

Total ban on caribou hunting urged by wildlife group to study dwindling numbers

By Peter Morton
(Herald staff writer)

Nothing short of a total ban on caribou hunting is going to help save the rapidly dwindling band, Alberta hunters and conservationists maintain.

This year, the provincial government is planning to restrict hunting to the Hinton-Edson area in October, one of five regions where caribou herds are found in the province.

But, that's not good enough, according to the 25,000 member Alberta Fish and Game Association.

"We have asked the government for a total closure on caribou hunting," Don Hayden, president of the 25,000 member association, says.

The province still refuses to consider a moratorium on hunting, along with "unnecessary industrial activity" to find out why the caribou is dying off.

"We support the closure until a proper caribou management plan is drawn up," Diane Pachal, a co-ordinator for the Alberta Wilderness Association and several other provincial conservation groups, said today.

A recent department of fish and wildlife study estimates that the caribou population has seriously decreased in the last 15 years, bot-

toming out now at between 1,500 and 3,500.

In 1968, the population was estimated at almost 10,000 animals.

Last October, hunters shot only 11 caribou, but most of them were breeding bulls which are already endangered because of sharply declining numbers.

However, for the second year in a row, the province has refused to consider a total closure as recommended by an internal fish and wildlife report.

The report called for the closure while an inventory and habitat study is done and a management plan is drawn up.

Fred McDougall, deputy minister of renewable resources, said that the decision on the restricted season "is now at a ministerial level."

"There would be an extremely restrictive season with some narrowing of areas," McDougall said from Edmonton.

Consider closure

McDougall hinted that the province may be considering a total closure for the 1981-82 season but added that "it would only be fair" if hunters were given a year warning.

Fish and game members have been pushing a ban for the past two

years but so far, they say a decision has been made based on "political" pressures rather than from recommendations of the department of fish and wildlife.

The internal report, prepared earlier this year, said that other pressures, including the oil and gas industry, logging and recreation, have been at least partially responsible for declining populations.

The report pointed out that nearly all traditional caribou habitats in the province have also been committed to industrial and recreational activity.

"I don't see why seismic crews can't just cut one line and share data," retired forester Gordon Watt said from his home near Edson.

'No sense'

"It just doesn't make any sense to have 14 or 15 crews going over the same ground."

The only open area this fall will be near Hinton, and Willmore Wilderness Park where, according to Edson biologist Mike Bloomfield, the band there is under the greatest pressure.

Bloomfield, who is working on a study tracing the migratory habits of the caribou, said a moratorium would not necessarily close the



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hunting season forever.

"People think that a moratorium would be a permanent ban," Bloomfield said.

"That's just not true. Many of those against the ban don't remember a moratorium was placed on caribou hunting in 1948 and 1949. The closure was later lifted."

Other bands live in the Peace River area, near Jasper, in the Clear Hills region and near Cold Lake and Fort MacMurray.

Watt, who was chief forester in the area for 12 years during the 1940s, said he remembers the days when literally "hundreds and hundreds of caribou" would move together in a herd.

Today, he said he is likely to spot just one.

Caribou, he noted, are highly traditional animals and are easily disturbed by human activity, including low-flying aircraft and nearby industrial and recreational activity.

Besides, he said, some sportsmen these days are satisfied to shoot anything for a trophy, including the very young caribou.

"Hunters these days don't know the difference between a cow and a bull."

Alberta caribou no longer running in herds