

Polar bear studies bridge Bering Strait

Working side by side in a polar bear expedition, U.S. and Soviet research biologists have begun a long-term, cooperative effort in wildlife research, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The combined effort is aimed at helping scientists answer questions about numbers of polar bears, their habits and the effects of subsistence harvest on their population.

"In the many years that both nations have been studying this magnificent animal, we have both had to halt our efforts at the invisible border on the sea ice that separates us," said Bill Palmisano, head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Alaska Fish and Wildlife Research Center.

"Now we may finally be able to work together in polar bear territory — on the sea ice — and follow them where they go. Polar bears ignore political boundaries," he added.

The research center staff has been involved in discussions with Soviet officials in the United States and the USSR for more than two years, trying to find a way for scientists working on the same wildlife populations to be able to share data.

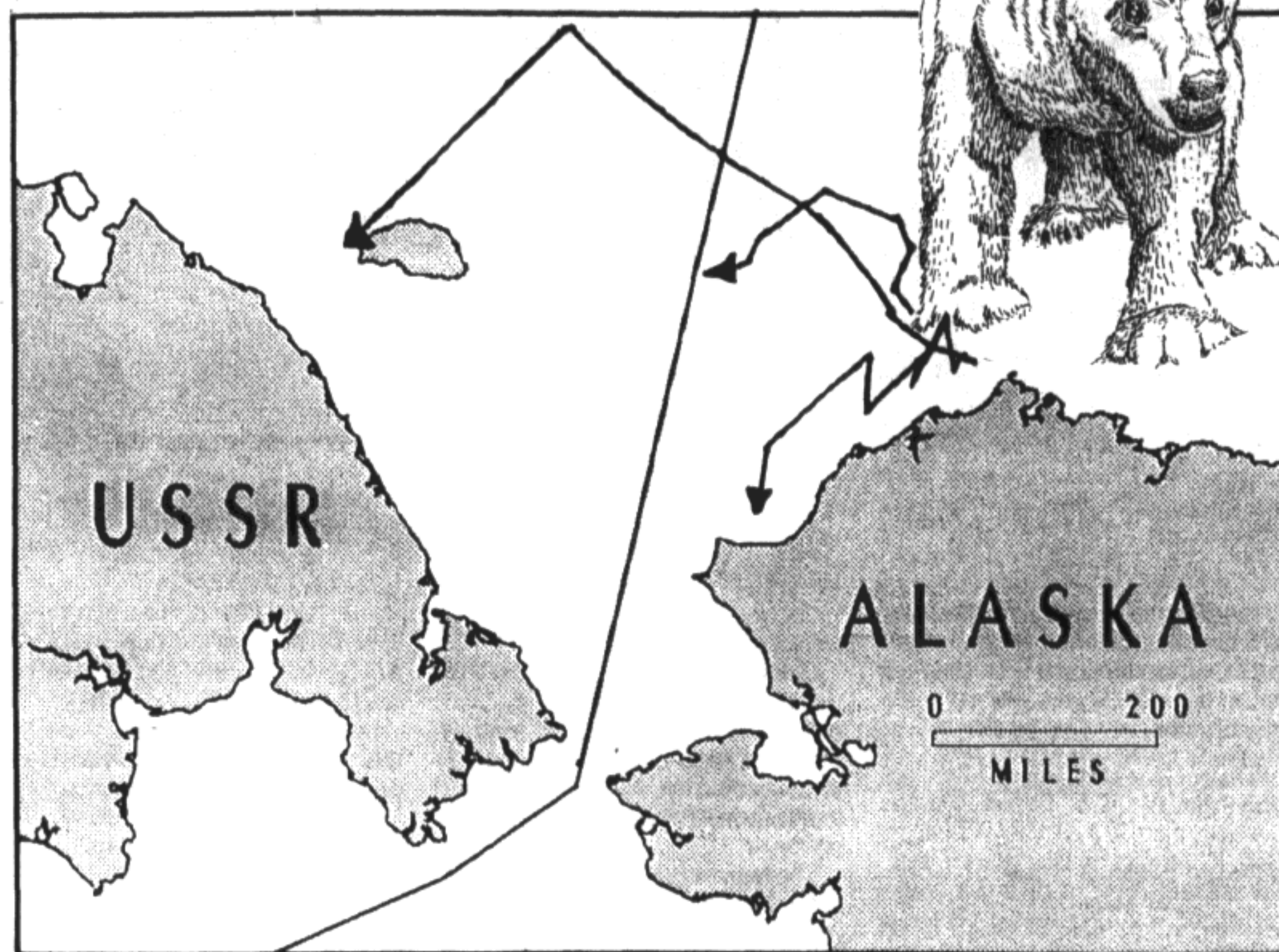
The effort began during the 10th meeting of the U.S.-USSR Environmental Agreement Joint Committee in 1986 when both countries agreed to a formal exchange of information on polar bears.

The efforts toward an exchange of scientists were continued at the 10th polar bear specialists group meeting in Sochi, USSR, in October 1988. The talks culminated in a meeting in Leningrad and Moscow in December, leading to approval for this spring's work.

Cooperative field work with migratory birds and walrus were also discussed during the visit.

Service research biologists Drs. Gerald Garner and Steven Knick have recently documented the international nature of the polar bear population that frequents Western Alaska.

Using data from satellite-tracked radio collars placed on the bears, Garner and Knick demonstrated that polar bears captured along the Western Alaskan coast spend almost 70 percent of their time in Soviet territory.



The movements of three bears are shown above. The bears were collared near Barrow in mid-April and tracked to early June, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A spokesman for the agency said information from Native villagers is critical in tracking the bears.

At least five of those bears built their dens on either Wrangel Island or Herald Island, both off the northern coast of the Soviet Union.

Two Soviet biologists, Dr. Stanislav Belikov of the All-Union Research Institute of Nature Conservation and Reserves and Dr. Mikahil Stishov, deputy director for science at the state reserve on Wrangel Island, visited the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Western Alaska from April 7-18.

During the first part of their visit, the Soviet scientists assisted the service research team in capturing and radio-collaring nine polar bears west

of Barrow. The last four days, the Soviets accompanied Scott Schliebe and Jon Nickles, service biologists, to Kotzebue, Nome, Shishmaref and Little Diomed to learn about management efforts.

Next spring, Garner and Knick hope to work with the Soviets on their polar bear work on Wrangel Island and along the northern coast of the Soviet Far East. By radio-collaring females in these regions, they can better define the international populations and help both countries manage the polar bears.

Schliebe also hopes to travel to Wrangel Island next spring to par-

ticipate in the Soviets' annual denning surveys.

The Soviets learned about the technology U.S. biologists use in tracking polar bears, which involves radio-collars placed on the bear that transmit signals to satellites orbiting overhead.

With this technology, researchers with the service are able to track polar bears on a regular basis. Coupled with satellite imagery of ice conditions, scientists in both countries can learn the habits and seasonal movement patterns of polar bears.