

PROTECTING THE FUR SEAL HERDS

Concluding its fifth annual meeting on February 9, the North Pacific Fur Seal Commission gave approval to the continuation of a wide-ranging programme of research by scientists of the four contracting countries and to a harvest of fur seals in 1962 that will be comparable to last year's take. The latter decision reflects the success of the Commission's work in building up and maintaining the stocks of fur seals of the North Pacific to levels designed to produce the highest sustainable yield.

Established under the provision of the 1957 Interim Convention on Conservation of the North Pacific Fur Seals, the Commission is composed of representatives from Canada, Japan, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. The Commissioners are: George R. Clark, Deputy Minister of Fisheries of Canada; Masayoshi Ito, Director of the Fisheries Agency, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Japan, Aleksander A. Ishkov, Minister of the U.S.S.R., Chief of the Main Administration of Fish Economy of Gosplan; and Ralph C. Baker, Chief of the Division of Resource Development, Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Commission meeting, which began on February 7, was preceded by a meeting of the Standing Scientific Committee of the Commission from January 29 to February 6.

MAIN RESPONSIBILITY

The North Pacific Fur Seal Commission has as its major responsibility the investigation of the fur-seal resources of the North Pacific. The object of this investigation is to determine the measures that will make possible the maximum sustainable yield from these resources, with due regard for their relation to the productivity of other living marine resources in the area.

Under the terms of the Convention, pelagic sealing (killing of seals at sea) is forbidden, except for certain specific numbers that may be taken by scientists of the member countries for research purposes and the operations of aborigines using primitive weapons. All harvesting is done on the breeding grounds, under the control of the Soviet Government on Robben Island in the sea of Okhotsk and the Commander Islands in the Western Bering Sea and of the United States on the Pribilof Islands in the Eastern Bering Sea. During 1961 the commercial land take by the U.S.S.R. was 10,882 seals and by the U.S. 95,974. The Convention contains a provision whereby Canada and Japan each receive 15 per cent of the seal skins taken by the U.S. commercial operations on the breeding grounds and, subject to certain stipulations, a similar percentage of the U.S.S.R.'s commercial take on the breeding grounds.

RESEARCH AT SEA

In accordance with plans developed by the Commission, research agencies of the four participating countries carry out research at sea. Research and management on the breeding grounds are con-

ducted by the United States on the Pribilofs and by the Soviet Union on the Commander Islands and on Robben Island. The scientific investigations are concerned with dynamics of the fur-seal populations, distribution and migration at sea, feeding habits and harvesting methods.

During 1961 scientists of the four member countries conducted extensive research at sea, and the results of these operations, together with those of the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. on the breeding grounds under their respective controls, were reviewed by the Commission. The resulting reports provided valuable information on the migratory patterns and range of feeding habits of the seals. An extensive tagging programme was conducted on the breeding grounds as part of the scientific studies; Soviet scientists tagged 10,472 seal pups on Robben Island and 11,069 on the Commander Islands, and United States scientists tagged 50,000 pups and 740 yearlings and two-year-old seals on the Pribilof Islands. Recovery of tags from recaptured young seals indicates a certain intermingling of the herds, some seals tagged by the United States appearing on Robben and the Commander Islands and some Soviet-tagged seals appearing on the Pribilofs.

THINNING THE HERDS

For some years past there has been evidence of overcrowding conditions on the main Pribilof Islands breeding grounds and as a corrective measure, with the Commission's approval, the United States has included in its commercial take specified numbers of surplus female seals. It was noted that, in spite of this kill, together with the loss occurring through natural causes, the number of females is estimated to be larger than the level calculated to be necessary for optimum production.

Research at sea in 1962 will again begin in February and will generally be along the lines already described. On land the scientists will give attention, among other matters, to the numbers of seals returning to the breeding grounds, natural mortality rates, reproduction, and behaviour of the various segments of the herds.

The Commission noted the high degree of cooperation that has emerged, and is being continued, among the scientists of the four countries.

The United States Commissioner Ralph C. Baker was elected Chairman of the Commission to serve through the next annual meeting and George R. Clark, the Canadian Commissioner, was elected Vice-Chairman.

The next annual meeting of the Commission will be held in Washington, D.C., November 26, 1962. The Standing Scientific Committee will meet for three days prior to this date to consider the results of the year's investigations and its report to the Commission.