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 herd, Alberta hunters and conservationists say.

This year, the provincial government is planning to restrict hunting to the Hinton-Edson area in October, one of five regions where caribous 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," Dana Parshal, a coordinator for the Alberta Wilderness Association and several other provincial conservation groups, said today.

A recent report by a fish and wildlife study estimates that the caribou population has seriously decreased in the last 15 years, but hunting is now at between 1,500 and 3,500.

In 1956, the population was estimated at almost 10,000 animals.

Last October, hunters shot only 11 caribou, but most of them werecalendar 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 with an inventory and habitat study is done and a management plan is drawn up.

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

"There would be a very 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 1982-83 season but added that "it would only be for a few years".

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 of little or no importance.

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

"I don't see how animal rights can't just cut one line and share data," retired forester Gordon Watt said from his home here.

"No sense"

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

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

Bloomfield, who is working on a study tracking the migratory habits of the caribou, said a moratorium would not necessarily close the hunting season forever.

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

"That's just not true. Many of these fish and game members want a moratorium 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 Chet Hills region and near Cold Lake and Fort Nelson.

"We don't have a problem in the area for 12 years during the 1940s," said Bloomfield. "But, when literally "hundreds and hundreds of caribou" would move together in a herd."

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

Caribou, he noted, are highly territorial and are easily disturbed by human activity, including low-flying aircraft and noise from industrial and recreational activity.

But, he noted, some sportmen 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."