

Updates

Ottawa National Caribou Conference



From October 29 to November 1, I joined Cliff Wallis in representing AWA at the North American Caribou workshop in Ottawa. This major research conference is held every two years and the Ottawa location provided an extra valuable opportunity to meet federal government officials working on caribou issues.

One highlight was the ‘Indigenous knowledge’ sessions that ran throughout the conference. There were members of Indigenous communities from both barren-ground and woodland caribou lands, from Yukon to Labrador. Some recounted caribou legends, some documented changing habitat and population conditions, and some described their management innovations. Many spoke of themselves as ‘caribou people.’ Their identity and survival was intimately connected with caribou. It provided a powerful inspiration to support indigenous communities’ efforts and rights to have a continuing relationship with self-sustaining populations of caribou.

Another highlight was meeting and listening to scientists and ENGO colleagues who I had only known through e-mails before. At the Climate Change workshop, the



While in Ottawa, AWA took the opportunity to ask for strong federal government habitat actions to save caribou. AWA did this with ENGOS on Parliament Hill (AWA's Carolyn Campbell 4th from right) and meeting with MP Sean Fraser, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Credit: Stand.Earth and AWA.

University of Montana's Mark Hebblewhite made two key points: human land use still affects caribou habitat more significantly than climate change and land management at the large landscape scale, including protected areas, is the best scale for caribou. At the conference's kickoff panel, David Suzuki Foundation's Rachel Plotkin laid bare the misleading “manufactured uncertainty” tactics used by both climate change and caribou habitat naysayers: deny the problem, deny the cause, and as a last resort, say it's all going to cost too much to fix.

On that last point, at the conference's poster session AWA was able to showcase an October 2018 economic report on optimal solutions for conserving northwest Alberta caribou habitat. The report was commissioned by AWA, David Suzuki Foundation, and the Harmony Foundation. Written by eminent natural resource economist Dr. Tom Power, the study concludes that managing lands for caribou recovery – including two new protected areas and a seismic line restoration program – can grow the economy in the Bistcho-Yates caribou ranges of northwest Alberta. It also recommends that, across all caribou rang-

es, we begin with the shared goals of caribou recovery and community economic activity and proceed to build optimized ‘least cost’ habitat solutions (see also the Bistcho article in this issue). Our poster display included vintage AWA posters which had warned decades ago that mountain caribou were headed towards extinction. We also displayed a colourful sample of the hand-drawn caribou flags created by hundreds of concerned Albertans who joined in our caribou flag campaign.

During the week we also met with Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) civil servants and with three Members of Parliament. We outlined the Power report's recommendations for optimal range plan solutions for Alberta caribou and communities. We explained why we believe a measured, interim federal habitat protection order is urgent to help drive the completion of habitat-focused caribou range plans by Alberta. We also expressed our concerns with an Canada-Alberta conservation agreement: it is taking too long and it may focus too much on extreme wildlife measures such as caribou fences and extensive wolf kills to facilitate, or turn

a blind eye to, overall ongoing habitat loss.

Our meeting with New Democrat Members of Parliament Linda Duncan (Edmonton-Strathcona) and Richard Cannings (South Okanagan-West Kootenay) prompted Linda Duncan to make a strong statement on behalf of caribou in the House of Commons on November 1st. She described calls by Canadians for an immediate safety net order for northwest Alberta caribou as a needed safeguard, while strategies are

developed that will protect critical habitat and maintain a viable economy. We also met with Liberal MP Sean Fraser who is parliamentary secretary to the ECCC minister. He is optimistic in what a Canada-Alberta conservation agreement, expected to be completed within a year, will accomplish. Frankly, we need to see some substance and evidence in order to share his optimism. Overall, we valued the chance to underline to government and opposition

MPs alike what we believe to be the urgent federal responsibility to take stronger actions to help Alberta's endangered caribou survive and recover.

AWA would like to thank one of our ENGO partners, Harmony Foundation (<http://harmonyfdn.ca>) for supporting Carolyn Campbell to attend this important conference.

- Carolyn Campbell