

Polar bear hunting ban up for reconsideration

The federal ban which restricts polar bear hunting to Natives only and forbids the sale of polar bear skins, will be up for airing this summer with hearings in Washington, D. C., Anchorage and Nome, according to Jack Lentfer, research biologist for the federal Fish and Wildlife Service. And judging from the results of Lentfer's current research, reconsideration may be timely, for the Alaskan polar bear population appears

to be high and dangerously hungry.

The hunting ban was imposed under the Marine Mammal Act of December 1972 because of declining bear population. This federal law superseded a state regulation passed in July of that year, which banned the hunting of polar bears from planes.

"The state never had a chance to put their policy of hunting from the ground into effect," Lentfer recalls. "But

what it hoped for was that Natives would serve as guides."

This year hunters of Savoonga, St. Lawrence Island, shot 30 bears, a record that goes beyond the memory of their oldest hunter, and neighboring Gambell men took seven.

Eskimos speculated the bear population increase is due to lack of aerial hunting but Jim Brooks, Commissioner of the state Department of Fish and Game, "believes the extraordinary success of the St. Lawrence men is due to ice conditions.

"Prior to the mid-1950s there was very little aerial hunting, but hunters never had that much luck," Brooks reasons. "Heavy ice has moved that far south only three times during the last Century. This winter there's a lot of it, even down below the Aleutians.

Never-the-less, the bear population is high, notes biologist Lentfer, who has been counting bears off Barrow since 1967.

"I've marked 60 bears so far and it will probably be 100 before the season is over," he told the Tundra Times Thursday. The population has

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been good for the last few years, Lentfer added, but this year the bears are leaner than usual.

"The Canadian biologists have documented a reduction in seals in western Canada and it probably extends over here," he speculated. "There has been a movement of bears to the west, they're hungry and there are fewer seals to be taken.

"Last week I saw a male kill two cubs and he ate them completely." Polar bears generally turn tail and run at the sight of man, but last year one ate an oil field worker in northern Canada and Lentfer said he recalled hearing of one other kill.

Brooks speculated that there would be fewer bears than usual shot in the Barrow area and he was right. Only three or four bears have been taken there this year, but local residents say that there was a case of trichinosis from eating bear meat last year, which may have discouraged the hunting of the animal for food.

"Besides, every time you see a bear these days it's got a number painted on its side or a tag in its ear, which sort of takes the fun out of it," one Barrow hunter complained.

Lentfer spotted bears within five miles of Barrow last week and says there is a healthy population down the coast of Wainwright. Hunters there are said to have bagged about 16 or 17 which is good but not exceptional.

Even in this day of modern science, there are still things we don't know about bears, Lentfer said. This is the reason for his research and census. This season, for the first time, he is experimenting with a satellite communications collar which should enable scientists to track the animal over far greater range than the old fashioned radio tracking

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equipment.

It's still in the experimental stage, he cautioned. "But we are getting a weak signal."

And hopefully, come the time of the federal hearing regarding polar bear hunts, we should have some good new material to work with.