

# ***Polar bears studied like never before***

The world's polar bear population--the subject of intense study for the past several years--appears stable with a conservative estimate of 20,000 animals worldwide, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported to Congress recently.

The greatest threat to these bears is posed by oil and gas exploration, drilling, and extraction on the North Slope of Alaska. Human activity in and near denning areas could cause fewer bears to come ashore to den and, therefore, den on sea ice. It could also prompt mother bears to desert land dens earlier than normal, taking cubs to sea prematurely. Oil spills from offshore drilling rigs or tankers could reduce the insulating value of the bears' fur as well as damage the food chain below these carnivores. There is a potential for development

along the entire north Alaska coast from Point Hope to the Canadian border.

This information was published in the Administration and Status Reports of the Marine Mammal Protection Act submitted to Congress in late 1976. A limited number of copies are available to the public by writing to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 20240.

The annual world harvest of polar bears was estimated at about 900 during 1976. Heavy ice conditions around St. Lawrence Island and the northwest coast of Alaska brought more bears within reach of Eskimos last year and 150-160 were killed. The Soviet Union kill was 600. Greenland residents took 125-150. The Soviet Union allows 10 to 15 cubs to be taken each year for zoos.