

Opinion: Protecting caribou doesn't jeopardize jobs

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In 1978, I was hired as provincial caribou specialist. Five years later, I became the first casualty in the long battle to save Alberta's caribou, a conflict heating up again.

Advocacy for caribou, although my job, soon put me offside with the government of Alberta and the industries with whom it had a cozy relationship. I succeeded in 1982 in ending caribou hunting but achieving land-use changes was much harder. By 1983, I was pushed out the door.

While I was privileged to spend the following 35 years serving people and the environment in Canada and around the world, caribou in Alberta have been driven towards extinction.

Logging, mining and oil and gas development, including roads and seismic lines, have been and continue to be the primary causes of the decline of caribou. Habitat loss also increased caribou vulnerability to wolves but poisoning wolves to save caribou is a cruel distraction. It's like banning barbecues in Calgary to offset greenhouse gases from oil sands development.

The truth is that caribou are inconvenient to people stampeding to enrich themselves as quickly as possible by exhausting the resources of generations in a few decades.

For 40 years, successive governments have failed to diversify Alberta's economy and to implement land-use management to ensure opportunities for current and future generations. The result is a dependency on unsustainable resource jobs and royalties. That exposes government to pressure and makes it easy to mislead workers about the causes of job loss and to exploit their fears to manufacture opposition to caribou conservation.

Portraying the situation as jobs versus caribou is cynical and untrue. Without more sustainable land-use and forest management, both will be lost.

The science has been clear for a long time. In the 1970s, caribou already were declining as resource development accelerated. A 1978 report on the Eastern Slopes of the Rocky Mountains recognized the need to protect wildlife habitat. Scientific reports in the 1980s and strategies released in 1993, 1998 and 2005 all called for habitat protection with increasing urgency, but little was done for caribou even though development continued to ramp up.

In 2010, Alberta again ignored the worsening plight of caribou. Despite the advice of its own scientists, no action was taken to move caribou from threatened to endangered status.

Legal action in 2010 raised the stakes. A court ruling directed the federal government to produce a national caribou recovery strategy released in 2012. In turn, the provinces and territories were required to produce a range-management plan for each of their herds within five years.

Alberta's draft plan was released in December 2017. While it finally acknowledged the lack of habitat protection for caribou in Alberta, it is not really a plan, as it does not provide range-specific timelines or maps showing how habitat requirements will be met.

Now the province is working feverishly to produce plans before the Canadian Environment minister rules that Alberta's endangered caribou are not sufficiently protected. The result could be a "safety net" order compelling Alberta to take long-delayed action.

Are government and industry finally ready step up and do what's needed for caribou in Alberta? Clearly, it's not enough to manage for currently depressed populations and leave caribou perpetually at risk. Plans must provide sufficient habitat to allow herds to recover to self-sustaining levels. Canada's Species at Risk Act prescribes a minimum of 65 per cent of each range must be undisturbed.

Albertans have been blessed with exceptional wealth from natural resources, but government and business leaders have failed to manage it for long-term benefits. Instead they blame caribou, environmentalists, wolves and other scapegoats when the loss of jobs and revenue is due to mismanagement, declining demand, increasing automation and the global movement toward clean energy and sustainable forests.

So where do we go from here? No one envisions a future without resource extraction; but it must be combined with conservation and restoration that better protects our forests, water and wildlife for generations to come. And we should learn from Norway to invest resource wealth in long-term prosperity and pursue the clean-energy, high-technology, knowledge-based economy of the future.

Over the past year I've reached out to business, government and interest groups to encourage working together to protect caribou while respecting responsibilities to current and future generations. Environmentalists and indigenous communities are ready but half-measures by government and efforts by many in industry to confuse and delay will doom caribou to extinction.

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