

**SUBSISTENCE USE OF BROWN BEAR
IN THE BRISTOL BAY AREA:
A REVIEW OF AVAILABLE INFORMATION**

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**Alaska Department of Fish and Game
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Dillingham, Alaska**

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This report briefly summarizes readily available information about subsistence uses of brown bear in the Bristol Bay drainage. Most of this information comes from secondary sources which are only indirectly concerned with patterns of resource use, although a small amount of data has been collected in the course of fieldwork in the area. No research dealing specifically with brown bear utilization has been conducted by the Subsistence Section, however.

Traditional uses of brown bear are mentioned in several sources of Bristol Bay history and prehistory, including Petroff (1900), Kowta (1963), Townsend (1965), and VanStone and Townsend (1970). These sources indicate that brown bear was used for subsistence purposes in most areas of Bristol Bay aboriginally. Brown bear were apparently particularly significant when other large land mammals or sea mammals were scarce, since they could provide large quantities of meat, fat, and other materials such as gut. This substitution value of brown bear was apparent in the Lake Clark and Iliamna areas in the early 1900s when caribou and most populations were low and local residents depended heavily on sheep, black bear, and brown bear (Smith,

1917; Behnke, 1977). Brown bear has been important in this respect in many areas, even where fats and other materials were normally available from other species, since brown bear could be obtained in the spring when other resources were scarce or unobtainable.

Contemporary brown bear hunting by local residents for meat, fat, or hides is mentioned for the Nushagak area (VanStone, 1967), the Lake Clark-Iliamna Lake area (Townsend, 1965; Behnke, 1977), and the Wood River-Aleknagik area (Nicholson, 1975). None of these sources provide much detail about hunting methods or uses, however. The Department recognizes in its brown bear management plan for the area that subsistence uses of brown bear occur in Bristol Bay drainages: "Occasionally bears are taken for domestic use, particularly in the Togiak, Wood River, and Nushagak system." (Alaska Department of Fish and Game, n.d.).

Two sources provide indications of contemporary subsistence brown bear harvest levels. A survey of 290 families from most of the communities of Bristol Bay showed that at least 24 brown bear were taken by local residents in 1973 (University of Alaska, unpublished data). Six villages in the Iliamna drainage accounted for most of this harvest or a total of 19 bears. The remaining five bears were taken by Nushagak and Wood River residents. This survey did not include the large community of Togiak, where it is likely that additional bears were taken.

Fifteen families in the village of Aleknagik reported harvesting eight brown bear in 1975 in a survey conducted by the Bristol Bay Native Association (Nicholson, 1975). Harvests of moose and caribou reported in this survey (20 and 8 respectively), do not seem out of line, so it seems reasonable to accept these figures for brown bear as indicators of actual harvest levels. Neither of these surveys provides information about how much brown bear was actually consumed.

Gasbarro and Utermohle (1975), writing about the University of Alaska survey in Bristol Bay, suggest that the brown bear harvest by local residents is difficult to estimate because restrictive hunting regulations make people cautious about reporting such harvests. This may help account for the scarcity of information available about the subsistence use of brown bear in the area.

Brown bear fat is available and used in moderate quantities in several of the Bristol Bay villages where fieldwork has been conducted by the Subsistence Section. Many of the families visited in these communities had jars of brown bear fat on the table in every day use. This fat is commonly eaten with dried salmon, particularly "fall-fish" or "red-fish." It is also eaten with raw frozen fish in the same way that is seal oil. Many of these families had obtained jars of bear fat from relatives or friends in other villages.

In the Iliamna Lake area most of the brown bear used for subsistence purposes seems to be killed during the fall. A few residents of the Nushagak, Wood River, and Togiak areas report that they try to take brown bear as soon as they emerge from their dens in the spring because there are few other resources available at that time, because the fat tastes better, and because travel conditions are usually good for searching for the animals.

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