

Woodland Caribou Public Meetings

Woodland caribou are amazing creatures that are in real trouble in Alberta. For 40 years, Alberta governments have stated their support for caribou recovery and done the opposite. Their actions have allowed forestry and energy industry activity to degrade severely the home ranges of this boreal icon. In October 2017, provincial caribou range plans are finally due under the 2012 federal boreal woodland caribou recovery strategy. The plans must outline how Alberta will protect and restore its overly fragmented caribou ranges to attain at least 65 percent undisturbed habitat. This is the minimum our endangered caribou need to have a chance to recover. The Alberta government has indicated it will circulate draft range plans in late October 2017 for public comment. This will be a pivot-

al moment. Will Alberta reverse decades of delays and take the vital first step to protect and recover the habitat that Alberta's woodland caribou urgently need to survive?

In late August and early September 2017, I offered presentations at three public meetings organized by northwest and west central communities to discuss Alberta caribou range plans. In the town of High Level, Mackenzie County hosted an information session, and the next evening the County of Northern Lights hosted a similar gathering in Manning. Two weeks later, the Whitecourt Chamber of Commerce sponsored a panel discussion. All events were well attended with many questions and comments from community members.

Municipal officials and citizens have many questions about caribou; they also have questions and concerns about the economic impact of range plans that will protect the habitat critically important for caribou survival. These were very important occasions for AWA to listen to people's experiences and concerns. It was also a great chance to discuss why caribou belong in Alberta. I discussed why caribou need intact older forests and peat wetlands to avoid overlap with their natural predators, how the excessive industrial disturbance of recent decades has robbed them of the habitat they have relied upon for thousands of years.

These meetings were an important chance to discuss habitat solutions that recover caribou and are fair to communities. Alberta committed in June 2016 to establish three proposed protected areas in northwest Alberta, as recommended by mediator Eric Denhoff. There is a lot of unwarranted fear about the impacts of these protected areas. AWA stressed that these areas do not overlap with existing forestry tenures and that they will honour existing energy leases. As a result, they will achieve the most protection of three northwest caribou ranges for the least socio-economic cost to the communities.



Presenting on the topics of caribou recovery and caribou range plans in Manning in late August.

AWA encouraged Mackenzie County and County of Northern Lights to pursue the UN Biosphere Reserve concept. This idea was raised as a possible course of action in their commissioned report on caribou range plans. Biosphere Reserves are ecologically sustainable communities anchored by core protected areas. Municipalities in the Waterton and Beaver Hills regions have been active partners in Alberta's two existing Biosphere Reserves. AWA also cited Hay-Zama Wildland Park as a valuable regional example of a north-west protected area where energy companies, First Nations, and conservation groups collaborated to minimize energy industry surface impacts for the duration of the operators' leases.

I also pointed out that AWA has advocated for government to support the many sustainable jobs that could promote caribou recovery. For example, extensive forest habitat restoration work is needed across and adjacent to caribou ranges. We have also pointed out that unsustainable mountain pine beetle surge clearcuts, which are now prescribed in many western Alberta forest tenures, are due to fall off steeply in a decade. While caribou persist, we strongly believe that 'now' is the right time to reform regional timber supply allocations, to retain the maximum number of local jobs and to achieve truly sustainable regional forestry that is compatible with caribou habitat

protection and recovery.

These meetings were a great chance to support local involvement in collaborative stakeholder meetings for habitat-based range plans. AWA believes that provincial government leadership is urgently needed to convene meaningful discussions among indigenous peoples, local communities, industry and conservation groups. Together we can examine the best options and chart out a plan to manage caribou habitat to meet disturbance targets; together we can ensure that caribou can recover and local, sustainable economies can thrive.

Caribou need core protected areas, extensive habitat restoration, and clustered development in order to recover. Whether our generation chooses to recover caribou or lets them die off is a choice that goes right to the soul of Alberta. In the upcoming weeks and months AWA will be working hard to ensure Albertans learn about solutions for 'healthy forests, healthy caribou and healthy communities' and that they can participate in this important choice. We invite you to check out <http://caribou4ever.ca/> where you will find links to social media as well as opportunities to send postcards and letters.

- Carolyn Campbell