

Saving the Caribou:

West Central Alberta Closing in on Action

By Gillian Steward



For untold generations, hundreds, likely thousands of caribou roamed the old growth forests and alpine meadows of west central Alberta around Grande Prairie and Grande Cache. But those caribou herds have been dwindling for decades and could soon die out due to rapid industrial development of their habitat and feeding grounds. Today, their numbers are counted in the dozens.

“We are running out of time because of dramatic range recession due to increasing human disturbance,” says Dave Hervieux, the Caribou Management Coordinator for Alberta Fish and Wildlife, a division of Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP), who has been on the frontlines of the fight to save the caribou for 39 years.

The caribou have been tracked, studied, and discussed in dozens of government committees and reports. No jurisdiction in Canada has studied them as much and for so long. But their numbers continue to decline anyway because all the research and discussion hasn't led to much change. Forestry, petroleum, and coal corporations still resist efforts to curtail their operations within caribou ranges. The Alberta and federal governments could force them to rein in their operations in favour of the caribou but they seem to prefer delaying significant action rather than restraining the resource industries.

There is one ray of hope that could improve the odds for the caribou in this area. AEP is developing what are known as caribou sub-regional land-use plans. The draft plan for the Upper Smoky sub-region, which extends southwest of

Grande Prairie down to Grande Cache, will likely be released sometime this year. Public consultations will follow – that's when Albertans, including First Nations and Métis, will have a chance to weigh in on how that land should be managed so that caribou can not only survive but hopefully thrive.

There are two herds in the Upper Smoky; as of 2019 Government of Alberta wildlife biologists estimate there are 153 caribou in the Red Rock Prairie Creek herd and 56 in the Narraway herd. In 1966 government biologists estimated there were 1200 to 1600 caribou in this region. As of 2017, 71 percent of the Red Rock Prairie Creek winter caribou range had been disturbed by forestry, mining, petroleum facilities, or roads. Almost all of the Narraway winter range – 84 percent – has been disturbed by industrial activity.

“The only thing we have to do is protect their winter habitat,” says Brian Bildson, a trapper who knows this country like the back of his hand. “That's all we gotta do. And it's not that huge an area. We are not talking about saving the whole province of Alberta but there doesn't seem to be the will.”

Weyerhaeuser Ltd., often cited as the largest forestry company in the world, is the largest operator in the region by far. It manages 1.1 million hectares (about 2.5 million acres) of forest in the region and has been harvesting timber from the Red Rock Prairie Creek and Narraway caribou ranges for over 20 years. Based in Seattle, Washington, Weyerhaeuser manages 14 million acres of land in Canada (more than in the U.S.) leased to it by provincial governments; one third

of those holdings are in Alberta.

Of all the industrial disturbances, current logging practices obliterate the most caribou habitat. Seedlings will be planted where the trees once stood but it will take 80 years for a new forest to grow into natural caribou habitat full of ground and tree lichens that are the caribou's main source of nutrition. And yet Weyerhaeuser's latest government-approved Forest Management Plan continues to include logging on caribou winter ranges.

“We understand that the forestry companies will take some of the forest, that's the way business works, but do they have to take it all?” says Landon Delorme an Indigenous knowledge holder and trapper. For him the pattern of clear cuts slashed into mountain sides, along the highways, and near his family's home at Victor Lake is a clearly visible marker of drastic changes to the natural environment.

Since caribou habitat and the caribou are deemed by various First Nations and Métis as essential to their way of life, they are keen to play a key role in the preservation and enhancement of the caribou herds. Earlier this year an agreement was reached between two First Nations (Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and Mikisew Cree First Nation) in the northeast of the province and the federal government, aiming to establish self-sustaining populations of boreal caribou in four ranges. The hope is that this arrangement could lead to more such agreements for the benefit of caribou.

For trapper Brian Bildson – among many others – it's long past time for

this kind of action. “We can’t afford two more years of research, three more years of research,” he says, “we need something now, it’s triage time.” 🍀

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