

Fur loss, lesions reported in Beaufort Sea polar bears

April 10 2012, By Mike Dunham

Research scientists working for the U.S. Geological Survey report that some Alaska polar bears are losing their fur.

Tony DeGange, chief of the biology office at the USGS Science Center in Anchorage, said that in the past two weeks, of 33 bears checked by scientists, nine had alopecia - loss of fur - and other [skin lesions](#) in the southern [Beaufort Sea](#) region near Barrow. Three of four bears inspected near Kaktovik on Thursday showed the symptoms.

The scientists have been collecting blood and tissue samples from the afflicted bears but do not know the cause or the significance of the outbreak.

"Our data set suggests that this is unusual, but not unprecedented," said DeGange. Ten of 48 bears checked by the team in 1998-99 had a similar condition, he said.

In a longstanding project, the USGS has sent [polar bear](#) research teams to the area since 1984. The teams track, sedate and examine the bears to help determine their general health and habits.

This year they saw their first bear with hair loss on March 21. The team will wind up this year's operations in May when the [sea ice](#) becomes too treacherous for safe travel.

"We took biopsies in '99 and couldn't establish a causative agent for the

hair loss then," DeGange said. "But now we have this unexplained mortality event going on with seals. And they haven't been successful in figuring out what caused the seal deaths. Is it just a matter of coincidence or is it related? We don't know."

On Dec. 20, 2011, the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) declared an "unusual mortality event" based on a number of [ringed seals](#) hauled out on beaches on the Arctic coast of Alaska during the summer. Dead and dying seals were found to have [hair loss](#) and skin sores. Affected seals were later observed in Canada and Russia.

In the fall, Pacific walruses with similar lesions were found in the same area of Alaska. However, the walruses appeared to be otherwise healthy, according to the USGS.

The bears, like the walruses, don't seem to be harmed by the condition.

"The bears we've caught that are affected don't seem to be any worse off than any of the non-affected [bears](#)," said DeGrange. "We don't have any mortalities."

Intensive and careful testing will continue, he added.

In response to the seal mortality event, the Alaska Division of Public Health emphasized its recommendations concerning interacting with any animal in the wild, recommendations the USGS repeated in a press release on Friday. They include:

- Do not eat any animals that appear sick or diseased.
- Do not allow dogs to interact with or eat diseased animals.
- Wear rubber gloves when butchering or handling wild animals and

thoroughly wash hands and equipment afterward.

Anyone observing or harvesting a polar bear with fur loss or skin sores is asked to report the animal to the USGS polar bear hotline, (907) 786-7034.

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