

Two-bits?:

Woodland Caribou Are Worth More Than That

By Chad Belisle



It's no secret that our environment has taken a turn for the worse with more than 70 plant and animal species currently "at risk" in Alberta. By looking into the history of the woodland caribou, it becomes apparent that our society hasn't progressed in terms of responsible environmental management. Three things have occurred side by side since the early 1970s. First, the woodland caribou population has declined steadily and seriously. Second, only a select few have taken it upon themselves to advocate for the caribou and protect its future. Third, the government has repeatedly assured us that the decline will be fixed.

Over the past 45 years the Government of Alberta has created countless programs and policies to help address the factors causing the caribou population decline. For example, "Woodland Caribou Provincial Restoration Plan" and the "Alberta's Woodland Caribou Conservation Strategy", are two of the larger efforts implemented by our government. The province attempted to address high predation rates by initiating a wolf cull program; we've killed more than 800 wolves over the past decade. Government took that path despite studies showing that the root cause of the population decline is industrialization within caribou ranges. The government's programs and policies have touched on controlling and restricting further development in these areas, but have never actually fully eliminated development.

It's one thing to write a policy and another thing to enforce it. There has been a lack of consistent government commitment to actually enforcing any of the policy changes. Whenever there is corporate interest these policies are stepped on and promises are broken. A question posed in 2004 to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development asked: "Will the Minister call a stop to new industrial development in caribou habitat until populations have been restored to historic levels?" The Minister replied that: "Only the Liberals would stop everything in a situation like this. We don't do that. That's why we are the government. That is why we have a strong economy, a good environment, and good wildlife management and we'll continue doing that." Inflated statements like this make it clear that the Alberta government has had little to no interest in fully committing to caribou conservation. It's so troubling and insulting to see government claim it has our environmental interests at heart when its actions make it obvious that industrialization takes precedence over environmental concern.

For caribou to have any chance of surviving on the Alberta landscape for the next 45 years we must revolutionize our way of thinking about how we manage the environment and who we trust to manage it for us. The provincial government has a key role to play in protecting the environment and should represent the public's voice. Election after election the same promises of

good environmental management are made, and yet the public is still voicing its concern. It's time for a new approach from our leaders. Many Canadians probably don't know that the picture on the quarter is not a moose, but is actually a caribou. The caribou design was issued first in 1937 and celebrated one of Canada's most commonly seen animals. Ironically, through industrialization, we have traded one of the most magnificent mammals in the country for pocket change. Soon all we will have when buying our coffee in the morning is a cruel reminder of how Alberta's need for a "strong" economy outweighed the survival of an entire species. ♣

Chad Belisle is a graduate from SAIT with a diploma in Environmental Technology. Now that he doesn't have to stress about grades he is free to enjoy his favourite pass times such as hiking, snowboarding, and messing around with computers.

