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## The Woodland Caribou Controversy

By Dick Dekker

*Alberta's Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan calls for the shooting of moose as well as wolves. Will this vicious cycle of killing spill over into Jasper National Park?*

Although accurate census data are not available, intensive field surveys by provincial biologists leave no doubt that Alberta's population of woodland caribou has been in decline for the past three decades (Edmonds 1986). However, concrete plans toward recovery were not finalized until very recently with the publication of a 48-page report by the Alberta Fish & Wildlife Division (AFWD), in cooperation with a consortium of public and private agencies.

The *Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan: 2004-2014* contains information on the animal's biology and current status, as well as the management measures deemed necessary to halt the decline (Hervieux et al. 2005). Unfortunately, the authors fail to emphasize that the surest way to save the caribou from extirpation is by closing off critical winter habitat to resource exploitation and private vehicles. All parties concerned about caribou survival strongly believe that the protection of large chunks of west slope woodland must be a crucial first step toward recovery. However, such demands from the public and wildlife experts alike have been lost like cries in the wilderness of Alberta's political reality.

Given its limited mandate, AFWD ignored the urgent need for the establishment of foothills forest preserves, and instead, as its first priority, focused on the caribou's natural enemy, the wolf. Details of the first year of operation were duly made available to the public and reported in the *Edmonton Journal* and *Nature Alberta* (Dekker 2006a, b; 2007). Last winter, 89 wolves were shot from helicopters in the region northwest of Hinton. Full particulars were also disclosed of an ambitious program to protect newborn calves from predation by taking 10 pregnant caribou cows into temporary captivity.

Comparative figures for 2006-2007 were not yet available at the time of this writing, but a spokesperson for Alberta Sustainable Resources said that more wolves have been killed on caribou range.

Are government wildlife managers trying to protect the woodland caribou at the expense of other wildlife?

The Recovery Plan identifies wolf predation as an increasingly serious limitation on caribou populations on the basis of the following theory. As formerly closed stands of old-growth forest are opened up by oil and forestry companies, the altered habitat favours the expansion of moose, elk, and deer, which in turn attracts more predators, compounding the vulnerability of caribou. In order to protect them, the killing of wolves is seen as a necessity. However, the document includes a warning that the removal of predators will result in even more hoofed mammals, thus enlarging the prey base for wolves. Furthermore, as soon as controls are lifted, the predators can be expected to come back in greater numbers than before.

So, what is the next stage in the vicious circle? David Ealey, spokesperson for Alberta Sustainable Resources, explains it this way: "The objective of reducing alternate prey such as moose is essential if the larger scale caribou conservation efforts are to be successful." Apparently, the planned reduction of moose – as well as deer and elk – is to be achieved by increasing hunting allocations under general licence throughout caribou range in west-central Alberta.

However, wouldn't this bring even more guns into the field and aggravate the potential danger for caribou? Although the season on them was closed 26 years ago, the secretive woodland dwellers are sometimes shot by accident because they are mistaken for elk, moose, or deer. To further complicate





matters, aboriginal and Metis people are allowed to hunt wild animals, including caribou, throughout the year.

A more target-specific, but not yet implemented, method of moose reduction might be aerial shooting by government technicians. If left in the field, the moose carcasses could serve as food for the local wolves. With a full belly, these predators are not likely to go after other prey, thus mitigating predation risk for caribou. Supplemental feeding of wolves and bears, by providing them with the carcasses of traffic-killed ungulates, was practiced in Alaska two decades ago with the aim of reducing mortality rates of newborn caribou calves.

As for the wolves that have thus far been shotgunned from the air, most of them were indeed left in the field for practical reasons. Helicopter crews chasing a fleeing pack of wolves have no time to land and search for dead or crippled victims. They have to press on in pursuit of other pack members. Neither do airborne wolf hunters want to waste time by cruising on a haphazard course over the wilderness. Instead, they make use of the best technology available. For instance, they net-gun single wolves during summer or fall and release them again fitted with radio transmitters. Called "Judas wolves," these animals will later lead the hunters to the family pack.

Another sure way to zero in on wolves is to dump large baits, such as the carcass of a moose, on frozen lakes. After a wolf pack begins feeding at the open bait site, the helicopter swoops down, intercepting the animals before they scatter and escape into the woods.

Helicopter hunting is expensive. The cost of a campaign in British Columbia in which 996 wolves were shot over two winters was \$2,500 to \$3,000 per wolf in 1980 dollars. Ironically, the massive control effort was deemed a waste of time as well as money: after three years, the local wolf population was back at its former strength (Dekker 1997).

The most effective method of wolf control is poisoning, a common practice in past years. However, today it is frowned upon since it jeopardizes the lives of many other scavengers besides wolves. Surprisingly, AFWF was considering it as a last resort in the current wolf campaign.

### **Will War on Wolves Spill into Jasper?**

The Caribou Recovery Plan includes the following recommendation: "Alberta Fish & Wildlife Division and Parks Canada should determine options and a schedule for implementing control of predators and (possibly) other prey species on caribou ranges where herds are in immediate danger of extirpation or in serious decline."

Does this mean that the killing of wolves and moose is also going to take place in Jasper National Park? The answer is as yet unknown. Parks Canada officials are involved in ongoing discussions with the Alberta Caribou Committee. Whereas the proposal for active wolf control in the park will likely be turned down, it is highly probable that provincial crews are shooting wolves just outside the Jasper Park boundary. Another yet to be resolved question is whether Parks Canada will eventually approve of an indirect method of dampening wolf numbers by lowering their prey base. In this case, that would involve reducing not moose numbers but elk.

The reasoning goes as follows. Wolves are relatively common in Jasper Park by virtue of their large food resource -- the elk population, which is estimated at 600 head for the Athabasca Valley alone. Known wolf numbers in the main valley system are currently between 30 and 40, exceeding past estimates (Dekker et al. 1995). The assumption is that these wolves pose a threat to the park's scarce caribou, which became of special concern after they were declared a threatened species within Canada by federal directives. On the strength of this designation, park officials have jumped to attention and feel obligated to





reduce predation pressure on their caribou. The obvious question is this: if elk were made less common, wouldn't that force the wolves to hunt other prey species, increasing the risk for caribou?

Nevertheless, some people argue that Jasper's elk population exceeds natural levels anyway because their main food base – grass and forbs -- has been enlarged by human development. Elk readily graze along highway margins, around motels, and on town site lawns. They also consume sprouting bushes and trees. A high elk density, therefore, leads to the destruction of willow and aspen, which are home to songbirds and insects. This is where we run into another potential conflict, and the buzzword here is *ecological integrity*. The overpopulation of elk is believed to negatively affect the dynamic interrelationship of plants and animals.

Ironically, for the past two or three decades, park biologists have been worried about the progressive loss of open montane habitat due to natural plant succession. Inexorably, trees invade grassy meadows. There are two ways to halt this process: one is through fire, the other by heavy grazing and browsing, which is exactly what the elk are providing free of charge. By removing poplar shoots and spruce seedlings, the herds are in fact maintaining their own preferred open habitat. Consequently, a proposed cull of the park's elk herds would not only lead to misguided interference in the natural order of things, but park staff would set back wildlife management in Jasper to the dark ages of half a century ago.

To sum up, no matter how well intended, it is unfortunate that the threatened species label is forcing government wildlife managers, federal and provincial, to hands-on action that boils down to favouring one species at the expense of another, with the added risk of disrupting the entire large mammal system of our foothills forest and the adjacent national park.

### Do We Need More Research?

Prompted by appeals to help save a threatened species, and to assuage their collective conscience, the energy and forestry industries have sent representatives to the Alberta Caribou Committee. Several companies have donated huge amounts of money to pay for ongoing field research. Much of this money ends up in the pockets of helicopter crews contracted to capture some of the last of our caribou with the goal of fitting them with radio collars. Although this research is seen as an important management tool, it boils down to added harassment with a risk of lethal accidents.

In my opinion, the last of our caribou should be left alone, particularly in the national parks, where there is no resource extraction, no hunting, and no public access for ATVs or snowmobiles. After all, the inherent value of national parks is that here, and only here, is nature supposed to be allowed a free reign. Of course, even in Jasper there are some complicating factors, mainly because of human use of roads and trails. Nevertheless, given their full protection, if the last of the herds cannot make a stand in Jasper National Park, then it may be that Mother Nature is telling them to move on.

Similarly, if our foothill forests have become unsuitable for woodland caribou, mainly through habitat deterioration, it is inevitable that the southern limit of their population will adjust by shifting farther north. Retreating northward is what this ancient and adaptable species has been doing ever since the melting of the last ice age.

Trying to set the clock back by a vicious circle of haphazard management that offers no guarantee for recovery may cause more trouble than expected. If we are really serious about helping the last of the caribou, it is imperative that we redouble our efforts to create a habitat refuge where the last of the herds can balance out their own needs with those of other indigenous mammals including the wolf.

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tent or remote cabin. His many publications on the subject range from technical papers to popular books, including *Wolves of the Rocky Mountains - From Jasper to Yellowstone* and *Two decades of wildlife investigations at Devona, Jasper National Park, 1981-2001*.

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