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## Inspiring Stewardship Plan, for Rights, Lands and Caribou

Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) and Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN) have developed a land stewardship plan for northeast Alberta boreal woodland caribou. It is far superior to Alberta's own first caribou range plans (profiled elsewhere in this issue). Albertans should champion this Stewardship Plan.

The traditional northern Alberta territories of the two First Nations overlap with four caribou ranges: Richardson, Red Earth, West Side of Athabasca River (WSAR) and East Side of Athabasca River (ESAR). The Nations negotiated a funding agreement with the federal government to develop this Plan.

Indigenous knowledge holders directed

that the Plan's goals should be much stronger than in the federal boreal caribou recovery strategy. Federal requirements are for range plans prepared by provinces that demonstrate progress to achieve at least 65 percent undisturbed habitat per range within 50-100 years. By contrast, Stewardship Plan goals are to reach 80 percent undisturbed habitat in 40 years, with measurable interim goals. The federal habitat targets give caribou only an estimated 60 percent chance of being self-sustaining. The Stewardship Plan targets raise that to an estimated 80 percent probability, making it a much more credible recovery plan.

The Plan's foundation is Indigenous knowledge, laws, and stewardship principles, including incorporation of ACFN and MCFN Treaty rights in caribou recovery

actions. Indigenous knowledge is held at equal weight to western science. Dozens of knowledge holders were involved and each confirmed all the key goals, understandings and direction. Western science included Alberta's data on caribou telemetry locations and habitat disturbance.

The key direction is that three land-use zones are applied to the planning area. At this point, Protection and Restoration zones cover 65 percent of the area, and the Active Management zone covers 35 percent; the Plan will continue to be refined. The Protection zone considers above all else where the caribou and least disturbed areas are now. Elders also emphasised protecting 'muskeg' or peat wetlands, because of the length of time needed to restore them. Restoration zones may have limited development but require development offsets. Active Management zones are more disturbed and consider existing and future industrial tenure.

Each of the four ranges has Protection and Restoration zones. All the herds are recognised as interconnected and deserving of equal priority and protection. The plan also provides for habitat connectivity between these four ranges as well as to other ranges.

Some habitat is assumed to restore naturally; other areas require active restoration treatment. One scenario assumes that within Protected and Restoration zones, all human disturbance except roads, power lines and rail is restored. In that case, Richardson and Red Earth ranges come close to the goal of 80% undisturbed habitat in 40 years. In WSAR, ESAR, further work is needed to restore temporary roads, to aggregate the forestry footprint, and to reduce the permanent road network within Active Management and Restoration zones. Management scenarios also factor in future wildfire occurrence, which Alberta's plans have so far ignored. The values and direction of this Stewardship Plan should provide strong inspiration to guide Alberta caribou recovery and sub-regional land-use planning. For more information, a video link of ACFN-MCFN's April 12 presentation of their Stewardship Plan is available on Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute's caribou ecology and recovery webinar site.

— Carolyn Campbell, Conservation Director