U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Pribilof seal: A surprising reprieve.

for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to study the factors governing the seal population—a proposal which would ban the commercial taking of seals from St. George Island. St. George accounts for only about 15 percent of the seals taken from the Pribilofs, but the issue was still a touchy one. So it was a somewhat pleasantly surprised U.S. delegation that returned from the International North Pacific Fur Seal Commission meeting last Friday with an agreement settled and signed.

The study, with its ban, could last as long as 15 years, since the female fur seal is not fully productive until she is about eight years old. An influential argument at the commission meeting was that the study would give insight into the seals' real diet makeup, and show just how much of a threat they are to commercial fishing. Conservationists are also happy about the agreement, however, because of the commercial threat to the seals as a species, and grateful about any reduction in the clubbings and other violent methods sometimes used in taking the animals.

* * * *

Conservationists also were cheered last week at the withdrawal of an application to the National Marine Fisheries Service for an exemption to the Marine Mammal Protection Act that would have allowed the Bergner International Corp. of New York to import 10,000 dressed seal hides from Canada. Six exemptions have been sought for seals since the act was signed last October, of which one, also with pelts in mind, was rejected. Besides the recent withdrawal—just before a possibly embarrassing public hearing—four other requests are awaiting hearings or being processed. At stake: up to 3,000 live seals for sale to zoos and other institutions and 2,100 more for their hides. □

A call for a change of attitudes toward drugs

President Nixon advocates mandatory imprisonment for heroin pushers. New York Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller wants life sentences for dope dealers. Connecticut Gov. Thomas J. Meskill wants to reinstate the death penalty for twice-convicted pushers, including marijuana and LSD dealers.

"This would return the drug-use prevention effort to relying on fierce words in statute books instead of constructive action," concluded the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse last week. Such a hard line on drug use, said the commission in its second and final report to the White House, is irrational and overreactive. It solves nothing and might even be counterproductive because juries are sometimes reluctant to impose harsh mandatory sentences. Instead, the commission calls for a massive change of attitude toward drug use.

Last year the marijuana section of the commission's report recommended decriminalization of that drug (SN: 3/25/72, p. 197). Now, turning to other forms of drug use, the commission reports that alcohol is the most abused and destructive drug and that barbiturates (used by housewives, for instance) are "America's hidden drug problem." But the commission says the Government should not interfere with a person's decision to use drugs as long as they do not lead to antisocial acts. Heroin, for instance, should remain restricted, but users should be given treatment or counseling as alternatives to prison. The commission suggests that refusal to accept treatment be punished by a $500 fine and up to one year in jail.

The commission calls existing drug education material inaccurate and ineffective and says it should no longer be used. Methaqualone, the commission feels, should be more tightly controlled as should advertising and prescription of other mind-altering drugs. Finally, the commission calls for the establishment of a Controlled Substances Administration. It would be an independent agency coordinating enforcement of drug laws, treatment of users and all government programs of education and research. Such an agency, the commission says, would put an end to the drug-abuse industrial complex that has a "vested interest in perpetuation of the problem." President Nixon this week proposed a reorganization that would take all drug control programs (but not rehabilitation and education) out of the Treasury Department and White House and put them in the Justice Department. Unless Congress vetoes the plan, it, not that of the commission, will go into effect in 60 days. □

U.S. and Soviets plan 25 research projects

The new U.S.-U.S.S.R. Joint Commission on Scientific and Technical Cooperation (SN: 7/8/72, p. 19) held its first meeting in Washington last week and announced approval of 25 programs of cooperative research in six general areas.

The commission selected programs from among proposals submitted by joint working groups of Soviet and American scientists that have been meeting for the past several months. The six general areas of cooperation include energy, computer applications to management, agricultural research, microbiological synthesis, chemical catalysis and water resources. Within each area, certain projects were given first priority while others will begin after work is effectively under way.

Cooperation will include exchange of scientists and specialists; exchange of scientific and technical information; joint research, testing and development; organization of joint courses, and special arrangements between U.S. companies and Soviet agencies.

Despite the agreement, several questions remain to be answered, including what provisions will be made to expedite projects involving embargoed goods, whether the U.S.S.R. will make travel permits easier for its scientists to obtain, and how much information will be held back in areas of keen competition.

One such area is the crucial energy research field of magnetohydrodynamics, including investigations into the nature of plasmas that may one day provide useful sources of fusion energy. SCIENCE NEWS talked with Richard Balzhiser, head of the American energy negotiating team, and A. I. Maksimov, Soviet deputy minister of energy, who said there would be a free exchange of data and experts and use of one country's equipment to test that of the other. (Fusion projects, per se, will be handled by separate agreement through the Atomic Energy Commission.)

The chairman for this meeting of the joint commission was National Science Foundation Director H. Guyford Stever who said the discussions were held in a "true spirit of cooperation." His words were echoed by the head of the Russian delegation, V. A. Trapeznikov, who said the joint projects would "benefit not only these two countries, but all mankind." □

Science Service, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve, and extend access to *Science News*. www.jstor.org