

CARIBOU RECOVERY PLAN MISSES THE MARK

By Jonathan Wright

The following letter was sent to the Alberta government, May 2007.

I realize I've missed the preferred deadline for comments on this project by a rather wide margin, but I'd still be interested in hearing your take on my take. I will warn you in advance that I am highly critical of this program, but I would love to be swayed otherwise. It would be nice to have cause for hope – for conservationists, at least, if not for caribou!

I'd like to see the survival of woodland caribou in Alberta's forests, the same as I'd have liked to see the survival of the myriad things that have died out during my short lifetime thanks to our impacts. But thinking practically, and armed with an intimate knowledge of the workings of wildlife conservation and the politics thereof, I admit that I find it truly mind-boggling to try and fathom the level of effort you will need to sustain to meet success with this project, given that caribou are on their way out and a new, changed landscape/climate regime not conducive to caribou is clearly in.

Have you thought of the kinds of timelines you will need? The manpower? The money?

How long do you intend to go on killing wolves, for instance? What about the effects on the rest of the ecosystem? What about when you stop killing them and they come back with a vengeance because of all the extra moose and deer you've allowed for? What about the effects of all those extra moose and deer on caribou regardless of the wolves? On the rest of the ecosystem of your kill? What about the fact that your hypothetically boosted caribou herd will still have to deal

R. Bünglin



with all the same adverse landscape conditions on a worsened scale (this is Alberta, after all, and we've seen the trends here) that prevailed before the plan was implemented? What about the fact that on the larger ecological level, you have no idea what you are really doing? You folks are biologists – you don't need me to tell you that wolf-culling is dreadful science, decried by our best thinkers as it always has been, because you already know this. What the caribou faces is politics.

Now, the caribou mothers you are catching. What about stress? Capture myopathy? Capture-induced mortalities? Increased vulnerability to predators?

Finally, what if the caribou were gone (locally, that is – the far north is still teeming with them)? We're still looking at an ecosystem with wolves,

moose, bears, wolverines, etc. in pretty healthy numbers. That's about as close to utopia as you're going to get today. Think about that in perspective – do you want to meddle with this latest reductionist scheme? Because you and I both know that it takes incredible arrogance to believe we can predict all the effects of our actions.

With all due respect, this project seems to me to be geared more towards sustaining the careers of anachronistic, intensive “management”-school-type biologists than it is a truly progressive way of approaching a conservation crisis. It is, in fact, a wildlife manager's – rather than a caribou's – dream come true. Helicopters! Nets! Tranquilizers! Snowmobiles! Aerial hunting! Hands-on! Adrenaline! Steady work! There's nothing “innovative” about this. It's the same aging rodeo under the guise of science that I was watching 35 years ago on “Wild Kingdom.” Exciting, yes. Has it worked? Obviously not.

It would be excusable if it worked. But as Stan Boutin has gone on record as saying, “Chances of success are minimal.”

I will try to keep an open mind, however. I am hoping you can convince me otherwise. I'd appreciate your response. Thank-you for humouring me.

Government-commissioned wildlife recovery plans can miss the mark in a variety of ways. While the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan was submitted in December 2004, almost three years later it has not been approved by government, never mind implemented. This lack of action flies in the face of recent studies estimating less than 500 grizzlies in Alberta.

“No sight encountered in the wilds is quite so stirring as those massive, clawed tracks pressed into mud or snow. No sight is quite so impressive as that of the great bear stalking across some mountain slope with the fur of his silvery robe rippling over his mighty muscles. He is a dignity and power matched by no other in the North American wilderness. To share a mountain with him for a while is a privilege and an adventure like no other.”

— Andy Russell (1915-2005)