

Fish and Game Explains Tagging Of Polar Bear in Arctic Alaska

The 100th polar bear was tagged on the Arctic ice pack north of Pt. Barrow on April 5, the Department of Fish and Game announced Wednesday.

When released the polar bear, who was briefly dazed by the drug injected by a hypodermic syringe shot from a dart gun, sported a brightly colored neck belt, two ear tags, and a large number painted on his fur.

No doubt he failed to appreciate the notoriety

gained by the fact that he was the 100th bear tagged during 1968.

The tagging study is part of a research program on polar bear being conducted by the Department of Fish and Game under the direction of Game Biologist Jack Lentfer, with assistance from the U. S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife.

The purpose of the work is to determine the status of the stocks of polar bear off

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Alaska's coast.

The Alaska study in turn is part of international studies that are being conducted by Alaska, Russia, Canada, Norway, Iceland, and the United States.

The status of polar bear and polar bear hunting have been the subject of much concern and controversy in recent years. In Alaska polar bear are important to the guiding industry and to subsistence hunters who kill the bear for their meat and for the money derived from the hides.

Guided hunters and subsistence hunters operating off the coast of Alaska have harvested in excess of 200 bear annually during the past several years.

So far this year guided or resident sport hunters have taken 140 bear and subsistence hunters have taken 95 bear.

The technique for capturing and marking bear on the high seas was developed in Alaska by Jack Lentfer, 1967. The Alaska program is far ahead of the program of other nations.

In fact, Jack assisted Norway in launching their successful program last summer. Through tagging and marking biologists hope to trace the movements of bear to determine if the same bears or groups of bear appear off Alaska's coast each year.

Some scientists have speculated that polar bear are nomadic—wandering around the polar ice cap more or less at random. Others feel bear populations are discrete or identifiable; that is, bears use the same feeding and breeding areas each year.

Solving only this controversy will be most helpful in arriving at a management program that will insure perpetuation of polar bear while providing maximum benefits to people who use the resource.

The very success of the program, however, causes some inconvenience to guides and subsistence hunters.

"Fortunately, to the best of our knowledge the drugs cause little inconvenience to the bears as the drugs wear off rapidly and are ex-

tremely safe when administered properly," Lentfer said.

One bear tagged far out on the ice pack made a beeline for the Barrow area and was killed by a subsistence hunter 3 days after tagging.

Because the bear had been recently drugged, the Department recommended that the meat not be utilized even though there probably would have been no undesirable effect to humans had the meat been utilized. It merely seemed advisable to be very cautious.

The hunter experienced additional inconvenience because the fur of the animal had been marked with a dye. The dye can be removed with bleach, but it does involve extra work.

Guides also encounter tagged and marked bear which are not generally acceptable to their clients

and then they must seek untagged bear.

Ideally, the locations of the marked animals would be reported to the Department to aid in tracing movements, but the bear should be spared by hunters if at all possible.

The guides have cooperated by reporting the locations of marked bear and by not killing any of them.

Last year when Lentfer was developing the tagging technique, 31 bear were tagged. Three of these bear have been captured—one was killed by a subsistence hunter at Wainwright this past winter, and two were recently recaptured by tagging crews.

In addition, several were sighted on the pack ice during the summer months by the residents of Barrow.

While this small amount of evidence is not conclusive, it does prove that some bears return annually to the same areas.