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Alberta Caribou Population Faces Grim Future at the Hand of Industry

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Caribou in Alberta's foothills are experiencing steep declines in their numbers and are facing the permanent loss of their habitat through habitat fragmentation, alteration, and alienation. The face of Alberta's foothills landscape is changing. This natural subregion is only two percent represented in the province and has been subjected to extreme transformation from increasing industrial activities, including oil and gas and forestry, along with recreation. In turn, the demographics of Alberta's remaining caribou herds are shifting.

Woodland caribou are now listed as "Threatened" under both the Federal Species at Risk Act and the Provincial Alberta Wildlife Act. Of Alberta's 18 herds of caribou, three have been ranked as of "Immediate Risk Of Extirpation" by the 2004 Alberta government's Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan. Included among these herds is the Little Smoky herd located in the foothills northwest of Hinton.

The Little Smoky caribou, with its population estimated at fewer than 80 animals, have been at the centre of recent conflict and debate between ENGOs and industry. AWA, along with other ENGOs and interested parties, met with Suncor and partner ConocoPhillips (and their consultants) in September to discuss the development of a 101 km-long gas pipeline through the heart of the Little Smoky home range.

The groups attempted to negotiate re-routing options for the pipeline, echoing the recommendations made by caribou scientists who had advised Suncor to locate its pipeline outside the range. Currently within the Little Smoky caribou range, approximately 85 percent of the habitat is located within 250 meters of a linear corridor. Although the area within and surrounding the Little Smoky range has experienced a high degree of industrial activity and fragmentation, Suncor's pipeline would traverse through the only relatively intact habitat remaining in Little Smoky range.

The development of this pipeline would undoubtedly pave the way for further industrial activity within the area, including tie-ins and other infrastructure. As compensation, Suncor has committed over \$1 million to restore approximately 400 km of existing linear disturbance in the range, including seismic lines, cutlines, and trails.

Although Suncor's efforts are acknowledged, the issue is not about dollars and cents. Suncor is of the opinion that their investment into restoration will help to eliminate some of the negative effects of linear disturbance on the caribou herd. However, if the company were truly interested in the viability of the herd, they would not be operating within this sensitive range to begin with. Although Suncor is willing to account for existing disturbance left by others, they are in no way accounting for the brand new disturbance they will be exerting on the landscape. They would have us believe that if it is not them who develop the pipeline, it will be constructed anyway by another company unwilling to undertake any mitigation endeavours.

Suncor puts the blame on the government, which allows industry into these sensitive areas. This assertion is correct insofar as the project was granted approval by both the Alberta Energy Utilities Board (EUB) and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD). However, industry must take the lead and set a higher standard of practice and push government to do the same. It cannot be left strictly up to ENGOs and other concerned individuals and organizations.





Suncor's activities come on the eve of the release of the Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan (Caribou Plan) to the Minister in October for approval and implementation. Recommendations of the report include the establishment of range teams and range plans for caribou herds. Without gathering further scientific data, it is unknown what impacts the new industrial development would exert on these already threatened caribou. Given the high value placed on these animals, a moratorium on new development within these sensitive ranges is not much to ask if it would lead to the development of better management practices in the range and the revitalization of the population.

The implications of the release of the provincial Caribou Plan is believed to be of concern to other industry players. In the week prior to, and the day of, the release of the Caribou Plan to the Minister, AWA received many inquiries by companies to discuss their activities in areas within and adjacent to the Little Smoky caribou range. From discussion with these companies, they did not appear to be concerned about the possible implications the Caribou Plan might exert on their activities, including a possible moratorium on new activity in the caribou ranges considered to be at immediate risk. "A moratorium on oil and gas – I doubt it. After all, this is Alberta!" These words come from companies who themselves have endorsed the Caribou Plan. Although they appear to support the initiative, their business-as-usual attitude does little to reflect any commitment.

We must be cautious not to forget that the primary issue is the viability of the Little Smoky caribou herd. The fact is, Alberta's government continues to allow industrial activity in the ranges of these threatened species, and industry continues to purchase the leases. It remains uncertain whether linear disturbance restoration will have a substantial benefit for the caribou. Methods have not been assessed for effectiveness and would require scientific confirmation before they are implemented. These unknowns may place an unacceptable risk on an already threatened herd. More information, including the viability of the herd, the quantity and location of key habitat, and parameters of present and historic ranges, is required before allowing any new industrial development within the caribou ranges at immediate risk of extirpation in this province.

A pipeline may be worth millions, but the survival of the Little Smoky caribou population is priceless!

