



RESEARCH WITHOUT RESULTS

By Lindsey Wallis

As early as 1929 it was recognized that caribou range in Alberta was becoming limited and the species would require protection. But, after almost 100 years and decades of study, caribou numbers across the province are still in decline, with three herds at immediate risk of extirpation.

Caribou in Alberta are an example of how research can achieve very little if it is not backed by the political will to follow through on recommendations made by the experts. As the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) Boreal Campaign Director, Helene Walsh puts it, "We know what we shouldn't be doing but we'll do it anyway."

Driven by economic factors, the government has consistently chosen industrial development over caribou protection. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Eastern Slopes of the Rocky Mountains, home to the Little Smoky herd, the longest studied herd in Alberta

and one of the most at-risk.

The Alberta government recognized, in a 1973 report, that pressures to expand development in the Eastern Slopes would only increase and, in 1978, approved a resource management plan for the Eastern Slopes which stated over 70 per cent would remain as wilderness or natural areas and critical wildlife habitat would be protected. Such action was needed, "to maintain those species presently found in the Eastern Slopes."

Research conducted on the Little Smoky herd, and other herds in Alberta, show again and again, that industrial development in critical caribou habitat is detrimental to herd numbers and, ultimately, the herd's survival. A 1980 report by Alberta Fish and Wildlife recognized the need for a ban on hunting caribou, but also stressed the importance of protecting critical areas such as wintering and breeding grounds, calving sites and essential travel corridors. The

report stated:

"Further habitat alienation resulting from indiscriminate land development will exacerbate an already serious problem through loss of critical areas, range discontinuity, increased access, creation of barriers to movement, reductions in carrying capacity and disruption of normal patterns of social interaction and resource utilization. Although the hunting closure is urgently needed (and overdue) successful caribou management largely will be dependent on population and habitat studies, the subsequent development of a comprehensive management plan and implementation of guidelines for industrial and recreational activity in caribou range. **The technological and professional expertise is available. Therefore, all that is required is the resolve and inter-departmental commitment to solve the problem.**" (my emphasis)

That resolve and commitment is still lacking 30 years later.

In 1984, the government ignored these recommendations and revised the land management strategy for the Eastern Slopes, allowing for expanded development. "Resource potentials and opportunities for development are identified with a view to assisting in the economic progress of Alberta. The policy is sufficiently flexible so that all future proposals for land use and development may be considered. No legitimate proposals will be categorically rejected."

The Alberta government approved a *Woodland Caribou Provincial Restoration Plan* in 1986. It stated, in no uncertain terms, "Habitat protection is a key factor in maintaining viable caribou populations and is of primary importance for managing caribou in Alberta." Yet, three years later, the government granted logging rights to the Alberta Newsprint Company within the Little Smoky herd's range.

This strategy of research, followed by developing conservation strategies before

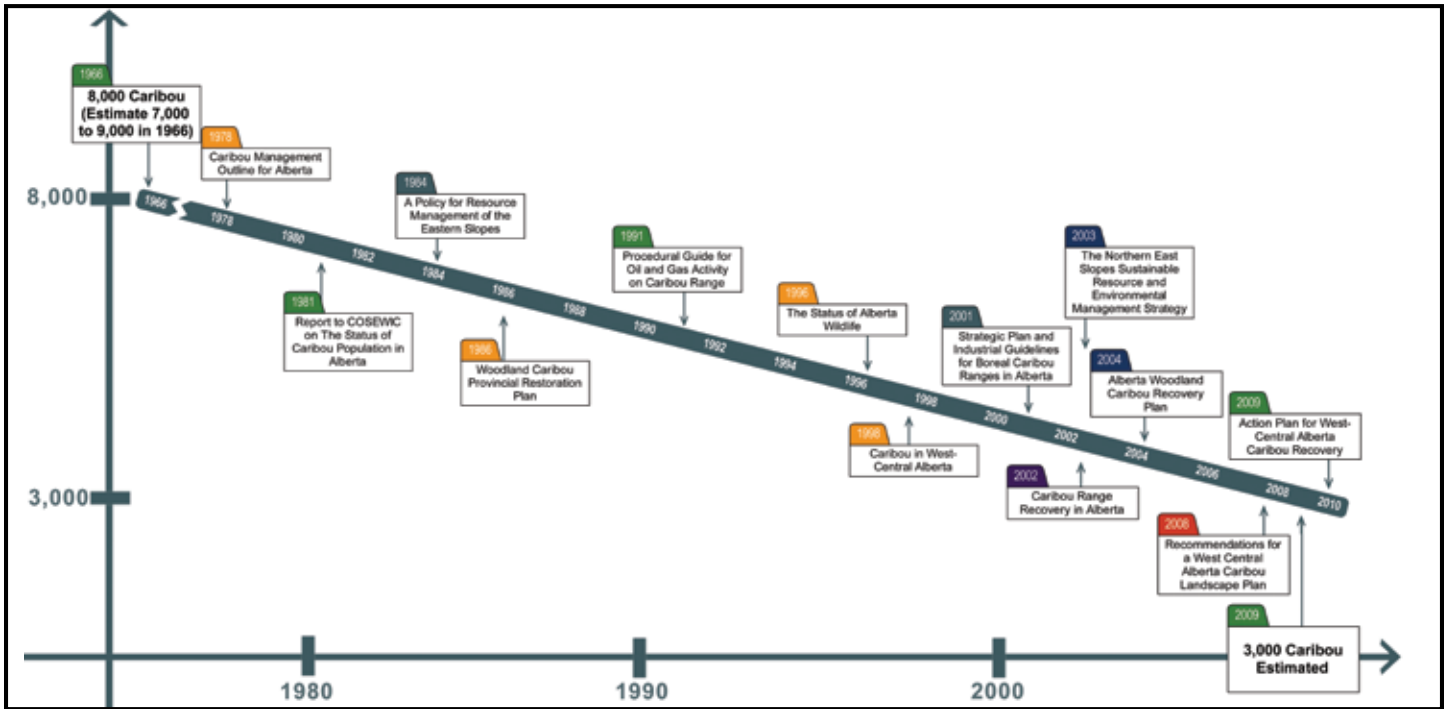


Alberta's remaining woodland caribou populations have yet to benefit significantly from research. PHOTO: R. BURGLIN

ignoring them altogether continued through the 1990s. The 1993 *Strategy for the Conservation of Woodland Caribou* specifically mentioned the logging

industry as the biggest threat to caribou survival in Alberta. It stated:
 “Of all impacts on woodland caribou, none are more severe than timber

harvest...Logging removes old-growth forest, arboreal lichen food resources and terrestrial lichens are normally disturbed to a degree that requires a long



A steady slide to extirpation - must this be the future of Alberta's woodland caribou? © ALBERTA FOOTHILLS NETWORK

Calling All Treaty Eight First Nations

Few readers are likely to disagree with AWA and Lindsey Wallis that too little has been done to address the critical situation faced by Alberta's threatened woodland caribou. Last month a lifeline, in the form of a B.C. Supreme Court decision, may have been thrown to those caribou. On March 19th Justice Williamson released his judgment in a case brought against the B.C. government by the West Moberly First Nation. The West Moberly contended that the B.C. government had failed to fulfill its constitutional obligations with respect to consulting and accommodating First Nations.

The focus of the West Moberly's attention was the Burnt Pine caribou herd. This herd, reduced to just 11 members, faces extirpation in northeastern B.C. They argued that the government, by ignoring the cumulative effects of coal exploration and development and issuing exploration/development permits to First Coal Corporation, failed to respect the West

Moberly's Treaty 8 right to hunt.

Justice Williamson agreed. He did not believe the consultation with and accommodation of aboriginal peoples met the "honour of the Crown." He concluded: "...a balancing of the treaty rights of Native peoples with the rights of the public generally, including the development of resources for the benefit of the community as a whole, is not achieved if caribou herds in the affected territories are extirpated." To satisfy the Crown's obligations he ordered the B.C. government to proceed with "the expeditious implementation of a reasonable, active plan for the protection and augmentation of the Burnt Pine herd." Expeditious here meant 90 days.

This decision, according to West Coast Environmental Law, is the first time aboriginal constitutional rights have been used to force the state to protect a threatened species.

Since Alberta already has a caribou recovery plan why might this decision matter to Alberta's caribou? The hope rests in the fact that the Court was prepared to assess, not just the

adequacy of the consultation process, but also the actual adequacy of the accommodation offered by government to aboriginal peoples. In that respect the Court went further than just saying that the government needed to develop a recovery plan. It called for the implementation of an "active" plan. This may open the door to future litigation if the West Moberly First Nation is not satisfied that the details and implementation of the recovery plan satisfy the Crown's obligation to accommodate their members' aboriginal right to hunt.

Could Alberta's Treaty Eight First Nations use the precedent set by Justice Williamson's decision to challenge the way Alberta's caribou recovery plan has been implemented? It is an interesting possibility and we hope their leaders are considering that strategy. We also hope that the spectre of this type of litigation and the Pandora's box it might open will push Alberta to implement its caribou recovery plan in a more active and assertive fashion.

- Ian Urquhart, Editor

regeneration period. Openings created by logging receive greater amounts of snow and it is more likely to become hard when compared with closed-canopy forest. Hard snow reduces access by caribou to remaining terrestrial lichens and may enhance the terrain for predation by wolves. Logging creates new access to formerly inaccessible ranges. Logging removes calving and winter ranges. Logging interrupts migration routes and isolates small segments of caribou populations. Habitats are fragmented...

No approach has been demonstrated to be effective in maintaining caribou populations in association with timber harvest in the long term.” (my emphasis)

Though years of research provide absolute clarity about the problems associated with allowing logging in caribou habitat, the government continues to approve projects, and today there are multiple companies logging within the range of the Little Smoky herd.

The 1996 *Alberta's Woodland Caribou Conservation Strategy*, although largely approved by government, was not implemented. Perhaps the main reason for this is that the strategy recommended: “No significant new clearing of coniferous forests beyond existing commitments should be considered until caribou habitat supply analyses are completed,” a recommendation not in keeping with the government’s “foot-off-the-brake” approach to industrial development and not backed by the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Subsequent ministers have been unable or unwilling to stop mineral sales, forest management agreement renewals and road building. This refusal to slow industrial development for conservation reasons has been seen by critics as a lack of commitment to the health of caribou in Alberta.

The 1996 strategy was the first to mention wolf culls, but only as a last resort. Today, wolf culls are the principal means for managing caribou in the Little Smoky area and, according to Walsh, logging companies are content with this strategy because it is cheaper than developing other, more meaningful methods of protection. More than 300 wolves have been killed to mitigate the effects of industry in the Little Smoky.

With caribou listed as threatened under the provincial *Wildlife Act* and by the federal *Committee on the Status*

of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, the Alberta government was forced to develop a recovery strategy. That strategy was completed in 2005. But, despite the fact that almost three decades worth of research shows that industrial activity – especially logging – threatens caribou, the government chose not to approve the recommended moratorium on all resource development allocations in range areas of caribou populations at immediate risk of extirpation.

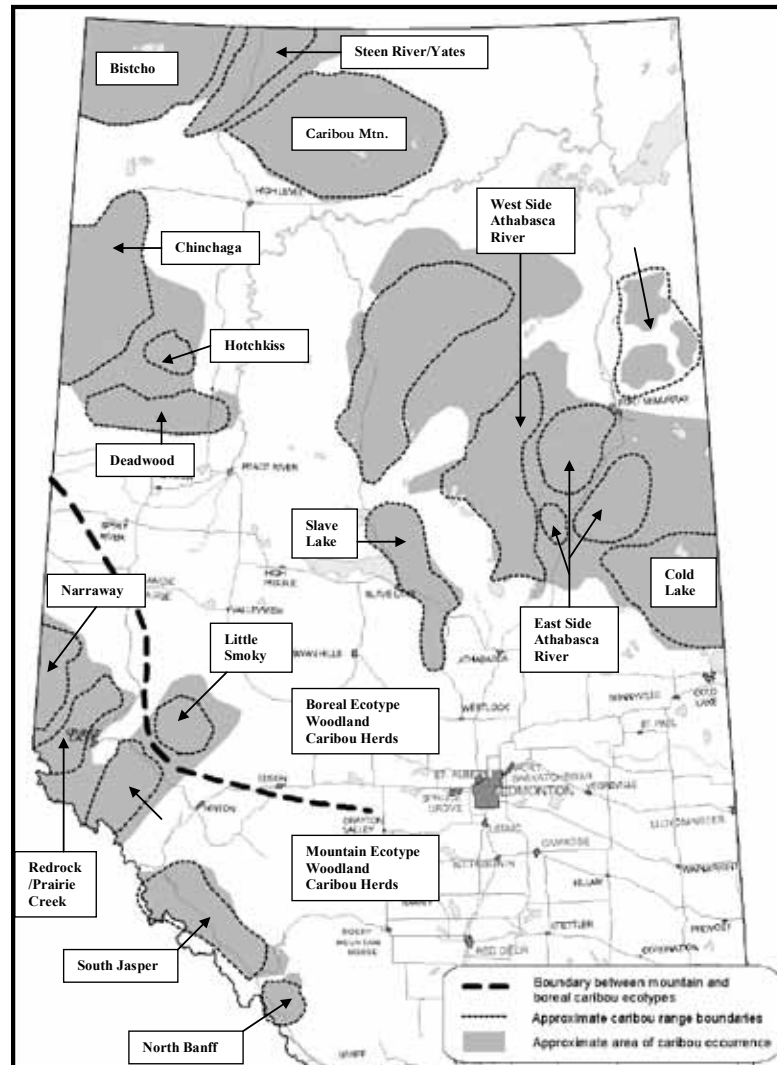
And, while research shows caribou prefer large, continuous tracts of old growth forest, Walsh says maps developed by industry scientists to identify critical habitat in the Little Smoky leave out a number of areas fitting this description. Though the government has admitted that the maps need “further refinements,” a new, 20-year logging plan will be approved based on these incomplete maps.

Environmentalists are concerned that while maps are drawn and more

research is being conducted it will still be “business as usual” in critical caribou habitat; government will allow more industrial development and further fragmenting of what little remains of the range of herds such as the Little Smoky. Walsh says the government is more than happy to continue doing research and studying caribou. Allocating money for caribou research improves its public image, without generating the political unpleasantness that would result from hampering industry and offering any meaningful protection.

For the 80 remaining members of the Little Smoky herd, 30 years of research means very little. Without immediate action to stop the habitat destruction and start recovering the ecosystem on which their survival depends they will literally become ghosts of the boreal. 🐾

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Woodland Caribou ranges in Alberta. CREDIT: ALBERTA SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT