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Wolves the Latest Casualty in Little Smoky Industrial Strategy

By David Samson, AWA Conservation Specialist

The Alberta government has started culling wolves in the Little Smoky region in a misguided effort to keep the caribou from becoming literally the "Grey Ghosts of the Boreal." Yet at the same time they are selling more oil and gas leases in the habitat of the Little Smoky herd. The government's own newly formed Alberta Caribou Committee (ACC) has already stated that the culling of wolves cannot be done without concurrently deferring industrial activity in key caribou habitat.

"There is no point in killing wolves to save caribou if habitat for caribou survival is being wiped out at the same time," says Cliff Wallis, an ACC member and past-president of the Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA). "Caribou need secure habitat in which populations can be restored. Alberta and the resource industries are ensuring that both wolves and caribou will die to make way for resource extraction."

Wallis says the government has absolutely zero credibility on wildlife conservation. AWA supports a moratorium on industrial activity in the Little Smoky until management recommendations are finalized by the ACC.

"The Tories should listen to their own experts," says Bill Bonko, the Alberta Liberal's Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) critic. "I don't believe wolves are the main issue. Encroachment of industry is the problem and the government is part of the problem as they're allowing it."

Crown petroleum and natural gas rights were being publicly offered for sale during January. AWA estimates that 9,472 hectares (94.72 km²) of those sales occurred in and immediately adjacent to Little Smoky caribou habitat. These lease sales are in addition to the current maze of oil and gas and forestry activity in the Little Smoky.

The government's choice to use a wolf cull at this time is controversial. Dr. Stan Boutin, a University of Alberta biology professor who researches population ecology of boreal mammals and predator relationships, describes the wolf cull as being "completely ineffective in the short term." He points out that to be effective, a wolf cull must remove at least 50 per cent of the wolf population and maintain that level over a number of years.

Wolf populations rebound very quickly once a cull stops, while caribou populations are virtually unaffected in the first year by wolf culls, and they recover more slowly. Wolf culls would have to continue while caribou populations rebound and then may have to continue for many years until habitat is reclaimed, which would be extremely difficult with increasing industrial activity.

"The Little Smoky herd is in real trouble," says Boutin. "There are a whole bunch of remedies needed." The cull may only buy a little more time for the herd, delaying the extirpation by perhaps another five years. For caribou to have a chance, there has to be a slow-down of activity in caribou habitat, something never seen in Alberta, combined with aggressive management. Boutin says a big indicator of government commitment to saving caribou habitat would be in the control of land sales, and there has been no evidence of that. The government's mindset, he says, is to maximize revenues from land sales, and this is "flying in the face of (effective) land management."

Ultimately, Boutin believes that the level of industrial activity allowed is overwhelming industry best practices and has "upset the applecart of habitat." Many years of habitat reclamation would be needed,





and we would have to start now to see the benefits much later. But Boutin does not necessarily agree with a moratorium on industrial activity in the Little Smoky. He believes that with increasing human activity, there is a higher risk of losing caribou and that a broader and more regional landscape approach is needed. He suggests that we may have to look judiciously at which areas are good and focus our conservation dollars on those areas. The Little Smoky area's value for caribou is diminishing, and it may be at a point of no return.

Wildlife researcher Jonathan Wright, who studied the effects of industry on caribou in Chinchaga for a locally operating oil company, echoes Dr. Boutin's suggestion that human activity and caribou recovery should be approached on a regional scale. "We have to look at the entire ecosystem, not just the caribou."

Wright points out that caribou were previously hunted very heavily, depressing population numbers, but that now industry is giving wolves better access to caribou. He says the cull should not have gone ahead without prior assessment of its effectiveness, a time-consuming task. Caribou may rely on large population numbers as a survival strategy, and it may therefore be too late to save the much diminished Little Smoky herd.

The question is how committed the government is in its stated intentions and legally mandated directive to see woodland caribou recover. The woodland caribou was listed as an endangered species by the provincial and federal government in 1987 and 2000, respectively. Under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA), the provincial government must have a recovery plan implemented by 2007. The *Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan* (May 2004) identifies the Little Smoky herd as being at "immediate risk of extirpation" and the herd is the immediate focus of the ACC.

AWA, along with seven other leading national and Alberta environmental organizations, concluded that the Alberta government is not taking meaningful steps under its caribou recovery plan to maintain caribou herds that are at immediate risk of extirpation. The eight groups filed a petition under the Species at Risk Act (SARA) in December 2005 with the federal Minister of the Environment asking the federal government to issue an emergency order to take action to protect the caribou.

Conflicting Messages and Actions

Over the years, what the government has said it wants to do with the Little Smoky caribou and what it has actually done have been two very different things. The Little Smoky region had been considered for protection for many years. At a minimum, protecting and managing some habitat to sustain caribou recovery has been a common thread through a myriad of committees and government policies over the decades.

Concerns about the impact of industry on the Little Smoky caribou were indicated as early as 1973. The *Foothills Resource Allocation Study* by Alberta Lands and Forests noted that ungulate populations could suffer from increased hunting pressure brought by improved access within the Berland Planning District of the Little Smoky region. In 1980 Alberta Energy and Natural Resources identified major concerns over the impacts of timber harvesting and mineral extraction and the need for a regional plan for the area. They recommended that access to certain areas be limited because of the secondary impacts of industrial activity, such as services and transportation networks.

A 1993 draft Berland Subregional Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) recognized the importance of retaining habitat in order to sustain wildlife in the area and emphasized the potential problems from industry. It noted that as demands for mineral and timber resources had increased in the once remote area over the last decade, the creation of surface access by these industries had necessitated efforts to protect many sensitive species, such as caribou, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, and elk. Broad management





objectives were stated that included maintaining the integrity of caribou range, stabilizing and increasing caribou populations, and maintaining or increasing suitable terrestrial habitat.

The 1994 Fox Creek Knight Subregional IRP described the Little Smoky area as having a core area of caribou habitat and stated that a range of management techniques would be used to conserve caribou, guide activities throughout the area, and maintain the integrity of caribou habitat. The plan appears to give caribou and its habitat priority by stating that oil and gas, timber, and other industrial activities will consider caribou needs.

In that same year, an economic evaluation produced for the IRP stated that while the Regional Directors' Committee had recommended that this herd be protected, complete protection would require precluding timber harvesting and energy development from key winter (woodland caribou) habitat because these activities would destroy food sources, increase competition from other ungulates, and lead to greater predation by wolves. It did not appear possible, the report continued, to protect the Little Smoky caribou herd without compromising existing forestry commitments. "The extent to which the herd can survive such changes (logging activity in key winter ranges) is not known and may be irreversible."

The report concluded, "The economic benefits of maintaining the Little Smoky woodland caribou are not large, primarily because caribou are not a marketable commodity. Yet, the non-market benefits of protecting caribou are quite high, as demonstrated by evidence that many Albertans actively participated in non-consumptive wildlife activities, and that people in Saskatchewan are prepared to pay to protect remaining caribou herds."

Based on the logging and petroleum industries' activities since 1994, the decision on whether to save the Little Smoky herd may have already been made, intentionally or not.

By 2000, the Special Places process, which was supposed to identify and protect valuable public lands, was near completion. Large portions of the Little Smoky region were put forward as candidate areas, especially due to the woodland caribou habitat. Only two Natural Areas totaling just more than 37 km² were created. Neither area seems to be of any value to industry: one is a sliver of land in a canyon that harbours goats; the other is a slim section of land protecting a river valley. The government chose sites that had the least conflict with industry and that meant eliminating the Little Smoky caribou range from protection.

The Alberta Advantage

When conservation groups met with SRD staff in February 2005 about the caribou issue, SRD acknowledged concerns about habitat fragmentation by industry, but their bottom line was, "Well, that's the Alberta Advantage."

In a March 2005 response to a concerned Albertan, SRD Minister David Coumts wrote: SRD "is very concerned about the status of woodland caribou throughout Alberta and particularly, the Little Smoky herd. The department is considering a number of strategies to conserve this dwindling herd relative to an escalating interest in oil/gas and timber development. A provincial Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan is currently under review. Once the Recovery Plan is finalized, the challenge will be to implement locally effective conservation strategies, while trying to honor other land use commitments that contribute to our economy."

In the legislature in November 2005, he revealed more clearly the government's industrial strategy for Little Smoky: "We're promoting industry best practices more widely so that companies can operate on all caribou ranges."





If we lose the Little Smoky caribou herd it will be a poignant statement of our ongoing failure to sustain the habitat necessary for our wildlife that was brought back from the brink of extinction in the last century. That greatest conservation success story is being constantly eroded.

The government may be leading Albertans to tell them the good news/bad news scenario: the bad news is that we're going to have to lose our Little Smoky caribou; the good news is we're rich. But I suppose that depends on your definition of wealth.

