

## **Observations on Changes in Polar bear behaviour from Four West Hudson Bay communities**

### Arviat:

From the 1930's to the 1950's, two elders who traveled frequently from Churchill to Chesterfield Inlet as part of their responsibilities as RCMP Special constables, rarely saw polar bears. One of the Special Constables traveled to Churchill to get supplies and to deliver mail to people in the area during the early 1950s. He stated that encounters with polar bears were rare. For example, in one year, the dog teams they were used for traveling smelled something at Nunaalaaq (a location between Arviat and Churchill). He was puzzled because there were no caribou to be seen. He later learned that a denning polar bear (hunted by an Inuk hunter later that year) was in the area. He first observed a live polar bear when he was about 18 years old, despite extensive travel in the area, and during spring and summer family camping trips, there were almost no encounters with polar bears.

Inuit started to notice more polar bears in the region, beginning in the 1970s, when in their spring and summer camps. In the last 10 years, they indicated that polar bear population numbers have further increased. Both elders and hunters expressed the view that polar bears constantly move in search of food and are capable of traveling great distances. Where previously there were very few sightings and encounters, there are now many more sightings of females and their cubs, and of individual polar bears. The hunters observed that camping on the land at the present time requires much more vigilance due to the higher frequency of encounters with polar bears.

### Whale Cove:

From the late 1950 to about the 1980s there were very few encounters with polar bears in this region. One hunter indicated that when he caught a polar bear in those days, it was a big event because it was so rare. When the quota system was introduced in the 1960s, Whale Cove hunters typically travelled to the Arviat region to hunt polar bears. More recently, hunters do not need to travel as far to hunt bears because they are found closer to the community. One hunter stated that he would like to know more about the situations of the bears that affect the population, such as the currents and winds that push the ice platforms used by these animals to different areas of Hudson Bay.

### Rankin Inlet:

Currently, Inuit hunt seals, beluga whales, caribou and polar bears in this area, from the late 1950s to the early 1980s there were very few encounters with polar bears. However, recently there have been more and more encounters and successful hunts in

the vicinity of Marble Island, and during summer, Inuit have to monitor camps in the area are now seeing polar bears 20 to 30km inland from the Hudson Bay coast.

#### Chesterfield Inlet:

From the 1930s to the 1940s very few polar bears were observed and hunted in the Chesterfield Inlet area. It was only when hunters traveled to Coates Island (about 400km east of Chesterfield Inlet) to hunt walrus that they were almost certain to see and hunt polar bears. They would also be more certain of encountering polar bears if they traveled to Wager Bay (about 240km to the north). Recently, people have observed greater number of bears closer to Chesterfield Inlet. For example, groups of polar bears were not normally seen, but they are now. Furthermore, polar bears now congregate near the Baker Lake River waiting for freeze up, something that did not do in earlier times. A hunter indicated that in one day while hunting he counted over 20 polar bears. Based on his previous experience of the area, he concludes that the abundance and distribution of polar bears in this area has changed markedly in recent years.