

THREATS TO ARCTIC ANIMALS

INTERNATIONAL MEASURES NEEDED FOR PRESERVATION

The Arctic is being thrown open to man; meteorological stations, air fields and defence bases are spreading northwards. We ought to consider carefully the animals whose territory we are thus invading, if we are to avoid a repetition of the tragic effects of man's impact on the fauna of other new countries.

The musk ox inhabits arctic and near-arctic regions from Greenland to Alaska, including most of the larger islands except Baffin Island. It is well able to defend itself against its natural enemy, the wolf, for the musk oxen stand their ground in a solid phalanx, guarding their calves. But these tactics, so successful against the wolf, have been its undoing against men armed with firearms, and fifty years ago it became in danger of extinction.

That the northern climate also may bear hardly on the musk ox, as on other arctic animals, has been shown by Professor Spørck, of Denmark. He tells how in east Greenland last winter a heavy snowfall formed a layer of snow two or three metres thick. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of musk oxen died of starvation, probably including all the one- and two-year-old calves.

In Canada the musk ox is now carefully protected, notably in the Thelon game reserve in the North-West Territories. In Alaska it was exterminated during the nineteenth century, but was reintroduced in 1930, when thirty-four young musk oxen were brought from Greenland and placed on Nunivak island. These have increased, but in the spring some of them seem to have a tendency to go out on the sea ice, and when the break-up comes they are drowned.

The continued existence of the caribou is necessary not only for its own sake but because it forms an important part of Eskimo diet. Its only important enemy apart from man is the wolf, and so efforts have been made to protect the caribou from the wolf. But nature is seldom as simple as that, and recent investigations have shown that however good the summer grazing the critical time for the caribou is the winter. Its food is then lichen, without which it cannot survive. Lichen can easily be destroyed by over-grazing, and as it grows slowly cannot then re-establish itself in time to save the caribou from starvation. So survival of the caribou depends upon

limitation of its own numbers, and this, in the interior of the far north, can be carried out only by the wolf. The wolf, therefore, not only preys on the caribou but helps to preserve it.

No arctic animal is harder to investigate than the polar bear, for in winter climatic conditions preclude observation and the females are in winter quarters beneath the snow. In summer the bears are out on the ice floes where any estimate of their numbers is extremely difficult, and where they are usually outside territorial waters and thus not within reach of ordinary legal protection.

HUNTING POLAR BEARS

In Canada varying degrees of protection are afforded to the polar bear. Manitoba does not allow sportsmen to hunt it. The Federal Government levies a royalty of \$5 on each skin exported from the North-West Territories: for the year 1952-53 the total was 433. The area is vast and this may not be considered a great number. But besides this the United States has a fortnightly meteorological air service to the Pole, and a necessary survival service in Alaska.

It has been alleged that the depredations of this service on the polar bear population, and also on the great Alaskan brown bear, are heavy; in fact that "you cannot come back from the Arctic without having shot a polar bear". The effects of this must still be local and comparatively small, but the number of these meteorological stations will increase. Furthermore, in Canada no restriction whatever is placed on the hunting of polar bears by Eskimos. This is understandable and could not have been questioned in the days before Eskimos acquired firearms. Perhaps the time has come for a reconsideration of this policy in some areas at least.

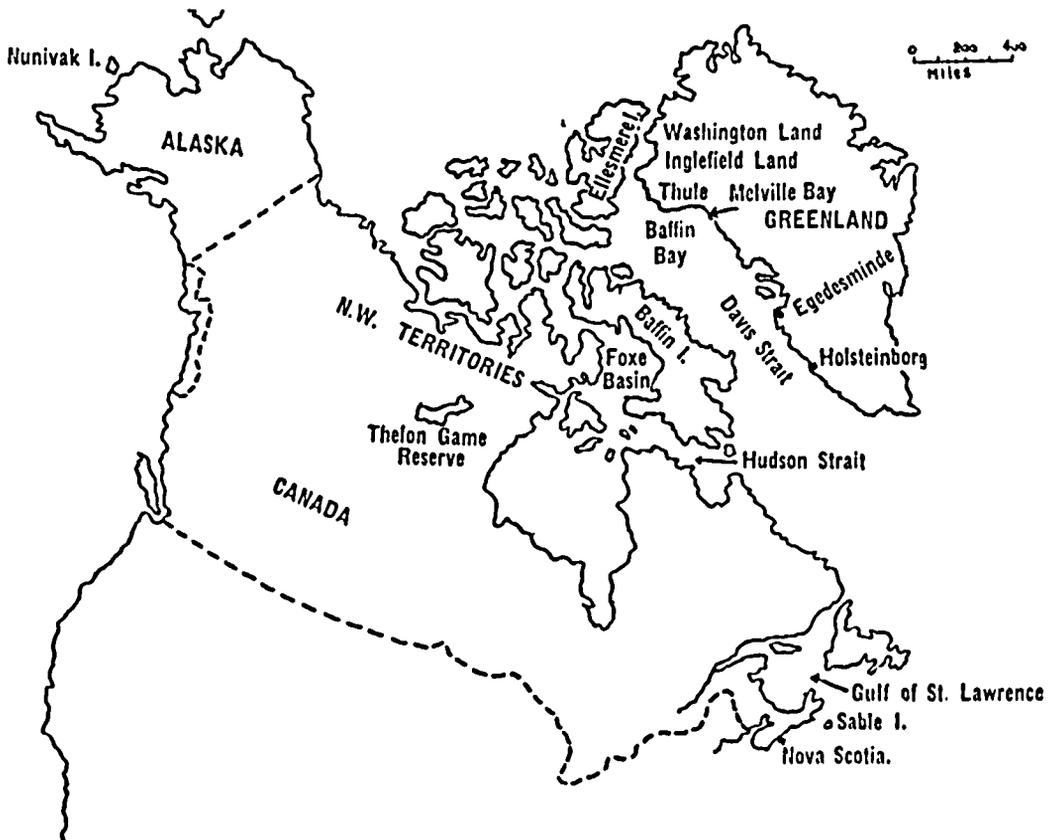
Since about 1930 there has been a heavy decline in the stock of polar bears on the shores of Greenland. This may be judged by the number of polar bears shot, which has been falling everywhere each year, especially on the east coast. Protection is certainly necessary and the Danish Government has established a close season for the polar bear on the northern part of the east coast of Greenland from 1st June to the end of October.

NORWEGIAN SANCTUARY

There are many polar bears in the Spitsbergen archipelago, where the Norwegian Government has made a complete sanctuary of the island of King Karl's Land, thought to be an

important breeding-place. On the other hand, fortnightly shooting trips are made by one vessel during the summer to Spitsbergen, at a time when the polar bear skin is almost useless. One such trip resulted in 14 polar bears being shot. The bears are also killed by sealers, chiefly to obtain live cubs, which fetch high prices.

The walrus is an essential animal to the Eskimo. It provides meat for man and dog, blubber for heating, leather for harness and tusks for trade. The Eskimos of the Thule district of north-



west Greenland depend almost entirely on it throughout the winter. Yet the walrus is steadily decreasing. In the seventeenth century it was said to breed on Sable Island, off Nova Scotia, and within the past 200 years was commonly hunted in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Now it seldom appears south of Hudson Strait. And whereas the walrus used to appear in large herds on the west coast of Greenland, between Holsteinborg and Egedesminde, just within the Arctic Circle, it is now rarely seen south of Melville Bay, 600 miles to the north. This contraction northward has been caused not so much by changes of climate as by man.

The food of the walrus consists mainly of bivalves, which it

must seek in comparatively shallow waters, and this makes it vulnerable on its known foraging grounds. There is a resident population of walrus at Foxe Basin, west of Baffin Island; but the walrus is also a migrant, though its movements are not yet fully understood. Some walruses, after breeding in the ice-floes of the Davis Strait, move up the coast of Greenland past Melville Bay, and there join in wintering stock in the Thule district. Migration continues so far north as Inglefield Land, and perhaps even to Washington Land, at latitude 80 deg. N. Later there are southward movements along the Thule peninsula and the east coast of Ellesmere Island. In fact the migration more or less encircles Baffin Bay, but it does not seem to be annual; walruses possibly spend several winters on the way.

NEED FOR PROTECTION

The Danish Government is aware of the importance of walrus conservation. Protected areas and close seasons have been established and walruses may be killed only by Greenlanders and in limited numbers at that. Although in the Thule district there is no limitation on the rights of the polar Eskimos to hunt walrus, there is a valuable rule which in most cases forbids the use of the rifle until the walrus has been harpooned. This prevents the waste and cruelty involved in the escape of wounded animals.

It would be good if a similar regulation could be made in Canada, where the possession of rifles by Eskimos, combined with Government relief and family allowances, has reduced the importance of careful stalking and economical killing. There are reports of much reckless shooting, pregnant females being killed and wounded animals escaping. The Canadian Government is, of course, aware of this situation and steps to remedy it are being considered.

Animals of the Arctic, because of their habits and distribution, need consideration on an international level. In order that necessary action may not be taken too late the International Union for the Protection of Nature has set up a committee under Professor Spärek of Denmark, to consider the status and preservation of Arctic animals.

The above article is reprinted by permission of *The Times*, and is protected under the Copyright Act, 1911. Reproductions in part or whole may not be made without the permission of *The Times*.