

Caribou recovery can grow economy in northwest Alberta's Bistcho-Yates ranges

October 23, 2018



Photo: John Marriott

Managing lands for woodland caribou recovery can grow the economy in the Bistcho-Yates caribou range lands of northwest Alberta, eminent natural resource economist Dr. Thomas Michael Power found in an October 2018 report evaluating a caribou restoration economy. The report was commissioned by Alberta Wilderness Association, David Suzuki Foundation and Harmony Foundation.

“At least 65 percent undisturbed caribou habitat can be reached with almost no displacement of existing industrial activity in the Bistcho-Yates ranges,” said Dr. Power. “We estimate that a reasonable Bistcho-Yates seismic line restoration program would generate 100 direct jobs per year and give a regional economic stimulus of \$24 million per year or \$434 million (undiscounted) over 18 years. That is a solid employment opportunity for this region and could even help lay the basis for a more diversified economy.”

The Economic Impact of Restoring Woodland Caribou Habitat in the Bistcho and Yates Ranges in Northwestern Alberta also found that:

- Flawed assumptions have led to exaggerated projections for habitat protection costs and job losses
- Economic sources of instability in Alberta's forest products industry have been much more disruptive to the industry's health than efforts to protect caribou habitat are ever likely to be
- Best operating practices that minimize surface disturbance are essential in areas of existing and future commercial activities
- Two large conservation areas in Bistcho-Yates can be created that avoid forestry and energy leased areas
- Established models can 'optimize' land use choices by weighting the ecological, social and economic values in an area - the best energy plays, caribou habitat, water, forest - to generate least-cost and most beneficial alternatives
- Where industry and caribou priorities overlap, it is possible to generate least-cost and most beneficial pathways to manage ranges for an economy that supports caribou and other significant wildlife and forest benefits

"For all caribou ranges, we can start with shared goals of caribou recovery and community economic activity to find 'most benefit and least cost' solutions," said Carolyn Campbell of Alberta Wilderness Association. "The models to achieve this are not new. What is new is placing value on caribou habitat needs as well as industry, to recover our valued wildlife and forests in the best possible way."

"Land use choices for both caribou and a restoration economy can value important ecological, cultural and commercial concerns, as well as help recognize indigenous interests and rights," said Rachel Plotkin of the David Suzuki Foundation. "This simply is not an either-or situation."

Canada's woodland caribou are a threatened species. Human activities have fragmented older forest areas that caribou depend upon, pushing many populations towards extinction, yet habitat disturbance continues to grow. Provinces have the responsibility to manage wildlife and natural resources, and the federal government has the responsibility to protect species-at-risk habitat if provinces fail to do so.

"It is urgent to recover the habitat caribou need to survive and thrive," said

Michael Bloomfield of Harmony Foundation. “Woodland caribou are an iconic symbol of the health of Canada’s vital boreal and mountain forests. Protecting caribou habitat is not only important for sustaining caribou but to meet our commitments on climate change, biodiversity and the rights of First Nations. This study gives even more evidence that we can and must manage forests differently, for healthy caribou, forests and communities.”

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