
Caribou Pieces Not Adding Up to Critical Habitat Protection

Woodland caribou are a 'sentinel' species for older, relatively intact boreal and foothills forests and wetlands. These landscapes store significant water and carbon and many other wildlife species rely on these lands. As 2019 opens for Alberta's threatened woodland caribou, we hear some promising intentions, but see far too few on-the-ground actions.

I will first note that Premier Notley's seasonal 2018 holiday card featured a painting of a caribou and snowy owl. Terry McCue, an Alberta-based Ojibwa artist, entitled his painting *Northern Brothers II*. The owl is perched in his caribou brother's antlers. Hear and consider what Terry has said about his paintings: "Take the animal portraits, for example. I was taught that the animals are our relatives. They don't exist only in their relation to us. They have an integrity of life separate from us and it is our responsibility to guard their cultures. We have life because they have life." It's a quintessential conservation statement.

A welcome step for wildlife came in

mid-December 2018, when the Alberta government proposed a new protected area south of Wood Buffalo National Park. Although range protection for the important Ronald Lake wood bison herd is central to the proposal, the area would provide some additional connected protected lands for both the Red Earth and Richardson woodland caribou populations (see our other update on the BSA-WPP in this issue). AWA supported this proposal during public consultation and we hope it will become a reality soon.

In late December, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) released its second progress report on recent steps taken to protect critical habitat for boreal woodland caribou in Canada. Critical habitat essentially means habitat within our remaining caribou ranges that either provides suitable habitat now or has the potential to do so with responsible restoration and management. AWA agrees with the Report's overall assessment: "Despite the progress being made, the gaps in protection, as described in the first Progress Report, remain. Additional efforts, including those noted in this report, are needed to reverse the loss of critical habitat and declines in boreal caribou populations."

More positively, the ECCC report notes that Alberta will end forestry surge cuts within the Little Smoky caribou range by April 30, 2021. Since the 2007 inception of Alberta's so-called Healthy Pine Strategy, AWA has maintained that the Strategy's extensive mandated surge clearcuts in Alberta's conifer forests are more ecologically harmful than the mountain pine beetles they are meant to address. These surge clearcuts are particularly inappropriate in species-at-risk habitat. AWA supports this Little Smoky decision but we would like to see it take effect earlier and extend farther. We are also concerned, as with many other parts of this report, that this 'progress' is really a statement of future intention that is vulnerable to be changed.

Another interesting point in the ECCC re-

port is that almost 2,000 km² of sub-surface energy and mineral tenures, in eight Alberta boreal caribou ranges, have been returned to the provincial government since July 2017. AWA believes that these tenure reversions are due to: market conditions, pre-existing tenure regulations, and to Alberta's deferral since summer 2015 of new sub-surface resource tenure sales in caribou ranges. We strongly support Alberta's tenure deferral in caribou ranges: we believe these deferrals must remain in place until SARA-compliant range plans are finalized. Tenure reversions and deferrals are helpful stop-gap measures because at least they forestall even more disturbance pressures. They provide more options to develop essential access and infrastructure plans for managing surface disturbance that are compatible with caribou survival and recovery.

However, Alberta is still allowing new industrial surface disturbance in its fifteen woodland caribou ranges. This additional activity is sanctioned despite the fact disturbance levels in these ranges mostly far exceed what caribou can tolerate. Meanwhile, Alberta has not completed any range plans outlining how it will maintain or achieve minimum caribou habitat requirements over time. The October 2017 deadline for these range plans, as set out by the 2012 federal boreal woodland caribou recovery strategy under the *Species at Risk Act*, has come and gone. And no such plans are in sight.

As a result, AWA is once again headed to the courts. In late January 2019, Ecojustice lawyers, acting on behalf of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Mikisew Cree First Nation, Alberta Wilderness Association and David Suzuki Foundation, filed a lawsuit against the federal ECCC minister for her failure to protect the critical habitat of five boreal caribou herds in northeastern Alberta. Decades of federal and provincial inaction mean that interim federal habitat protection is urgently needed for these Alberta boreal caribou.

- Carolyn Campbell