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Will the Woodland Caribou be Alberta's Dodo?

It is time for the Alberta government to stop ignoring the plight of one of Alberta's most prestigious and enigmatic species before it is too late. Continuing industrial activity is jeopardizing woodland caribou habitat in the province. If remaining caribou herds are not adequately protected now, Alberta's Woodland caribou may become extinct.

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA), CPAWS Edmonton and the Federation of Alberta Naturalists (FAN) are calling for postponement of industrial activities in core caribou habitat until herds recover to healthy numbers. They are also calling for permanent protection of caribou habitat in the wildlands of the Little Smoky, Chinchaga and Kakwa.

"Woodland caribou are in severe danger of becoming the next extirpated species in Alberta," says AWA Outreach Coordinator, Nigel Douglas. "We have known for a long time why caribou are disappearing in the province and we know what we need to do to re-establish them. But there is currently no political will to implement the major and potentially costly changes in industrial activity which would be required to set the caribou on the path to recovery."

Woodland caribou are slow to reproduce, and cannot tolerate the disturbance and increased predation associated with industrial development. They are designated as 'threatened' in Alberta under the Wildlife Act, and 'threatened' under the national Species at Risk Act, but their numbers continue to decline. Their distribution is extremely fragmented: of the 18 known herds in the province, 3 are at immediate risk of extirpation; 6 are in decline; 6 are unknown and 3 are stable.

"Decades of inaction and half-hearted approaches by the Alberta government continue," says Cliff Wallis, AWA Past President. "This is a recipe for disaster for the caribou. We are looking particularly to the forest and energy industries for leadership on this critical issue. Their commitment and influence is crucial to success."

There have been some positive signs for Woodland caribou recently. In March 2004, Weyerhaeuser agreed to 'postpone' harvesting in 82,000 ha of caribou habitat in the Kakwa area of northern Alberta. But at the same time, Suncor Energy is considering a pipeline, which would fragment the largest intact piece of caribou habitat in the Grande Cache area.

"The oil and gas industry together with government resource departments have been protecting the 'the business as usual' scenario when it comes to new allocations and activities in identified woodland caribou ranges," says Dennis Baresco, President of FAN.

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