

## Caribou face extinction, warns wildlife expert

By Peter Morton

(Herald staff writer)

Alberta's rapidly diminishing caribou population faces extinction, a fish and wildlife biologist has warned.

Mike Bloomfield, the Edson regional biologist and co-ordinator of the province's caribou management program, said in an interview Friday that increased industrial and recreational pressures could virtually wipe out what little remains of the herd, now numbering no more than 3,000.

The caribou population in 1966, according to "the best educated guess," was almost 9,000, he said.

"The writing is on the wall. We have to do something or lose them."

Caribou rely on mature forest for habitats and are extremely sensitive to intrusion from logging and recreation.

While stressing that "this is not an indictment of the hunting community or loggers," Bloomfield said such massive projects as the Dempster Highway, the Alaska pipeline, the Odyssey resort proposal near Rocky Mountain House and the tree harvesting proposals for Fox

Creek and Berland forest management areas are cutting into critical winter range of the caribou.

"It's happening in a hurry," he said, referring to the diminishing numbers.

Bud Miller, minister of public lands and wildlife, acknowledged that while "one of the problems is the decrease in caribou populations, (the government) is just not sure why.

"There seems to be some uncertainty as to the cause. It might be a natural cycle."

Researchers working under the Alberta Oil Sands Environmental Research Program (AOSERP) found that caribou in the Fort MacMurray area are barely maintaining their own population, now ranging between 130 and 340. Any further intrusion, they warned, could severely reduce the population there.

In addition, Bloomfield said the populations in the Edson area, where the province is entertaining proposals from major lumber companies to harvest more than 3.5 million acres of timber, have also been severely reduced over the past years.

He said little is known about the somewhat erratic behaviour of caribou since caribou research has been a low priority because "they are not a popular game animal and their normal habitats in dense forest make it difficult to follow their movements.

Hunters bagged 41 caribou during the 1978 season plus one illegal cow.

One of the greatest fears researchers have is that because caribou, along with grizzly bear, are "ecological indicators," the loss of either one of those species in an area underscores a dramatic change in the ecological makeup.

"Eventually, we could be living in our own sewage," Bloomfield said.

The province has already reduced the hunting season on caribou. Effective this year, hunters will only be able to hunt for two weeks in one management unit near the Willmore Wilderness Park.

As well, the season further north has been cut by one month, restricting hunting from Sept. 5 to the end of October.

Bloomfield argues, however, that a total closure of hunting is necessary to perform a full inventory of the population and to list critical winter habitats.

After that, he said, a comprehensive management plan and applied research studies should be drawn up, including strict guidelines in forest management.

Bloomfield said he is afraid the demise of the Alberta caribou could parallel a situation in Prince George, B.C., where improved roads and new logging development effectively wiped out the entire caribou population.