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Only habitat protection will help Alberta's caribou
Moving elk, captive breeding programs are no more than stop gaps

Parks Canada's newly-announced Southern Mountain Caribou Conservation Strategy, including a captive breeding and reintroduction program, will fail in Alberta without a stronger focus on habitat protection and restoration. Alberta Wilderness Association calls on federal and provincial governments to deal with the root cause of Alberta's plummeting caribou populations: habitat destruction by human disturbance.

The plan delays identifying critical habitat, though the important habitat for these herds is well known. For Banff and Jasper National Parks, the focus is on managing elk, deer and wolves, rather than curbing human disturbance of caribou habitat within and adjacent to Parks that increases these species' presence. This contrasts with the plan's focus in BC National Parks to "protect caribou and their habitat through precautionary management of human use and natural disturbance."

"Alberta herds deserve the same habitat-focused strategy that Parks Canada is proposing for caribou herds in BC National Parks," says Carolyn Campbell, conservation specialist with Alberta Wilderness Association. "Killing wolves, moving elk or expensive captive breeding programs are no long-term solution if the habitat is no longer there to support caribou."

In July 2011, a federal court overturned the Environment Minister's decision not to recommend emergency protection for caribou. "It is not immediately apparent how, given the foregoing facts, the Minister reasonably could have concluded that there are no imminent threats to the national recovery of boreal caribou," Justice Crampton wrote in his decision.

Alberta's caribou populations are in desperate straits. The Alberta government's 2010 *Status Report* for woodland caribou notes that of Alberta's thirteen caribou populations with adequate monitoring, ten are in decline. "Provincial land-use guidelines for industrial activities have not succeeded... in providing for long-term caribou population and habitat conservation, and guidelines for caribou habitat protection currently are not being applied," the report notes. This comes on the heels of Alberta's 5-year wolf-killing program as its main approach to caribou management, which has already seen more than 500 wolves poisoned or shot from helicopters.

"Abundant scientific studies show that cumulative energy, forestry and recreation impacts cause caribou population declines," says Campbell. "In August the federal government proposed a national caribou recovery strategy that for Alberta's most vulnerable herds, relies on wolf kills and lets intact habitat drop to a pathetic 5% of range. We urge Parks Canada to set a better example: define critical habitat and apply habitat-centered actions for caribou to Banff and Jasper Parks."

For more information

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