

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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## GOOD YEAR FOR MARINE MAMMALS

Marine mammals under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior are becoming better understood and protected, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's annual report just issued to the Congress and the public, Director Lynn A. Greenwalt said today.

The report, covering the period June 22, 1976, to June 21, 1977, reviews the Service's marine mammal-related activities and summarizes the status of polar bears, sea and marine otters, walruses, dugongs, and three species of manatees. All eight species remained stable in numbers or increased during the report year, and all populations remained comparatively healthy.

The West Indian manatees in Florida suffered an unexpected setback, however, when an abnormally high number of them--35 as opposed to 6 during the previous report year--died during the severe winter of 1976-77. Manatees superficially resemble the marine dugongs, and both groups of animals inhabit primarily tropical waters.

Administrative actions during the year included extending jurisdiction of the Marine Mammal Protection Act from the 12-mile limit to 200 miles offshore, effective in March 1977. The Service also proposed adding the marine otters of Chile and Peru to those animals protected by the Act to afford them additional legal protection. This otter was already listed as an endangered species. The Service also reported approving two changes

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in Alaska's laws to improve the State's management of the Pacific walrus in State waters. Management of the walrus was returned to Alaska in 1976 after extensive public hearings and debate.

The Service issued nine permits or permit amendments during the report year for studies on the biology, distribution, and behavior of sea otters and polar bears. Some sea otter work explored the effects of oil spills on these animals. The Service also authorized expanded tagging studies of manatees in Florida. All permitted research is being done by qualified government, university, and scientific investigators.

Service law enforcement special agents opened 236 marine mammal cases during the report period and closed 231 cases. Over 120 of the new case involved illegal sealskin importations. Enforcement agents also investigated numerous suspected violations involving mainly polar bears and walruses.

Internationally, the Service continued its deep commitment to protect and conserve marine mammals through cooperation with other nations. During the year, Service personnel participated strongly in the U.S.-U.S.S.R project protecting and managing marine mammals--mainly walrus and ice seals--in the North Pacific; and in the U.N.-supported consultation on conserving and managing marine mammals and their environment, held in Norway, which produced definitive status reports on these animals. Other meetings included the first conference on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, held in Switzerland, and working meetings, sponsored by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, on polar bears--held in Switzerland--and on otters--held in Surinam. Also during the year the five-nation agreement on polar bear conservation took effect in the United States, an excess foreign currency program for dugong studies in Egypt was authorized, and a joint project with the Brazilian Government began on manatees in that country.

Limited numbers of the report are available to the public. Single copies may be requested by writing to the Director (WA), Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

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