

Jasper's Endangered Caribou Need Stronger Management



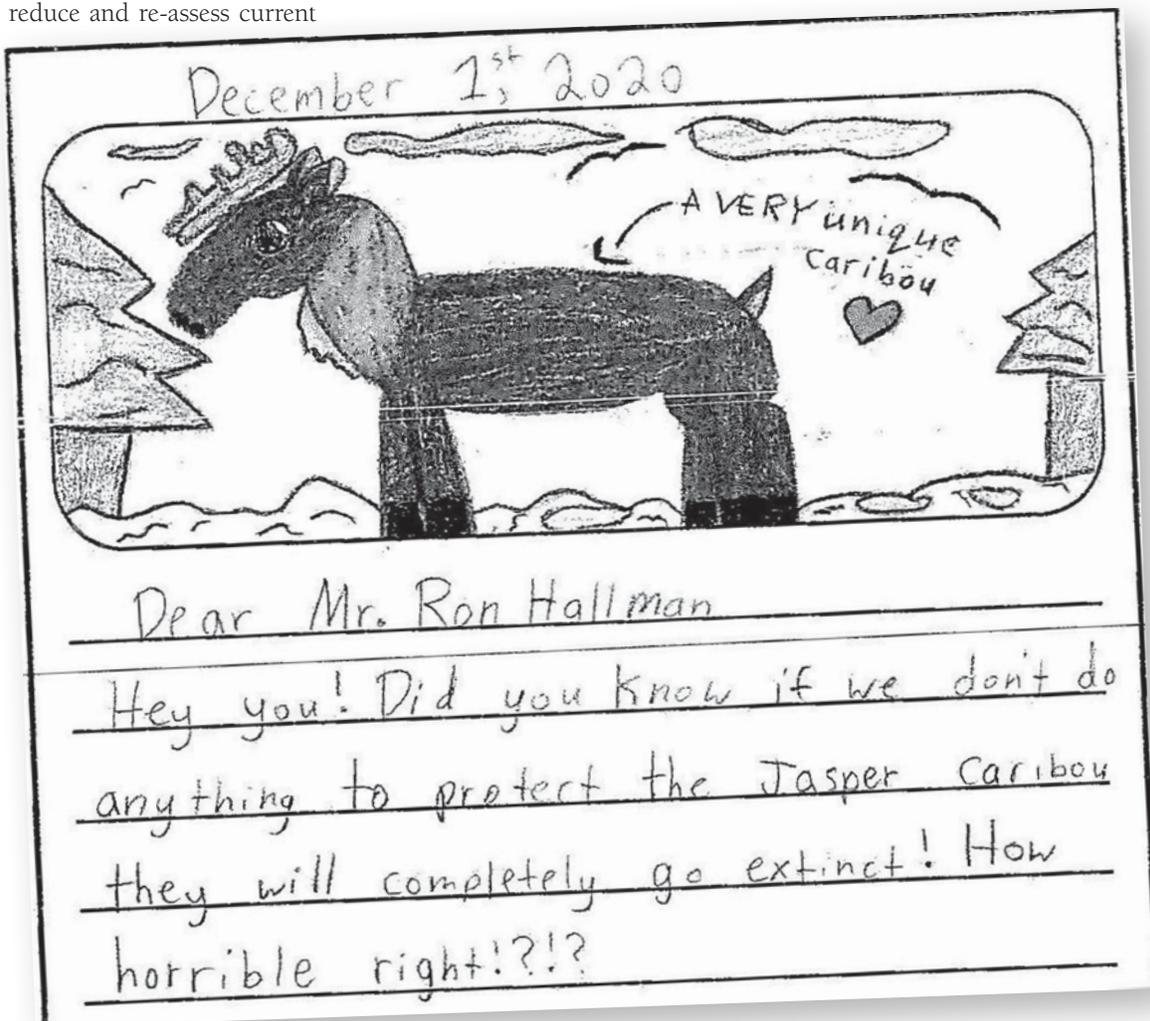
By Carolyn Campbell, AWA Conservation Specialist

Early October marked a month since Jasper National Park quietly posted news that its Maligne caribou were officially extirpated and that Tonquin and Brazeau caribou were too few to recover on their own. With respect to the human access that has facilitated these dramatic declines AWA proposed on October 8 that Parks Canada should: reduce and re-assess current

human access pressures on Tonquin and Brazeau caribou; stop snow clearing Maligne Lake Road beyond Maligne Canyon; and maintain hard-won Maligne back-country winter access limits.

From October 8-30, the Environment and Climate Change Minister convened the bi-annual Minister's Round Table to ask Canadians for advice on Parks Canada

matters, as required under the *Parks Canada Agency Act*. AWA advised that Parks Canada should: manage for greater ecological connectivity within and adjacent to national parks, limit national parks' commercialization, and increase visitor education on responsible wildlife-related activities. We also urged Parks Canada to



Letter from a Grade 4 student at Hugh A. Bennett School to Parks Canada's CEO Ron Hallman PHOTO: © THE DISAPPOINTED ELF

take stronger actions to ensure the survival and recovery of Jasper caribou. We were encouraged that, during this consultation, a number of national organizations also called on Parks Canada to do more to prevent Jasper caribou extirpation.

In late October, Parks Canada announced winter season access management measures for Jasper caribou ranges. They are little different from the measures of previous years; you could be excused for thinking that Jasper National Park doesn't believe its dwindling caribou need further action on this front. In Tonquin and Brazeau ranges, early winter season closures begin November 1 as usual. They are scheduled to be lifted as usual on February 16 in the Tonquin caribou range and March 1 in Brazeau. At those times, snowmobile supply routes and ski trails will be open to access several Tonquin backcountry ski lodges, as usual. In addition, Marmot Basin's 'Tres Hombres' downhill ski runs that were approved in 2017 above Tonquin's Whistler's Creek area remain open, as usual. This clearly violates Dr. Fiona Schmiegelow's expert advice, advice she gave Jasper National Park in the 2014 caribou risk assessment the Park commissioned her to prepare.

The only access change Parks Canada has made actually eases access restrictions. Now that Maligne caribou are officially extirpated, Parks Canada has removed its former early winter restrictions in two backcountry areas of the Maligne range, while it will keep most areas closed from November 1 to March 1. Meanwhile it will keep plowing the entire road during winter, a decision that facilitates wolf access and led to the caribou extirpation there. Parks Canada says that if caribou are in the area, winter access will be immediately rolled back. AWA is concerned that this is, in effect, a range retraction. It sets a very poor example to other jurisdictions about caribou range management. Instead, Parks should prioritize caribou re-occupancy of this prime caribou range as soon as possible, by halting snow plowing of the Maligne Road past the Canyon to minimize

chances of wolf re-occupancy.

In late October, Parks Canada also announced that its Jasper caribou conservation breeding program proposal will be reviewed by external experts. AWA's view is that the proposal has already had extensive expert review. However, if another review must occur, it should be quick and transparent, so Canadians can see whether the plan is viable and ethical.

In November 2020, Canadian Press obtained a Jasper National Park draft caribou breeding plan from 2017. In itself, the document is proof of a much-delayed process, during which caribou populations spiraled down. As well, it describes the annual February 16th re-opening of Tonquin winter backcountry access as a "compromise to offer some protection to caribou while still allowing the existing stakeholders to operate during a shorter portion of the winter season."

Tonquin caribou are the largest caribou population remaining in the south Jasper ranges managed by Parks Canada – they have at most ten breeding females left. Their survival is key to Jasper caribou recovery. Considering federal responsibilities under the *Species at Risk Act*, Parks Canada's ecological priority mandate, the

ongoing decline of Tonquin caribou, and Dr. Schmiegelow's analysis of Tonquin critical habitat disturbance, AWA believes this 'compromise' of Tonquin caribou survival to suit local interests is completely unacceptable. It is costing caribou their future in the Park.

In mid-November, AWA and other ENGO colleagues met with Jasper National Parks staff and a director from Parks Canada Capital Region and discussed all these concerns. We requested Parks Canada:

- keep Tonquin backcountry restrictions through late winter;
- transparently re-assess and reduce Tonquin summer-fall access impacts with urgency, in light of Dr. Schmiegelow's habitat loss analysis;
- revoke approval of Tres Hombres ski runs;
- prioritize caribou re-occupancy of the prime Maligne caribou range as soon as possible and consider precautionary actions to ensure the range is ready to be safely repopulated by minimizing chances of wolf re-occupancy.

There are very few grains of sand left in the Jasper caribou hourglass.▲

AWA is inspired by a group of Grade 4 students from Hugh A. Bennett School in Calgary. While studying Alberta's physical regions and persuasive writing, they became very interested in writing about Jasper caribou. Here are some of the many persuasive phrases they included in the thirty letters they sent to Parks Canada's CEO Ron Hallman:

"Without the caribou the world is not complete and the world does not feel right for example when we will go to Jasper national park it will feel empty and I'm sure you sir won't want that to happen right."

"We are making roads and taking over their space and how will they live if they have no space."

"Please protect the caribou they are so fabulous, unique and innocent I can't watch them go extinct."

"Did you know that the caribou in Jasper are endangered because humans keep building hotels, ski hills and hiking trails and because of that the caribou are losing there habitat."

"There is decreasing herds with less females. Bad right. Let's help caribous."

"They didn't do anything they just walk and eat and don't deserve to die."