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Will a New Committee Really Save the Woodland Caribou?

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Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) announced the creation of a new caribou committee as part of a package of “new” actions aimed at conserving caribou. Whether this alleged new initiative will actually “ensure that caribou remain on Alberta’s landscape for many years to come,” as David Coutts, Minister of SRD, states in a June news release, remains to be seen.

We have seen committees come and go and caribou populations still remain threatened. Three of 18 caribou herds are at immediate risk of extirpation; six herds are in decline; three herds are listed as stable; and there is insufficient information on another six herds to even know what their status is.

The new committee charged with the task of developing yet more plans for the recovery of threatened caribou is the Alberta Caribou Committee (ACC). It is an amalgamation of two existing caribou committees – the Boreal Caribou Committee and the West-Central Alberta Caribou Committee – and the Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Team. The new committee will consist of government, industry, and a smattering of that over-used mercurial hodge-podge description of “stakeholders,” as well as the equally non-committal “efforts to initiate dialogue with aboriginals.”

On a more positive note, Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) will be represented on the committee. “We feel this is our last shot from the inside,” says Cliff Wallis, AWA’s past-president and committee member. “If we can’t reach agreement with the other players and get a commitment from government for some essential planning tools like deferrals, we will have failed caribou and our responsibility to Albertans who want to see caribou restored in abundance to their former ranges.”

A key recommendation that SRD has chosen to dismiss so far is to put in place a moratorium on, or deferrals of, further industrial development within the ranges of threatened species until proper caribou recovery planning actions can be determined and implemented. It is difficult, however, to expect that SRD will accept recommendations in the future from a new committee when it has already rejected numerous previous recommendations, including those from its own departments, and placed industrial development at the forefront in threatened caribou habitat.

In a description of its key actions, SRD touts two enhancements, neither of which has proven to work so far: (1) creating another committee and (2) promoting industry best practices. With respect to a third more corporeal approach, they have chosen to highlight the option of predator management as a tool.

According to recommendations derived from the Report from the Caribou Workshops conducted in April 2005 (which included 39 participants from government [policy, science, and management], academia, industry biologists, consultants, and members of the Boreal Caribou Technical Advisory Committee), predator control was identified as a last-resort method of trying to save critically endangered populations. They identified predation as the major cause of caribou mortality, which occurs largely due to human alteration of habitat that in turn changes predator-prey relationships.

Additionally, the workshop arrived at a “clear understanding that predator control as a management tool is highly controversial” and that “predation risk is presumed to increase with habitat loss, and increased linear features.” SRD is recommending proceeding with this last-resort option while at the same time allowing continuing linear disturbances from industrial development.





SRD's indolence on this issue is akin to "Alberta continuing to fiddle while our caribou perish," as Wallis says, and clearly illustrates the glaring gap between what SRD says they want to do with caribou recovery and what they are actually prepared to do to achieve that objective.

What is needed is concrete action on habitat protection in caribou ranges. Only then can another tool, predator management, become an effective tool. In and of itself predator control is simply a last-ditch effort, which will likely result in failure unless it is coupled with ensuring the existence of significant habitat regions.

"We have danced around this issue of securing viable caribou habitat for 14 years or more," says Wallis. "Industry agrees that implementing other ideas has resulted in a failure to keep caribou populations from declining." He adds, "We may already be too far in some ranges so we need to act fast. There is a short fuse on ENGO support for SRD's actions. Industry has to do its homework. We need to set targets. The key tool in the kitbag is deferral and ultimately, securing of habitat."

Wallis, however, does not rule out industry activity. It may be possible for oil and gas activity to occur, but in an unconventional fashion, like in the Arctic. He points out that there are other major problems that need to be addressed as well, such as forest companies' high-grading practices in old-growth forests.

These are two huge problems. It is possible that industry can work in these areas and recover caribou, but we have yet to determine exactly how to do that. In the meantime, deferral as a tool is necessary to ensure that there will be caribou remaining to recover. This may give caribou much-needed breathing room to have a chance to recover and maintain their populations, and time for the ACC to get a clear idea of what tangible, effective actions need to be put in place to produce sustainable, healthy herds.

In 1987, the provincial government declared caribou as threatened. In 2000, the federal government listed caribou as threatened under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). Under this act, the provincial government must put a recovery plan in place by 2007; however, it is becoming clear that there may be more committees than caribou by that date based on the rate at which industrial development is being allowed to occur in threatened caribou habitat. The extent of our current knowledge of caribou is noted by Professor Bill Pruitt, Taiga Biological Station, University of Manitoba: "We know ridiculously little about them or how our actions are affecting them."

In a foreshadowing of what may eventually become of the caribou herds if no substantive actions are taken on managing industrial disturbances in caribou habitat, we can look to the Maligne herd in Jasper National Park. The Jasper Environmental Association asked Dr. James Schaefer, a caribou biologist at Trent University, to look at Parks Canada's proposed actions to maintain the Maligne herd.

Schaefer found that the actions are "timid" and may result in a herd population of 17 by 2008, by which time the herd may have "entered an extinction vortex and be unresponsive to recovery actions." The remedies with that herd that Parks Canada did not accept involved a suggestion to restrict some road access during the winter. Failing to take this action may result in loss of the herd as described above.

We can only imagine the effect of continuing oil and gas and forestry activity in the habitat of the herds in other areas of the province, particularly on those herds that we know are on the verge of extirpation. If the irreversible annihilation of the Maligne herd could be imminent by 2008, it is conceivable that other herds in the province could be at high risk of a similar fate by 2007, the date by which the province's recovery plan is to be in place.

What will probably not work on its own is simply another committee with reworked strategies. Provincial initiatives to date in caribou conservation are summarized in a January 2001 report issued by Alberta's Fish and Wildlife Management Division, *Status of Woodland Caribou in Alberta*. The report points out that





recognition for a provincial management plan began in the late 1970s. Since then, three provincial strategies have been developed and shelved with few of their recommendations adopted. The three reports are *Woodland Caribou Provincial Restoration Plan* (1986), *Strategy for Conservation of Woodland Caribou in Alberta* (1993), and *Alberta Woodland Caribou Conservation Strategy Development Committee* (1996).

Lastly, in a telling summary of the results of all these previous efforts, the report states: "The lack of endorsement of senior government officials has been viewed by some as a lack of commitment to caribou conservation efforts." We see, from the recent SRD focus, that little has changed.

If there is a glimmer of hope, it is that SRD's deputy minister has indicated that if industry and ENGOS can agree on actions, the provincial government will defer to those recommendations. This, however, may not be enough. In order to not disadvantage those industry players willing to defer their activities only to see valuable lands scooped up by others not willing to defer, government must make those ground rules apparent and fair to all. After all, we must keep in mind that the ultimate goal, as industry, government, and others agree, is to recover the caribou, isn't it?

