

The Clock is Running Out for Caribou

Time's almost up – this is our last chance to save west central Alberta's caribou

By Gillian Steward, Commissioned by Alberta Wilderness Association/September 2022

Caribou Country

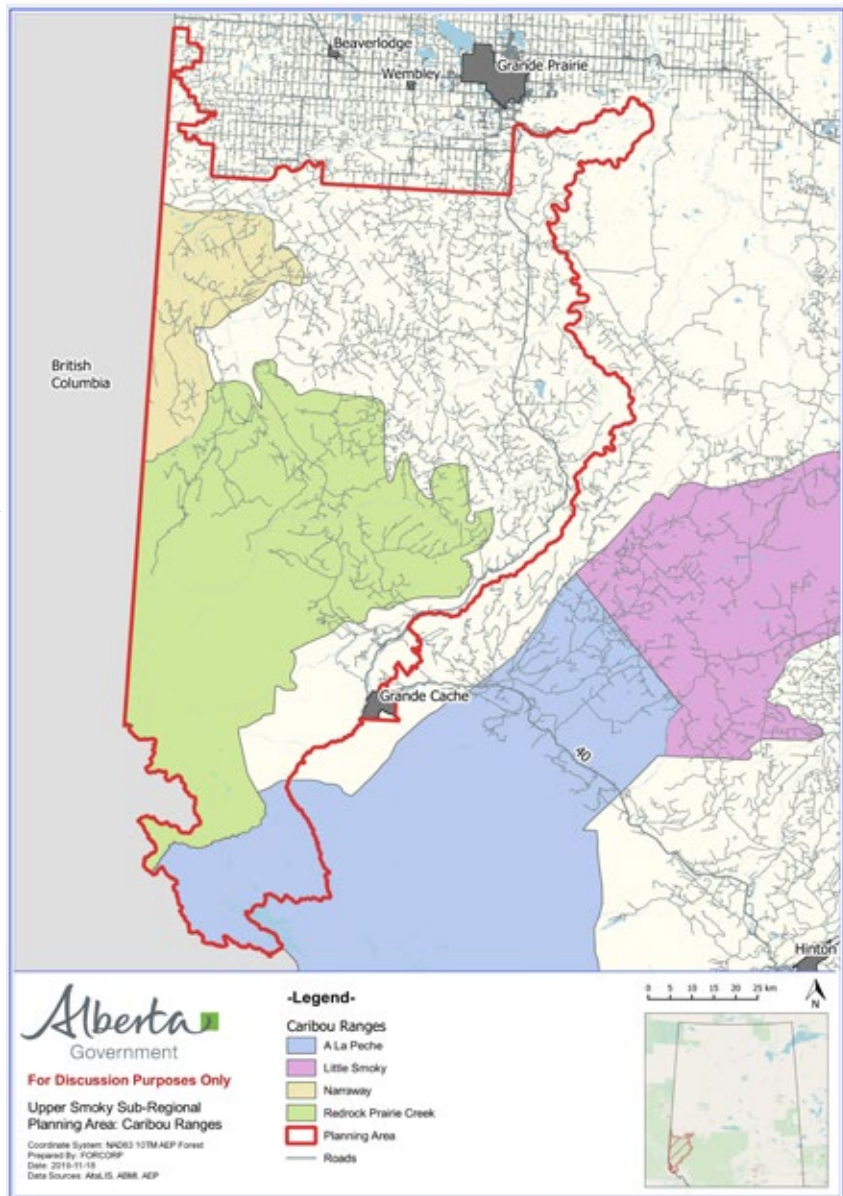
West central Alberta has been home to caribou for millennia but rapid industrialization is taking its toll.

Most Albertans have never been here even though it is one of the most alluring places in the province. Snow-capped mountains, wide forested valleys dotted with lakes; elk, deer, bighorn sheep and moose at almost every turn. This is also caribou country: Canada's reindeer have roamed these mountains and forests for untold generations. But the herds are shrinking because, while most Albertans haven't been to this part of the province, the petroleum industry, forestry and coal companies know it well and have been operating here for decades.

It is not an easy place to get to: a four-and-a-half-hour drive northwest of Edmonton, seven hours from Calgary. The B.C. border is an hour away. But it is one of the most industrialized regions of the province. Clear cuts, natural gas processing plants, open pit coal mines, pipelines, transmission lines carved into hillsides and valleys; these are all part of the landscape. Each year, old growth forests of spruce and pine that are full of ground and tree lichens, the caribou's main food source, are cut down. Seedlings will be planted where the trees once stood but it will take 80 years for a new forest to grow into natural caribou habitat. The industry roads and seismic lines that crisscross the forests make it easier for less-specialised deer and moose to access isolated caribou ranges. And with them come the wolves; attracted by increasing deer numbers, they also prey on the caribou now that their ranges are easier to access.

This has all been known for over 40 years. Alberta's caribou have been tracked, studied, and discussed in dozens of government committees and reports. No jurisdiction in Canada has studied them as much and for so long. But their numbers continue to decline anyway because all the research and discussion hasn't led to much action. Industry players still resist efforts to curtail their operations on caribou ranges. The Alberta and federal governments could force them to change their operations in favour of the caribou but they seem to prefer kicking the can down the road rather than restraining the resource industries.

“We understand that the forestry companies will take some of the forest, that’s the way business works, but do they have to take it all?” says Landon Delorme an Indigenous knowledge holder and trapper, whose family has lived in the area for generations. Most of his trap line is within undisturbed stands of spruce, pine and aspen but he can’t help but see the pattern of clear cuts slashed into mountain sides, along the highways, and near his family’s home at Victor Lake. Another trapper, Brian Bildson, lives in Grande Prairie but grew up in Hay River where caribou were plentiful. “We can’t afford two more years of research, three more years of research,” he says, “and we can’t afford to look at models where we have viable caribou habitat in 40 years. We need something now, it’s triage time.” After 39 years in the field, Dave Hervieux, the Caribou Management Coordinator for



Alberta Fish and Wildlife, a division of Alberta Environment and Parks, shares those sentiments. “We are running out of time because ongoing caribou population decline is being mitigated only through the annual delivery of wolf population reduction. All of which is a reflection of the impact of human land uses on caribou.”

Of course, the resource industries provide hundreds of jobs and income for local residents. The petroleum industry provides natural gas for home heating; the forestry industry produces pulp and paper for everything from toilet paper to books and lumber for new houses, and employs about 1100 people in the Grande Prairie region. Oil and natural gas are most important to the local economy thanks to two of the most significant natural gas fields in North America. For local politicians be they MPs, MLAs, mayors, city or county councillors, attracting and retaining employers is always high on their agendas. But attracting employers who chip away at the natural resources, particularly the forests, may not serve the region well in the end. Will it all have been worth it if the old growth forests eventually disappear along with the caribou?

Getting to Know the Caribou of Upper Smoky

The caribou are mysterious, beautiful creatures but they are becoming a rare sight.

Some of the most endangered caribou in Canada are in what is known as the Upper Smoky region between Grande Prairie and Grande Cache in west central Alberta. These caribou are not quite the same as those in the vast herds thundering across the North West Territories that we often see in photographs. The caribou in west central Alberta are known as Southern Mountain Woodland Caribou. Some people call them the “grey ghosts of the boreal forest” because they are so elusive and prefer to be isolated from both human activity and other ungulates such as elk and deer. Caribou are larger than deer but smaller than moose, and have thick coats that help them live in cold and snowy environments. Their unique hooves allow them to walk through deep snow and on soft mossy ground. In the fall their hooves grow sharp edges so they can break through ice in search of food. Both females and males sport a striking crown of antlers. Their ranges have been clearly mapped by university biologists and government wildlife researchers who study their migratory paths from the valleys that shelter them in the winter up to the sub-alpine areas they prefer in the summer.



Often called grey ghosts, seeing a caribou is a rare and becoming more rare but we can act now to change the trajectory. © J. Marriott

There are two herds of Southern Mountain Woodland Caribou in the Upper Smoky region; as of 2019 Alberta government wildlife biologists estimate there are 153 caribou in the Red Rock Prairie Creek herd and 56 in the Narraway herd. In 1966 government biologists estimated there were 1200 to 1600 caribou in this region. They are disappearing because their ranges have been subjected to so much industrial activity. As of 2017, 71 per cent of the Red Rock Prairie Creek winter caribou range had been disturbed

by forestry, mining, petroleum facilities, or roads. Almost all of the Narraway winter range – 84 per cent – has been disturbed by industrial activity. Destruction of the winter range is so extensive that caribou are increasingly abandoning migration to those forested foothills. A recent study conducted by government and academic biologists examined the changes in behaviour of the Red Rock Prairie Creek population between 1981 and 2018, and found that their migratory patterns had shifted significantly. Over the 30 years, the proportion of individual caribou migrating from their summer range in the sub-alpine areas which are mostly in protected parks and wilderness to the lower elevation but ravaged winter range declined from nearly 100 per cent to 38 per cent. Most of the caribou were now staying in high elevation areas all year. But this shift is dangerous for the caribou; there is less food, harsher weather, and deadly avalanches. So dangerous that the number of caribou in the herd rapidly declined between 1998 and 2012 by approximately 10 to 14 per cent a year.

Not surprisingly, it's now unusual to see caribou, but it's always a thrill. Brian Bildson, the trapper, remembers the first time he and his wife Deana saw caribou in this part of Canada: "We were in the Red-Rock Prairie Creek area. The place felt so wild and we go down to the (trapper's) cabin and we're sitting there and those caribou walked across and I said 'those caribou have come here to welcome us.' I just felt blessed, it was like a gift and then after that I would get excited whenever I saw caribou." Carolyn Campbell, Alberta Wilderness Association's conservation director, remembers one of the first times she saw caribou. "We were hiking, and a couple of bulls just silently came out of some wood and walked by not too far from us. They are silent and you get this sense that they're gentle, kind of self-contained, kind of mysterious, beautiful creatures." Dave Hervieux, a senior wildlife biologist with Alberta Fish and Wildlife who lives in Grande Prairie remembers vividly the first time he saw caribou in this part of the province. It was 1989 and he had just begun working in the area. "I saw eleven caribou in the Lingrell Lake area," he recalls. "It was pretty amazing. But the caribou have long receded from that area. It's all harvested (logged), so there won't be any there now."

The caribou are part of Canadian mythology, like the beaver and the loon. They live in our imagination and our dreams even though most Canadians have never actually seen one. They are like ghosts, reminding us that they have been here for thousands of years, thriving on what the land provides; without that they are doomed.

A Timeline of Frustration and Disappointment

For over 40 years scientists, environmentalists, government biologists and Indigenous peoples have been trying to save the caribou in the face of constant setbacks and delays.

To look at the last 40 years of efforts to preserve and enhance Alberta's caribou herds in west central Alberta can leave one with a deep sense of frustration, or perhaps sadness. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) has been fighting for caribou even longer than that. In 1966, a year after it was founded, AWA began working with provincial biologists on caribou conservation.

In 1979 Kirby Smith, a wildlife biologist for Alberta Fish and Wildlife, and two colleagues began collaring caribou so they could be tracked and studied. “We were always looking for funding so we could increase the sample size,” remembers Smith. “We started from scratch; how many there are, where they live, what they do, and what they eat.” A young government biologist at the time, Smith remembers the frustration he felt as he advocated for the caribou. “Beginning in the early 1980s, the issue really was industry saying, ‘your theories sound reasonable, but you don’t have any data.’ So the burden of proof was put upon us and the academics, to prove everything.” As more studies were commissioned, the number of caribou roaming the alpine meadows and the patchwork of clear cuts continued to decline.

Michael Bloomfield worked for Fish and Wildlife as the province’s caribou specialist at the same time. He soon became convinced that industrialization in west central Alberta was ruining the caribou population’s chances of survival. Despite the possible impact on his government career, Bloomfield was not afraid to speak out publicly. “In recent years the size, distribution and quality of caribou populations in Alberta have decreased considerably,” he wrote in an August 1979 article in the *Edson Leader*. “The decline is largely due to the combined effect of logging, oil and gas activity and recreation.” In a later interview he told the *Calgary Herald* “increased industrial and recreational pressures could virtually wipe out what little remains of the herd. The writing is on the wall. We have to do something or lose them.” Frustrated and disappointed by the lack of action on the caribou file, Bloomfield left Fish and Wildlife in 1983.



Caribou continue to decline despite being tracked, studied and discussed in dozens of committees and reports; time is almost up – we can save central Alberta’s caribou if we act now and protect their habitat. © J. Marriott

The federal government shares jurisdiction with the provinces in the matter of wildlife management

and protection, but it wasn't doing much either to protect Canada's dwindling caribou herds. The 2003 *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) included both the boreal and southern mountain populations of woodland caribou as two of the 68 threatened species out of a total of 233 species listed as "at risk." Most importantly, SARA gave the federal government the power to step in and take whatever action it considered necessary to preserve a species if a provincial government was not doing enough. In 2014 the federal government finally released a long-overdue *Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou, Southern Mountain Population, in Canada*. The following year Alberta's mountain caribou were assessed as endangered – in immediate danger of extinction – by the scientific advisors to the federal *Species at Risk Act*. Yet this did not stop the Alberta government selling off a further 1,765 hectares of energy leases in Upper Smoky's endangered caribou ranges. It wasn't until 2018 that the federal government presented its *Action Plan for the Woodland Caribou, Boreal Population in Canada* which, like the Southern Mountain population in Alberta, was in deep trouble. The plan commits to supporting provinces, territories and Indigenous communities in finalizing caribou range plans, then integrating them into the larger planning framework to create a "specific, measureable, achievable, and time-bound" conservation strategy.

But as usual things continued to move slowly. So in January 2019, Ecojustice lawyers, acting on behalf of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, AWA, and David Suzuki Foundation, filed a lawsuit against the federal environment minister for her failure to protect the critical habitat of five boreal caribou herds in northeastern Alberta. A day before the scheduled court date (Dec. 16, 2019), the proceedings were adjourned pending further discussions with the federal government. In October 2020, no doubt prompted by the lawsuit, the Alberta and federal governments finally signed an agreement which commits Alberta to meeting evidence-based habitat goals and providing annual public reports of its caribou populations and habitat conditions. The agreement also commits Alberta to engagement with Indigenous peoples for the conservation, management, and recovery of woodland caribou. The habitat goals were spelled out – caribou ranges need to be a minimum of 65 per cent undisturbed in order to give a herd a 60 per cent chance of survival. Alberta also committed to a detailed five-year schedule to finish enforceable sub-regional caribou range plans in order to achieve minimum habitat requirements in the coming decades. Three sub-regional caribou task forces, including one for the Upper Smoky, had already been established by Alberta in November 2019. Composed of representatives of forestry companies, the petroleum industry, tourism operators, municipalities, environmental groups, trappers, First Nations and Métis communities, they were established to meet and come up with recommendations for preserving caribou habitat that would be forwarded to Alberta Environment and Parks. But during the months prior to the agreement between Alberta and the federal government, Alberta Forestry approved the ten-year Forest Management Plan proposed by forestry giant Weyerhaeuser, allowing the company to harvest 550,000 cubic metres of timber on Redrock-Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou ranges each year— almost half of Weyerhaeuser's annual allowable cut. When asked via email to explain the company's rationale for such a plan, given that the federal and Alberta governments were already discussing how to preserve caribou ranges, Wendy Crosina, Director of Sustainable

Forestry replied: “Science-based evidence clearly shows that the caribou ranges under the Grande Prairie forest tenure can sustainably support up to 640,000 cubic metres per year of harvest.” In other words, Weyerhaeuser chose to take less than it considered sustainable and saw that as a serious effort to preserve caribou. Crosina said that figure was arrived at using computerized models of allowable coniferous harvesting over the next 200 years, assuming caribou range was only managed for timber supply. No official report was produced as it was not part of Alberta Forestry’s required process. It was primarily done to better understand how much potential cut was being set aside for habitat constraints in caribou range. “Our forest management objectives continue to focus on providing caribou habitat, both in the short term and the long term, while supporting mill viability and strong economic support for the region,” Crosina added.

A month after the Weyerhaeuser plan was approved an Alberta Forest Products Association report recommended opening up restricted areas in order to increase the forest land base that is available for harvest. A week later Devin Dreeshen, the cabinet minister responsible for forestry, announced that the forestry industry’s annual allowable cut would increase by up to 13 per cent. In 2020 the Upper Smoky Caribou Task Force established by Alberta Environment and Parks to make recommendations for protecting the Red Rock Prairie Creek and Narraway herds also submitted its report. The government has yet to make it public as it is still under discussion. When government does release a proposed plan, it will go through more public and Indigenous consultation before being finalized. Once the Upper Smoky Caribou Plan is finalized Weyerhaeuser will have to adjust its Forest Management Plan so it is in compliance.

Brian Bildson has participated in three Caribou task forces but he is skeptical about the Alberta government’s reasons for establishing them. He believes it has more to do with the politics of Alberta’s combative relationship with the federal government than saving the caribou. “That’s not speculative,” said Bildson during an interview in his Grande Prairie home overlooking the Wapiti River. “Because at the very first briefing I attended Jason Nixon the minister of Environment said ‘you are here on a very important mission, you are here to find a made-in-Alberta solution, because we do not want the federal government telling Alberta what to do’. That was his opening fricking statement!” Landon Delorme, the Indigenous trapper, is also skeptical. “It seems the task forces have an agenda that will produce a certain outcome even before the group meets,” he said over a coffee in the restaurant at the Grande Cache Inn. “Let’s talk about solutions and get down to it.” Delorme would also like to see task force members get boots on the ground so they can actually see and feel what is happening to the once verdant caribou ranges and surrounding areas. Unlike him, most participants don’t actually live anywhere near the clear cuts, coal mines and natural gas infrastructure. AWA’s Carolyn Campbell is more optimistic about the role of the caribou task forces. She sees them as a worthwhile opportunity for all interested parties be they ENGOS, industry, Indigenous communities or municipalities, to sit down together and put their concerns on the table for others to hear. The discussions lead to recommendations that everyone in the group can support. “It’s so much better than each stakeholder lobbying for government’s attention,” she says. “And once government releases those recommendations as part of the public consultation process all Albertans can have a say.”

The Industry Players in West Central Alberta

Forestry, petroleum and coal companies have been operating here for decades and are important for the region's economy. But the caribou are important too.

Forestry

Grande Prairie has been a hub for the forestry industry since the 1940s. Currently, there are four forestry companies operating in the Grand Prairie region – Weyerhaeuser Canada Ltd., International Paper, Norbord Inc., and Canadian Forest Products Ltd (Canfor). Weyerhaeuser, the largest operator by far, manages 1.1 million hectares (about 2.5 million acres) of forest in the region and has been harvesting timber from the Red Rock Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou ranges for over 20 years. Based in Seattle, Washington, Weyerhaeuser is often cited as the largest forestry company in the world. In 2021 it earned revenues of \$10.2 billion, up 30 per cent from 2020, and posted a profit of \$2.6 billion, more than double the previous year. It owns or manages 11 million acres of forest in the United States. But it has even more of a grip on Canadian forests, where it manages 14 million acres of forest leased to it by provincial governments in B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario. One third



A double row of logs extending for 1.6 km along Two Lakes Road, freshly harvested on Weyerhaeuser tenure in critical habitat of Alberta's threatened Narraway caribou. © AWA

of those holdings are in Alberta. Despite substantial operations in Canada, Weyerhaeuser has only one Canadian on its 9-member board of directors; Al Monaco, president and CEO of Calgary-based Enbridge Inc. who was appointed in 2020.

Despite its reach and revenues, in 2018 Weyerhaeuser warned it might have to halt further investment in the Grande Prairie region which includes the Red Rock Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou ranges if its Forest Management Plans were restricted because of caribou preservation. In a presentation to Grande Prairie city council, Wendy Crosina, speaking on behalf of Weyerhaeuser, said the company was concerned about the federal requirement to reduce disturbed range from 80 per cent to 35 per cent. “That’s a huge leap. It means we may lose the opportunity to harvest in roughly 35 per cent of our range,” said Crosina, a forester and a biologist. Weyerhaeuser’s general manager of lumber, Terry Jean, told the mayor and councillors that if Weyerhaeuser’s tree harvest is too restricted, it could affect their plans to re-invest in the Grande Prairie area. “Right now with our estimation of how much would be reasonable in the plan to restrict harvest, we would have enough to be able to invest, have a new mill, and continue on for the foreseeable future, but if it’s any less than that, then it really starts to question.” Four years later, and with a government-approved Forestry Management Plan that extends to 2029, Crosina said the forest sector is still concerned about the “current restraints” specified in the Federal Recovery Plan. She would like to see a more regional approach as well as different metrics for measuring the success of caribou preservation efforts. “We believe that caribou have a higher chance of being maintained on the landscape with a more flexible recovery strategy,” Crosina added. In its 2020 annual report Weyerhaeuser advised shareholders that Indigenous rights and environmental restrictions might impinge on future operations and income.

Oil and gas

Exploration and production of oil and natural gas has been ongoing in the Grande Prairie/Grande Cache region since the 1950s. But it was the more recent discoveries in the Duvernay and Montney natural gas fields, among the largest in North America, which really caught the industry’s interest. The Montney has the same layered, stratified geology as the Texas shale formation that led to a resurgence in U.S. oil production. But unlike the Texas fields, which yield mostly crude oil, the Montney is rich in gas and associated liquids such as condensate. Those shale deposits became popular targets for North American producers as technologies such as horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing made it cheaper to extract oil and gas trapped in narrow seams deep underground. Over the years these bountiful gas fields have attracted big industry players such as Encana (now Ovintiv), Royal Dutch Shell, ConocoPhillips, Canadian Natural Resources, Athabasca Oil Corporation and Tourmaline.

Calgary-based Seven Generations was one of the most active companies in the area and was so successful that in 2021 it combined forces with ARC Energy, also of Calgary, in a deal worth \$8.1 billion.

But the industry didn’t bring just investment dollars and jobs; it also introduced more well sites, pipelines, gas plants, roads and seismic lines, many of which encroached on caribou habitat. A study conducted for Seven Generations by fRi Research between 2007 and 2013 found that caribou not only avoided well sites with workers on hand but continued to avoid them even after human activity ceased. During early winter, caribou avoided well sites in the drilling phase more than inactive and producing well sites. During late winter, caribou avoided well sites in producing phases more than inactive well sites. All of which is to say that when infrastructure is on a caribou range the caribou notice and tend to avoid that area, which means their range and food supply has shrunk.

Kirby Smith, the former Alberta Fish and Wildlife biologist, believes the politicians and the bureaucracy weren't that interested in a department such as his because it didn't make any money. "A few outfitters and hunting licences paled in comparison to a forest management area or an oil and gas field," he says. "Politically, protecting certain species is a non-starter because there are very few politicians who see beyond getting re-elected every four years." Smith also noticed that whenever the price of oil and natural gas began an upward trend, there would be a surge of activity on the part of the government decision makers who wanted to get it out of the ground as quickly as possible. Making sure the caribou had enough range and enough lichens to keep them going fell to the bottom of the agenda. "There was no vision of what the province would look like other than we're just going to run it hard until we run out of oil and gas," he said during a phone interview from his home in Edson.

Coal

In 2007 Grande Cache Coal Corporation (GCCC) made it known that it wanted to begin exploratory drilling on Caw Ridge, a well-known migratory path for the Red Rock Prairie Creek caribou population. Fish and Wildlife officials made it known within government that they did not approve. "This proposal runs right across the eastern face of the ridge and is proposed during the historical migration period of October to December," wrote one Fish and Wildlife official in correspondence between various government departments considering the proposal. "An obvious conflict that should be avoided and I'm surprised that GCCC included nothing in their application to address this." The exploration proposal was eventually given the green light anyway and mining development soon followed, removing a large portion of Caw Ridge's lower slopes right within the caribou annual migratory corridor. Nevertheless, in 2017 GCCC which had 500 employees was forced into bankruptcy. In 2018 a Hong Kong-based company, CST Group Limited, took over the mines and leases. CST is now planning a new open pit coal mine in the vicinity of Caw Ridge and has already carved out a new road and clear cut a wide expanse of old growth forest on a hillside. "Because there are no mandatory deadlines that commit coal companies to reclaiming habitat where the wildlife has been seriously affected, the disturbances can remain for decades," says AWA's Carolyn Campbell. "So we have this overly permissive system for coal where the companies are given the benefit of the doubt about economic benefits that don't seem to pan out for the communities, because they're a boom and bust industry. They open mines and then they close them. But the disturbances don't come and go, they stay. They are certainly harmful to wildlife when the disturbances are long term with no timeline to reclaim them." The threat could be reduced, says Campbell, by simply requiring upfront financial security equal to the dollars needed for reclamation, along with regular publicly-available reviews to ensure those dollars are enough. Government could also require tighter deadlines for reclamation of habitat for species at risk. Given its history, the coal industry has not exactly been an economic boon in recent years, either for its owners or the people of the Grande Cache area. And no matter how often it was touted as an important component of economic development for the region, open pit coal mining definitely hasn't been a boon for fish and wildlife.

Solutions

Stop-gap measures are not enough. Significant action is needed now.

While the dwindling herds of caribou have been researched, discussed and reported on for almost fifty years, an annual slaughter of hundreds of wolves is the only response to the problem that has been actively implemented. Since 2014 wolves in and around the Red Rock Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou ranges have been shot from helicopters in order to cut down on the number preying on caribou. Dave Hervieux of Alberta Fish and Wildlife says it is only a stop-gap measure but it has halted the decline of west central Alberta caribou populations. It will be a long time before this tactic makes up for the losses in the previous decades. “But If we want to retain those populations the wolf program is unavoidable,” he said during a phone interview. Of course, the wolf cull wouldn’t be necessary (B.C. also culls wolves) if more caribou habitat had been preserved in the first place so the wolves couldn’t get at the caribou via the clear cuts, logging roads and seismic lines carved into the old growth forests. So now two species are suffering because governments have delayed for so long the land-use planning needed to preserve caribou habitat.

The most important indicator of the strength of a caribou herd is the number of calves born each year. If those calves survive attacks by wolves, avalanches, starvation and disease, it bodes well for the future of the herd, especially if a high proportion of those calves are female. So it has become crucial to protect mothers and calves, especially in the first few months after a calf is born. In B.C., not far from Alberta’s west central caribou ranges, an experiment in protecting mothers and calves which began in 2014 has proved to be beneficial for them and the rest of the herd. The project is led by the West Moberly First Nation and Sauteau First Nation which lie about 250 kilometres northwest of Grande Prairie. These Indigenous communities have “caribou guardians” who move pregnant females from the Klinse-Za herd on their territory into “maternity pens” for the spring calving season. The high elevation, predator-free pen encloses about 15 hectares with a light fence. The females are then watched over by Indigenous guardians and released with their calves in midsummer. Each year, community members pick bags of lichen to feed the mother caribou in the pen while other members live up at the top of the mountain near the animals. This gives the newborns a fighting chance at survival as they become stronger. According to lead researcher, Clayton Lamb of UBC Okanagan, the Klinse-Za caribou have gone up from just 38 in 2013 to 114 this year. The researchers, which include members of both the West Moberly and Sauteau First Nations, attributed the herd increase as approximately one-third due to maternal penning and two-thirds due to wolf reduction. Dave Hervieux of Alberta Fish and Wildlife said a similar experiment was tried in west central Alberta but the survival rate of calves delivered inside the pen compared to those delivered outside was the same, so the project was dropped.

Even though the Klinze-Za herd penning project was successful, the First Nations knew that the real key to caribou herd growth was protected habitat. There was no point in shielding caribou from harm with pens if they were going to be released into habitat where clear cuts and new roads made

it difficult for the mothers and calves to thrive. The two First Nations then sought to conclude an agreement with the provincial and federal governments that designates protected caribou habitat. The Partnership Agreement signed by all parties in February 2020 outlines the formal protection of a 7,986-km² area, which includes the 1682-km² expansion of the Klinse-Za co-managed protected area, and a 30-year moratorium on industrial development while long-term planning occurs. This Indigenous-led conservation effort represents the only successful example of not just halting the decline of a herd but boosting its numbers via short-term measures, followed by implementation of meaningful habitat protection to increase long-term viability.

The B.C. project highlights the important role that Indigenous communities can play due to their constitutional and treaty rights. Recent court cases have affirmed that First Nations' treaty rights – promises made to them when they ceded land to The Crown – must be recognized and honoured. This includes territory that a First Nation had been accustomed to using for traditional activities such as hunting, trapping, and cultural and spiritual practices that may be outside land allotted for a reserve. The courts have also ruled that cumulative effects of industrial development on Indigenous traditional lands must be taken into account because approving projects on a case-by-case basis leads to a general degradation of landscape and habitat.

Since caribou habitat and the caribou themselves are deemed essential to their way of life, First Nations have a key role to play in the preservation and enhancement of the herds. In Alberta an agreement between two First Nations in the northeast of the province and the federal government reached in March 2022, aims to establish self-sustaining populations of boreal caribou in four ranges. The foundation of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and Mikisew Creek First Nation plan is the knowledge of 20 participating Indigenous elders who regard the caribou as essential to their hunting, cultural and spiritual traditions. This knowledge was then combined with long-standing and new scientific research on the caribou. The plan designates three zones in each caribou range. The first zone would be a protection zone where undisturbed habitat would be kept as it is; the second would be a restoration zone which would be off limits for development while it is being rehabilitated; the third zone would allow for some industrial development. Protection and restoration zones would amount to 65 per cent of caribou ranges, the goal set by the federal government. But overall the ACFN/MCFN plan projects that within 40 years, 80 per cent of caribou ranges would be undisturbed habitat, a goal envisioned by the elders. The plan also commits to training Indigenous guardians to participate in habitat restoration and the monitoring of caribou populations. While the plan was developed by the two First Nations they don't see it as a stand-alone document but as the basis for collaboration, and reconciliation with other interested parties, including industry.

In west central Alberta the Aseniwuche Winewak (AWN) people have lived in the region for generations. Before the arrival of newcomers they were mostly Cree or Stoney Nakoda. In the 1800s Iroquois, Ojibwe and Métis people from eastern Canada guided and supported fur traders as they headed to western Canada. When the group arrived in the area around what is now known as the Jasper Valley some Indigenous and Métis members of the crew decided to stay and live with the

people who already called it home. They were all eventually forced to move further north when the federal government created Jasper National Park. Today the Aseniwuche Winewak live in the vicinity of Grande Cache. Many work for the industries in the region but they are also determined to preserve the land and their cultural traditions. One of the ways they have done this is by getting involved in the quest to save the caribou. Representatives participated in the Upper Smoky Caribou Task Force. AWN representatives have described their connection to caribou as: “We will be here, living on the land, after resource development is done, we need to make sure that caribou are not a story of the past, but part of the landscape for generations to come.” Landon Delorme, a community member and trapper regularly attends open houses where logging companies present their future plans so he can put forward the community’s questions or objections. “We need more than consultation,” he says. “We live here. We need engagement. It’s a much better process than consultation because it’s more personal, all points of view are taken seriously.”

Looking to the Future

The caribou belong here. It would be a tragedy if we lost them.

Caribou are only one species in a complex web of life in west central Alberta. There are many other animals – lynx, elk, deer, grizzlies, black bears and mountain goats to name a few. Birds, insects, and plants as well as rivers and lakes are also part of the web. So some might ask: what difference does it make if one species disappears? Isn’t it important to provide people with a way to earn a living? Yes, it is. But does that trump all other concerns when we live in such an interconnected web of life? How much are Albertans willing to sacrifice in the name of material progress? The caribou have inhabited this area for millennia. Over time they adapted to forest fires, diseases, floods, avalanches, and scarcity of food; otherwise they wouldn’t still be here. But they don’t adapt well when their ranges and migratory paths are ravaged by humans bent on extracting resources as fast as they can. Their dwindling numbers are clear evidence of that.

And it’s not as though there aren’t any solutions that could be quickly implemented. “The only thing we have to do is protect their winter habitat,” said Brian Bildson the trapper who knows this country like the back of his hand. “That’s all we have to do. And it’s not that huge an area. We are not talking about saving the whole province of Alberta but there doesn’t seem to be the will.” Landon Delorme whose family has lived here for generations wants the caribou task forces to get down to pinpointing solutions rather than holding endless discussions; “Everyone knows what has to be done. Let’s just do it.” Carolyn Campbell of Alberta Wilderness Association is determined to hold both the federal and Alberta governments accountable for what they pledged in their agreement to preserve caribou habitat. “Whether the wild caribou that have lived here for millennia survive depends on decisions and actions by Albertans in the next few years,” she says. “The Upper Smoky caribou land-use plan that’s now being written is the best opportunity to reduce unsustainable development impacts so caribou can thrive, as well as communities. The targets it sets and how it’s rolled out can be a transformative path for forests, Indigenous rights, and responsible economic development.”

That plan will likely be released sometime this year. Public consultations will follow; that's when Albertans will have a chance to weigh in. Dave Hervieux who has been advocating for caribou for almost 40 years wants Albertans to consider how much they have already lost. "On the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies caribou could once be found all the way up to Sundre but now they are all gone except for a small remnant and endangered population around Jasper," he says. "Wouldn't it be a tragedy if we lost the caribou in this area as well?" Kirby Smith worked on caribou preservation for Alberta Fish and wildlife for 43 years. He sums up his feelings this way: "Do you want to live in a country that's



When short-sighted priorities are pitted against wildlife, wildlife always loses © P. Sutherland

always putting the dollar ahead of everything else? And if you do, then these problems that we've seen so far, they're only going to get a lot worse." The caribou in this part of Alberta are the proverbial canary in the coal mine. They are warning us that when short-sighted industrial priorities are pitted against wildlife, wildlife always loses. And if the caribou disappear in this part of the world what might be the next catastrophe?

Trina Moyles is a Peace River writer and fire tower look out. She grew up in northwestern Alberta where her dad was a wildlife biologist who was more than familiar with the struggles of the caribou. In Alberta Views magazine, she described caribou tracks across the frozen lake, weaving in and out of one another, their lines undulating like a horse's tail. "Nature knows no straight lines, I thought to myself. From above, I tried to make sense of their message in the snow. 'We belong here,' they wrote."