

THE BROADER VIEW: AWA'S 2012 PRIORITIES

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At the many outreach and education events AWA hosts, we are often asked what campaigns and efforts we are working on. As important as they all surely are, it is easy to become so intent on one or two trees that we could lose focus on the entire forest. We want to take this opportunity to step back and give you an idea of the issues that, taken as a whole, encompass the breadth of AWA's work. Throughout the rest of this year *Wild Lands Advocate* will highlight the ten priorities we have identified to guide our conservation efforts in 2012. These priorities represent issues we know are of vital importance to the ecological health and natural well-being of Alberta.

It is no easy task to narrow down all the work AWA is doing to just ten headlines. However this is part of the long-term planning we do at the beginning of every year, following the Annual General Meeting in November. After much discussion we select priorities based in part on their intrinsic importance to maintaining Alberta's biodiversity, their achievability, the current momentum behind efforts to realize the goal, the familiarity of the broader Alberta public with the issue, and AWA's historical interest.

There clearly remain many other species, areas of concern and threats to Wild Alberta, and by no means will AWA ignore these. However the goals identified this year as priorities form the core of the association's 2012 efforts to conserve Alberta's wildlife, wild waters, and wild lands.

We will be dividing our discussion of these top ten goals between the five remaining 2012 *Wild Lands Advocate* issues, tackling two goals per issue. This issue starts the discussion by focusing on the plight of two of Alberta's most endangered species: the woodland caribou and the greater sage-grouse.

Woodland Caribou: Grey Ghosts of the Forest

Across Canada, and particularly in Alberta, populations of woodland caribou are declining. Of the 18 herds identified in the Alberta Caribou Recovery Plan, one has died out, another two are at "immediate risk of extirpation," six are declining, six are unknown, and just three are reported to be stable. The greatest contributor to the decline of Alberta populations is cumulative habitat loss and degradation. The largest current threat to Alberta's caribou is intensive oil sands exploration



and extraction; studies show herds in the oil sands region have suffered five times the amount of industrial disturbances as the average in all woodland caribou herds across Canada. Wolf culling is an inappropriate and ecologically ineffective management strategy in the absence of meaningful habitat protection and restoration. AWA believes that sales of energy leases in caribou ranges must stop, and exploration and development of new industrial operations must be deferred in woodland caribou ranges until sufficient disturbed habitat is recovered to support population recovery.

In this issue of the *WLA*, Carolyn Campbell writes in-depth about the federal proposed woodland caribou recovery strategy, and questions government reliance on the wolf cull as the sole means of “protecting” this threatened species. I follow this with a companion piece that explores an intriguing option proposed by a team of researchers at the University of Alberta that may see a way to protect caribou habitat without significant cost to resource development. Finally, Adam Driedzic from the Environmental Law Centre contributes another piece to the woodland caribou jigsaw puzzle. Writing about OHV use and regulation, Adam touches on many themes related to land use planning in Alberta that also impact caribou herds.

Greater Sage-grouse: At Imminent Risk of Extirpation

The highly endangered greater sage-grouse is an upland game bird iconic to Alberta’s dwindling native grasslands. In Alberta only 13 male sage-grouse were recorded on leks (mating grounds) in 2011, a 90 percent population decline since 1968. Based on the current trajectory of decline, experts have estimated that without immediate and drastic government action, the sage-grouse will be extirpated from Alberta within two years. Sagegrouse require large blocks of un-fragmented sagebrush grassland habitat to survive. Rapid population declines have occurred in response to habitat fragmentation primarily due to industrial and agricultural development in southern Alberta. According to sage-grouse scientist Dr. Mark Boyce, if sage-grouse disappear from the landscape it would be “the first case where the oil and

gas industry has caused the extirpation of a species in Canada.” It is crucial that the provincial and federal governments take the steps necessary to prevent the imminent extirpation of the sage-grouse in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Most importantly, no new development should be allowed within critical sage-grouse habitat and all existing industrial infrastructure in that habitat must be removed.

In November 2011, AWA petitioned Federal Environment Minister Peter Kent to recommend immediate action to protect Alberta’s most endangered species, as he was required to do under the federal *Species at Risk Act*. Despite being given months to respond, AWA has yet to receive a response. Faced with this lack of response, AWA along with Ecojustice and three other ENGOS initiated a

lawsuit against the Minister in February. Madeline Wilson writes about the ethical, organizational, and policy forces and factors that affect and constrain sage-grouse conservation in her article.

Other Priorities

AWAs eight remaining priorities for 2012 remain to have their stories told. Some of them, such as obtaining protection for grizzlies, are touched on in this issue of the *WLA*; others, such as the issues surrounding the sale of Alberta’s public lands, have been discussed in prior issues. Others, for example the development of a provincial biodiversity strategy, have yet to be showcased. Stay tuned for articles featuring all these priorities throughout the year’s remaining issues! ♡



Winner: Family Category “Desulfovibrio desulfuricans” by Susann and Michael Lagore

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