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## B.C.'s Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan Calls for Even More Drastic Measures than Alberta's Current Campaign

By Dick Dekker

Like their Alberta conspecifics, British Columbia's woodland caribou have been declining for several decades, giving rise to growing concern among provincial wildlife managers. In fact, the notion that wolves need to be controlled in order to save the remnant B.C. population was first proposed in 1992 and later echoed in Alberta (Seip 1992, Dekker 1997).

In October of last year, the B.C. Mountain Caribou Science Team released an updated report bemoaning the loss of caribou habitat to industry, the proliferation of trails open to snowmobiles, and the intrusion of commercial ski operations in caribou winter range. But the threat identified by the scientists as the most pressing was the loss of caribou due to predators. For this reason, the plan not only recommends the killing of wolves, but also cougars, lynxes, wolverines, and bears.

Bears, and in particular the grizzly, are known to prey on young caribou calves, but this relevant factor is overlooked by Alberta's wildlife managers. Our grizzlies are considered an endangered species and are therefore untouchable.

Besides predator controls, B.C.'s caribou panel called for the reduction of the predators' prey base, which means that moose, elk, and deer populations are going to be thinned out as well. What it boils down to is that major portions of the province are to be managed exclusively for the protection of the caribou.

On October 28, 2006, the plan received a scathing review on the editorial page of the *Vancouver Sun*. Under the title "Killing off other species to save caribou seems worse than the problem," the editors point to the inherent weakness in the report, which is that its authors admit "decisions on predator management will have to be made in the context of multiple uncertainties."

For instance, the word the scientists used to describe the perceived advantage of culling deer, elk, and moose, and its downward effect on predator populations, was "presumably." Evidently, the authors of the report did not really know whether their proposals will work or what the unintended effects will be. According to the *Vancouver Sun*, this is not good enough to justify a killing spree.

The only good news, according to the paper, is that the report of the Mountain Caribou Science Team was released for public comment and is not being implemented immediately. The public comment period ended in March 2007. According to Andy Miller, staff biologist for the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, the caribou issue generated 12,000 letters. Since that time, the B.C. government has not yet proceeded further with its recovery plan.

### Literature Cited

Dekker, D. 1997. A question of ghosts. In *Wolves of the Rocky Mountains – from Jasper to Yellowstone*, 149-57. Hancock House Publishers, Surrey, BC.

Seip, D. R. 1992. Factors limiting woodland caribou populations and their interrelationships with wolves and moose in southeastern British Columbia. *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 70:1494-1503.





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**Is the Establishment of a Caribou Park an Idea Worth Considering?**

Given the level of concern and uncertainty about the continued survival of mountain and woodland caribou in western Canada, the designation of a special sanctuary might provide a management option of last resort. I suggest that a number of animals could be captured and transported to a new provincial or national park containing suitable habitat, either in Alberta or in B.C. and perhaps straddling the provincial boundaries.

Such a move would follow the successful precedent set by Elk Island National Park, which was created a century ago to give the remnant herds of plains elk and bison a safe haven into perpetuity. Like Elk Island, the proposed caribou sanctuary should be fenced and not contain any large carnivores. Given the prospects for successful reproduction, surplus caribou might eventually be released back into the wild.

