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The Popular Bears of Cape Churchill

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ABSTRACT ONLY

Polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) have been abundant along the Manitoba coast of Hudson Bay throughout historic times, and apparently this species contributed considerably to the economy of coastal native peoples within and north of the treeline. The closure of the York Factory settlement at the mouth of the Nelson River in 1957, the organization of Registered Traplines in Manitoba during the early 1950s, and the concurrent cessation of military manoeuvres at Ft. Churchill, all provided increased protection and decreased killing of the bears.

Apparently in response to this, as well as to a decrease in the hunting of ringed seals (*Phoca hispida*)—the main food of polar bears—, the number of bears on Cape Churchill rose rapidly during the 1960s. Little was known of their biology and abundance when each autumn they began to appear in large numbers within the four settlements near the mouth of the Churchill River. A situation rapidly developed wherein law enforcement officers and residents were required to kill 10 to 15 bears annually to protect themselves.

During 1966 to 1968 one or two persons were attacked or killed each year, workers required guards and transportation from door to door when ending night shifts during October to December, and a strong dislike for the bears precipitated the tormenting or shooting of bears with small calibre rifles. R.C.M. Police officers were frequently replaced on the force, and therefore had little experience in controlling the bears.

In 1966, a study of the problem and of the Cape Churchill bears was begun by the Canadian Wildlife Service. In 1966 and in 1969, two of the garbage dumps where the bears concentrated were closed down on the basis of this research and on experience with other species of bears elsewhere. A public education project was begun to inform people about ways to avoid conflict with the bears, and various attempts at fencing, burning of garbage and improving the garbage pickups were made.

In 1969, the provincial government assigned Game Management Officers to the area to provide a 24 hour patrol, culvert traps were sent to Churchill for catching and shipping problem bears, and the Federal Department of Public Works began burying the garbage with sand. Funds were allocated for the construction of an incinerator, but work on it did not begin.

During 1970 through 1973, the patrols by game officers kept an uneasy control over the bears, and research confirmed emphatically that the existence of the garbage dumps contributed substantially to the problem of the polar bears

staying in or near the settlements. The Game Officers determined in 1971 that they had little recourse but to kill a large number of problem bears addicted from year to year to the garbage dumps. However, a temporarily arranged air lift of 24 problem bears to 250 km southeast of Churchill in that year by a private organization, and an early freeze up of Hudson Bay in 1972 and 1973, helped the officers to control the bears.

Completion of an incinerator late in 1973, promised to control the problem in the future, but adjustment problems, associated with bears accustomed to returning to Churchill each autumn, the storage of bait by resident trappers, and garbage pickups, are expected. A complete biological report on the Cape Churchill bears is now in preparation, and this history of the bears and the bear problems will form the introduction to it.