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Conservation Strategy for Southern Mountain Caribou

in Canada's National Parks

What We Heard

A Summary of Comments February 2012



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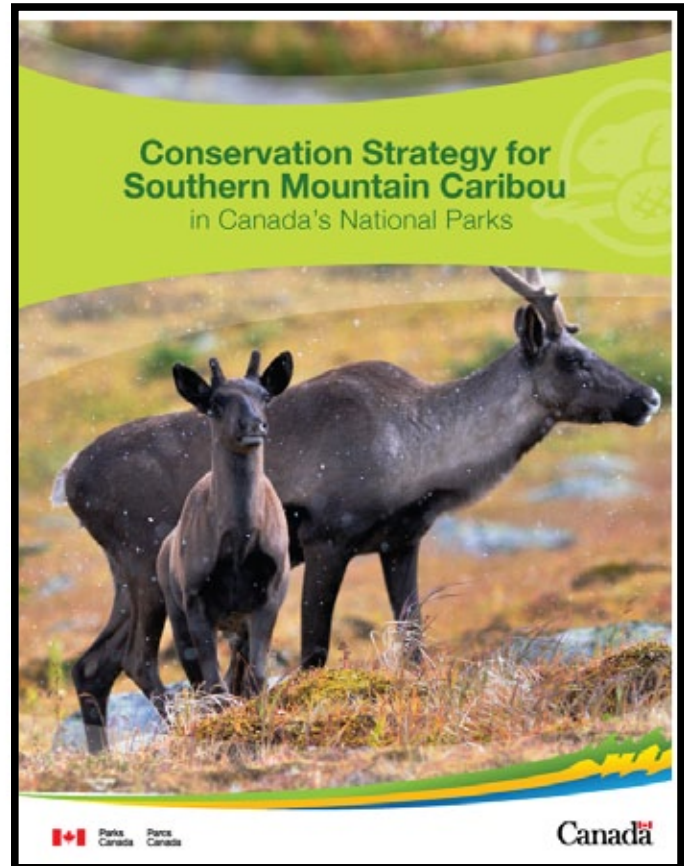
A SUMMARY OF INPUT RECEIVED ON THE CONSERVATION STRATEGY FOR SOUTHERN MOUNTAIN CARIBOU IN CANADA'S NATIONAL PARKS.

BACKGROUND

Caribou found in the mountain national parks of Banff, Glacier, Jasper and Mount Revelstoke belong to the Southern Mountain population of woodland caribou, listed as Threatened under Canada's Species at Risk Act (SARA).

Parks Canada is responsible for the protection and conservation of species at risk that occur in national parks. On Nov 25, 2011, Parks Canada released the *Conservation Strategy for Southern Mountain Caribou in Canada's National Parks*. This strategy will guide Parks Canada's caribou conservation actions. It will also help inform the development of the Environment Canada-led recovery plan for the Southern Mountain population of woodland caribou, expected in 2012.

Following the release of the strategy, the public was invited to review the document and provide comments.



The objectives of the public review were:

1. To familiarize the public, stakeholders and others with the *Conservation Strategy for Southern Mountain Caribou in Canada's National Parks*.
2. To gauge public interest, understanding and support for proposed conservation actions.
3. To identify any opportunities or challenges not presented in the strategy.

The review, from November 25th through January 31, 2012, was promoted on the Parks Canada website, through Parks Canada's Twitter and Facebook accounts, in media articles and public notices. Comments were received by mail, email, on-line, and in person. The feedback will be used to inform management decisions for caribou conservation in the mountain national parks, and revisions will be made to the strategy based on the comments received.

WHO WE HEARD FROM

During the 60-day comment period, Parks Canada heard from approximately 150 individuals and organizations across Canada. The majority of respondents were from Alberta and British Columbia. While this may be a result of targeted promotions of the on-line form in the two provinces, it may also be reflective of the connection to and knowledge of the mountain national parks in their home provinces.

WHAT WE HEARD

Feedback consisted largely of responses to a series of targeted questions. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with proposed management actions and to provide further comments. This is what we heard from Canadians:

Is caribou conservation important to you?

On the comment form, 130 of 134 respondents felt that caribou conservation was important. Caribou are viewed as an iconic Canadian species important both to the ecological integrity of the landscapes they inhabit, and to the cultural heritage of this country. It was stated that we, including Parks Canada and Canadians in general, have an obligation to protect woodland caribou and their habitat.

For those who did not think caribou conservation was important, the comments largely reflected the view that humans should stop interfering with nature.

Parks Canada identified five key threats to caribou in the mountain national parks and proposed actions to reduce these threats.

Are there any additional threats or actions we should consider?

50% of respondents felt that there were additional threats or actions to consider. The other half was split between those who were uncertain and those who felt that Parks Canada had considered the primary threats or actions.

The effects of habitat loss, disturbance and fragmentation on lands outside and adjacent to the national parks were most often identified as lacking from the strategy. Suggested actions included increasing the size of some of the mountain national parks, further research into these impacts and more collaboration with industry and government on caribou conservation outside the national parks. Several comments stated that there should be no expansion of infrastructure or additional development in the national parks. Some respondents also suggested other potential threats to consider such as equestrian use, snowmobile use inside and outside the parks, heli-skiing and ATV use adjacent to parks, and natural causes including disease, genetics, nutrition and climate change.

“We only get one chance to save species at risk!”

“We should stop interfering with nature and let it take its course.”



Photo: M. Bradley

“Prevent the loss of caribou herds outside of the parks so they aren’t living as an island in the parks.”

Are there any proposed actions that you would not support?

Half of all respondents were not opposed to any of the proposed actions. Thirty percent indicated that there were actions they would not support. Primarily, this group did not support predator control as a means for caribou conservation. Other concerns included uncertainty around the use of captive breeding as a conservation action, not wanting more restrictions on human access within the parks and snowmobiling outside the parks, and that there was a need for enforcement for actions addressing direct disturbance to be effective.

Would you be willing to adjust your recreational use of the mountain national parks to support caribou conservation?

The majority of respondents were willing to adjust their recreational use of the mountain national parks. When presented with specific examples of what this might involve, most felt that these conservation actions should be a priority. Many others were in support of most of the proposed actions but did not support permanent closures that would exclude all human access to areas of caribou habitat. A few respondents did not want to see any more restrictions on human access.

Most people (over 90%) supported seasonal trail closures and relocation of trails or campsites to limit recreational impacts in important caribou habitat, while 75% support permanent closures. Over 90% of people support reduced speed zones and close to 85% support seasonal closures of secondary roads in caribou habitat. Some people qualified that strong education and monitoring would be necessary to the success of these restrictions.

“I will not support long term predator control (it’s only a band-aid solution).”

“(Will not support)... restricting access of people to the national parks. In other words, managing parks with the intention of keeping the people out.”

“I support all of these actions as long as they are combined with good outreach and education so that people can understand the reason behind the actions and that monitoring is conducted to ensure the actions are working.”

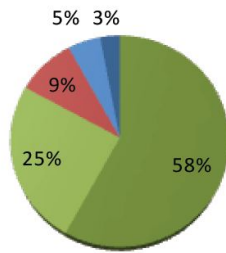
“Man has been travelling in the backcountry for many many years. This is low impact travelling and of no great consequence to all the wildlife out there, not just caribou.”



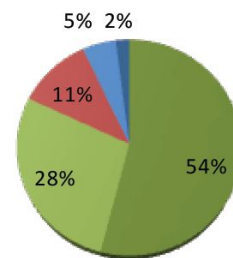
Photo: S. Bird

Do you support Parks Canada's intent to: -

a) Reintroduce caribou to Banff National Park

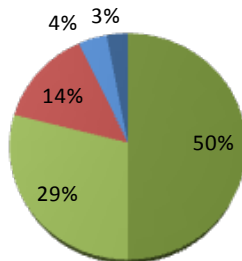


b) Increase herd sizes in Jasper National Park by adding animals from an outside source

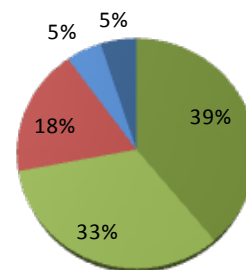


■ Strongly Support ■ Moderately Support ■ Uncertain ■ Moderately Oppose ■ Strongly Oppose

c) Increase the size of herds that us habitat in Mount Revelstoke and Glacier National Parks by adding animals from an outside source



d) Obtain source animals through a captive (conservation) breeding program



Comments in support of these measures, while noting that this is necessary in some cases for caribou herd recovery, also emphasized that the threats leading to the initial declines need to be addressed prior to any reintroduction or translocation. Many respondents were uncertain and would like to have more information on related initiatives or issues such as disease, caribou social relationships, stress and genetics. Those against these actions did not think they would be effective and felt that it would be a waste of time and money.

“Anything that will increase their numbers would be a step in the right direction as far as I am concerned.”

“I think the strategy could lead to an unsustainable never-ending topping up of populations, while the same fundamental problems of habitat remain.”

“Supportive of increasing herd sizes and reintroduction ONLY if actions have been taken to address the other threats.”

How supportive are you of Parks Canada's position on predator management?

Parks Canada seeks sustainable ecosystem management solutions that achieve long term benefits. Our approach to long-term maintenance of an appropriate predator - prey balance is to keep prey densities low through careful habitat management. Short term direct predator management to achieve Species at Risk objectives would only be considered in exceptional cases where vulnerable herds are at immediate risk and when all other management actions have been taken.

While many respondents were at least moderately supportive of Parks Canada's position, comments were equally split between those who did not support any form of predator control in a national park, and those who would support it only if it was a short term measure required in the course of reducing threats to caribou populations.

"Managing the ecosystem for the benefit of one species doesn't seem reasonable from an ecosystem perspective."

"Direct predator management could be risky, as well as temporary. I think it is better to deal with the source of the predator overpopulation."

"I think caribou need this type of extra help right now."

"Penning a wild animal places the animal under undue stress, especially pregnant females."

Maternity penning has been proposed as one in a number of conservation actions on provincial lands adjacent to Mount Revelstoke National Park. How supportive are you of this approach to caribou conservation?

Over half of respondents supported the use of maternity penning. The primary concern raised was the potential stress it would put on pregnant females. While many supported maternity penning itself, they did not support the use of concurrent predator control. Those who did not support this action questioned its effectiveness.

General Comments

85% of respondents felt that the Conservation Strategy for Southern Mountain Caribou in Canada's National Parks helped them to better understand caribou conservation issues, and most had enough information to provide an opinion on the strategy.

Suggestions to help improve awareness and understanding included more media coverage such as news articles, documentaries, speaker series and information posted through social media; increased access to scientific research and related studies not only in the parks but in surrounding areas as well as a more global perspective; and more information on what the public can do to support caribou conservation.

Several comments emphasized that it was not more information that was needed; rather it was time to act.

When asked how they would like to be involved in caribou conservation, the most common requests were for volunteer opportunities, research and conservation updates, and involvement in future information sessions and/or consultation.

"I will understand caribou conservation issues better when we can see some signs of actual progress. Please act quickly!"

"(I would like) more information as to what the public can do to help support the conservation and recovery of this species."

INPUT FROM ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to the general public, Parks Canada received extensive input from a number of interested organizations including the Valhalla Wilderness Society, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), Bow Valley Naturalists, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y), Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA), and member organizations of the Mountain Caribou Project.

The strategy was widely welcomed as an important step in caribou conservation. There is support for Parks Canada to take “bold steps” to protect caribou, in reference to wording in the strategy, as long as this commitment is genuine, and that the first priority is ecological integrity.

A common message heard was that activities and threats outside of national parks need to be considered more thoroughly, and there should be a stronger commitment to work with provincial governments and industry to protect caribou habitat. With the acknowledgement that the mountain national parks are “islands” of habitat, Parks Canada should look for ways to maintain connectivity between herds beyond park boundaries; and should be a strong advocate for caribou habitat protection.

Further clarification was requested on how Parks Canada’s strategy fits in with current provincial caribou conservation strategies, and how it will inform the anticipated federal recovery strategy. There was also some concern over the distinction between “important” habitat and the much anticipated designation of “critical” habitat under Canada’s Species at Risk Act.

It was generally agreed that prompt action is required if there is any hope for success. Long term strategic outcomes and timelines have been requested with which to measure progress and gauge success; as well as an outline of how and where money allocated for caribou conservation is to be spent.

Two key elements clearly identified as important for successful caribou conservation were education and research. Parks Canada is recognized as having a significant role in public education and that this should be a strong component of the caribou conservation actions. Parks Canada is encouraged to continue to offer opportunities for public updates, review and involvement as the strategy is implemented. Sound scientific research is acknowledged as the foundation to sound decision making, and lends credibility to conservation efforts. There needs to be greater acknowledgement of the wide array of caribou research available; and resources need to be allocated for continued research and monitoring to support conservation actions. Collaboration is encouraged to find synergies in caribou research, to identify knowledge gaps and to look for funding to support further research.

“We will be looking to Parks Canada to make these difficult decisions (closing or restricting human access to areas of caribou habitat) and to prioritize caribou over visitor use as necessary to recover the species.”



Photo: M. Bradley

“We recommend the strategy clarify the difference in terms of standards and enforceability between Parks Canada’s action plan as outlined and the eventual action plan, linked to critical habitat, required by SARA (Canada’s Species at Risk Act).”

INPUT FROM ORGANIZATIONS (Continued)

In terms of the key threats identified and proposed actions, these are the common themes that were heard:

Altered Predator-Prey Dynamics

- Highlight that the current threat of predation is as a result of other conditions (habitat loss, disturbance and increased populations of alternate prey) and not a natural dynamic.

Facilitated Predator Access and Direct Disturbance

- Ecological integrity should be the first priority, human access should be closed or restricted as needed to protect important habitat
- Parks Canada has a legal responsibility to protect Species at Risk
- The monitoring and reporting of results of recreational restrictions should guide on-going management actions – adaptive management.

Habitat Loss

- Should state that NO further development will be considered.
- The impact of current infrastructure in and around caribou habitat should be reviewed, and any associated threats reduced or eliminated.
- There is some concern about loss of habitat from prescribed burns in the mountain parks, and of the burns creating habitat that supports increased populations of alternate prey.

Small Population Effects

- Support captive breeding as a “last resort tactic” but not as a first or main strategy. While it may be necessary to ensure the survival of some herds, it must be accompanied by the reduction/elimination of other threats.
- Would like to see additional rationale and research for the number of animals required for viable herds (Minimum Viable Population numbers).
- Need to ensure adequate habitat is secure/available both inside and outside the parks prior to translocation.
- Consider increasing mountain national park land bases to secure caribou habitat.
- Opposition was expressed to both predator management and maternity penning particularly if used as default actions – in the absence of addressing the other threats.



Photo: A. Dibb

NEXT STEPS

The comments and feedback outlined in this summary will help inform the next steps for caribou conservation in the mountain national parks. Significant changes will be incorporated into the strategy and a revised edition posted at www.pc.gc.ca/caribou. Public information sessions and opportunities to participate in consultation on specific conservation actions will take place in each national park as they apply. Conservation actions will vary among the mountain national parks due to unique circumstances in each area. Parks Canada will release regular updates on caribou conservation in the mountain national parks as we move forward, and welcomes your comments throughout this process.



Photo: M. Bradley

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out about upcoming information sessions or to receive caribou conservation updates from Parks Canada, please contact us by email, phone, fax or mail at the following address.

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