



Town of High Level
10511 – 103 Street
High Level, AB
T0h 1Z0
Ph: 780-926-2201

info@AlbertaNWSAR.ca

April 16, 2018

Opinion: Collaboration at the grassroots level is the key to effectively balancing boreal caribou recovery, jobs and the economy

Crystal McAteer

Although Woodland Boreal Caribou are *Listed* as threatened across Canada and are experiencing local population declines over several years; there is no immediate threat that Boreal Caribou will become *Listed* as endangered under the federal Species at Risk Act.

Several million Canadian caribou, inclusive of multiple sub-species, are found everywhere from British Columbia and the Yukon Territory in the west, to the island of Newfoundland in the east. With approximately 34,000 Boreal Caribou, distributed across 51 local populations in Canada, they are not on their way to extinction.

While Caribou Range Plans are still being developed and submitted to the federal government, Northwest Species at Risk Committee (NWSAR) views the Alberta government's recent move to suspend new conservation area designations as a positive announcement for both, Boreal Caribou and the economic stability of Northwest Alberta. NWSAR also commends the Alberta government for requesting resources from the Government of Canada, which are required to create all-encompassing Provincial Caribou Range Plans.

The most recent Draft Caribou Range Plan, released by Alberta in 2017, proposed establishing multiple large conservation areas measuring almost 1.6 million hectares in total, across Northwest Alberta for caribou. Conservation areas in



Northwest Alberta, including Wood Buffalo National Park and Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park, collectively measure approximately 5 million hectares, an area just smaller than the size of Nova Scotia!

These additional permanent land-use designation changes could have occurred without Alberta and impacted communities ever knowing what the socio-economic impacts were, or whether the new conservation areas would even help the caribou to recover.

Alberta's large conservation areas and parks have a history of not supporting caribou survival and recovery. One such park is located in Northwest Alberta. Caribou Mountains Wildland Provincial Park, which adjoins the southwestern boundary of Wood Buffalo National Park; measuring approximately 591,000 hectares – larger than the size of Prince Edward Island, has provided little support for the Caribou Mountains and Yates caribou herds, since its establishment in 2001.

Even in federal parks such as Banff, Jasper and Wood Buffalo National Parks, caribou are not thriving and have actually been extirpated from Banff, since 2009. Large parks and conservation areas alone, are clearly not the answer to caribou recovery.

We should be applauding Alberta's government for wanting to better understand the impact of their Draft Caribou Range Plan. It just does not make sense to re-designate huge areas of land for caribou, when what we really need to do is better understand the history of why caribou are not recovering in parks and conservation areas.

Designating a conservation area today doesn't magically make the area sustainable for caribou recovery tomorrow. It only protects the area's current state. Alberta has tried this approach and history proves it does not work. Protected areas will continue to be susceptible to natural disturbances such as wildfires, Mountain Pine Beetle infestations and dead fall – all of which do not contribute to effective caribou recovery.

Caribou ranges require more than land mass, they require active land management to restore habitat, to monitor caribou stability and recovery progress over time. To do all this, you need humans on the landscape. Current, substantial databases need to be developed in order to fully analyze the impacts that are affecting the localized populations of Boreal Caribou. For example, wildfires and



the current response rate to extinguishing them, can have a bigger impact on habitat in more remote caribou ranges than others – responses to wildfires are prioritized by risk to human life.

Landsat satellite imagery, currently used to determine disturbances within caribou ranges is very controversial. These datasets do seem to provide a bleak picture for caribou, particularly once human disturbances are buffered on all four sides by the scientifically recommended 500m (1km across all linear disturbances). These disturbances cover the entire landscape!

Local land users, operators and Indigenous Peoples provide quite a different picture. One which utterly debunks the disturbance levels that are provided by satellite imagery. In essence, local knowledge datasets provide a much more optimistic outlook for caribou, other wildlife and continued sustainable economic activity.

The 500m buffer zones are defined by Environment Canada as not contributing to caribou habitat. NWSAR questions whether the recommended buffer zones are appropriate for all different types of disturbance. Essentially, do all types of human disturbances have the same level of influence on wildlife? Should a buffer on each side of a regularly-accessed roadway be the same size as a buffer for a legacy seismic line, which has seen little activity for the last 40-50 years?

Does the 500m buffer on each side of a disturbance really become unsuitable for caribou, and therefore defined as disturbed habitat? These are some of the questions NWSAR and others would like the answers to, before permanent land-use designations and Caribou Range Plans are complete and implemented.

Caribou do require some help from us to become self-sustaining. Over the short-term, they require strategic predator management, which could be completed by local Indigenous Peoples, trappers and outfitters who know the land. Caribou also require some immediate restorative efforts, which could help to stabilize many caribou populations. Reducing predator numbers and obstructing predator sight lines, makes more logical sense when attempting to immediately halt caribou declines, than drawing lines on a map for large conservation areas.

Long-term strategies such as integrated land and access management, and restoration provide benefits on both sides of the caribou argument. Communities, industry, and investors will be assured that sustainable operations can continue



and the caribou will begin to increase, as a result of their habitat becoming less fragmented, and therefore less effective predator-related mortalities will occur.

NWSAR, supports Alberta's commitment to establishing Caribou Habitat Restoration Committee. This initiative includes sub-committees, led by government, which will undertake biophysical inventories in all caribou ranges over a five year period. In essence, legacy seismic that has naturally recovered will be removed from disturbance levels, identified by Landsat satellite imagery – ultimately, providing the real picture for government to plan from for caribou recovery. All of which will take time.

NWSAR believes that habitat restoration sub-committees should involve biologists, Indigenous Peoples, industry and municipalities local to each region, with a multi-species focus – some caribou ranges overlap with habitat of other vulnerable species.

Alberta's Draft Caribou Range Plan acknowledges that historically, the province's regulatory process for industry access management and approvals has been focused on individual industrial interest and therefore, in some areas, an excessive road network has been created on Crown land. Moving towards integrated land and access management while positive, comes with a price. A price estimated by Alberta to be in excess of \$1 billion!

We as Albertans should be supporting Alberta's request for an injection of federal funds. This funding will go a long way in helping Alberta to restore critical caribou habitat, while also sustaining viable northern communities, local jobs and a prosperous economic future.

While there are threats to jurisdictions to move quickly, we do have time. We have time to get it right. Natural resource industries have invested millions of dollars in: data collection, modelling and analysis, restoration and other research, restoring habitat and much more over several decades, to better understand their impacts on caribou and the environment. Neighbouring jurisdictions need to align to harmonize recovery efforts of 'shared' caribou and build on industry's wealth of knowledge with help from the people on the local landscape.

Hastening to establish large conservation areas will not recover caribou, but will most definitely have an adverse impact on northern communities, natural resources industries and government tax revenues. A cost that northern



communities cannot bear, particularly with little-to-no guarantee of caribou recovery success.

By collaborating with Indigenous Peoples, municipalities, industry, grassroots organizations. Non-government organizations and other land users, Alberta will develop effective Range Plans for the caribou, while also ensuring the viable future of people, jobs and northern communities.

Crystal McAteer is vice-chair of NWSAR and Mayor of Town of High Level, Alberta.

