

# Endangered Caribou are Just One Sign of a Deteriorating Environment



By Gillian Steward

One night last May a small car travelling on Highway 40 south of Grande Cache in west central Alberta collided with a big bull caribou and killed it. Roadkill is not unusual in Alberta, but Bruno wasn't just any animal. He was very familiar to Kenny Napier a member of a Caribou Patrol organized by the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation to monitor the busy Highway 40 during the annual migrations of the caribou population; warning traffic so that caribou can cross without being killed.

"You could go up to him within, I'm gonna say 20, 25, 30 feet from this animal," says Napier "and calmly talk to him and say, 'Come on Bruno. You know, you're not supposed to be here'. And without a word of a lie, he would look at you and basically shake his head. No. And he would continue to eat." Other members of the Caribou Patrol were so heartbroken by Bruno's death they put together an obituary and published it on their website.

For the 500 members of the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation (AWN) the decline of the caribou herds in this area means yet another blow to the landscape and wildlife that have sustained them for generations. At one time they hunted caribou for food, used their bones for utensils, and their skin for clothing. They don't hunt them anymore, haven't since the early 1970s, in order to prevent their complete disappearance from this region. But banning hunting hasn't stopped the decline; it has accelerated ever since the coal, petroleum, and forestry companies moved into this resource rich corner of the province.

Besides organizing the patrol, which is co-funded by industry and government,

AWN representatives have also participated in recent caribou task forces established by Alberta Environment and Parks. The task forces are a product of a 2020 agreement between the federal and Alberta governments that commits Alberta to establishing subregional land-use plans to enable caribou recovery by reducing human disturbance in their remaining ranges. The Berland sub-region includes the remaining home ranges of the migratory A La Peche caribou, the adjacent non-migratory Little Smoky caribou, and land northeast of those ranges.

The caribou habitat goals are spelled out

in the agreement – caribou ranges need to be a minimum of 65 percent undisturbed in order to give a herd a 60 percent chance of survival. Currently, the A La Peche winter range is 88 percent disturbed; the Little Smoky range is 99 percent disturbed. Not surprisingly, studies show more A La Peche caribou are staying in their summer ranges in the sub-alpine for the winter where avalanches and lack of food can take their toll. Recent estimates put the Little Smoky population at 110; the A La Peche population is at least 100.

The pact between Alberta and the federal government also commits Alberta



*A La Peche caribou bull and calf during autumn migration. Photo © J. Kranjec.*

to engagement with Indigenous peoples for the conservation, management, and recovery of woodland caribou. But the AWN feels their participation in the caribou task forces which include other Indigenous and Metis representatives, is unproductive and they are pulling out.

“Thirty years of AWN participating on industry panels and government panels where their traditional land-use information has been asked for, or their decision-making processes have been asked for, and not one single document has been reflected back into the policy at the end of the day,” says Jason Veness, AWN’s Resource Director, during an interview in his Grande Cache office. “So there’s a bit of skepticism. I wouldn’t say a bit, perhaps there’s a lot of skepticism, a little bit of cynicism, as to how far the community can actually go towards influencing decision and policy at this point.” Veness is a former senior advisor for Indigenous engagement with the Alberta Energy Regulator. “We’ve been made to focus in on the caribou at the expense of all the other values of the land that are also at significant risk,” Veness adds.

Carolyn Campbell AWA’s Conservation Director agrees that broad land values as well as caribou habitat need to be conserved. “Alberta is overdue in addressing the extensive cumulative impacts caused by settlements, industry and other human activities to its lands, waters and wildlife,” she says. Campbell points out that regional planning was promised under Alberta’s 2008 *Land Use Framework* but had halted by 2015 before reaching the Berland sub-region. In 2019, with federal/provincial discussions on a caribou pact well underway, Alberta re-committed to achieve and maintain naturally self-sustaining woodland caribou populations, and to set up more localized subregional planning. The Berland subregional planning process started in 2021.

### **Losing Control of their Home**

The Aseniwuche Winewak people have lived in the region for generations. Before the arrival of newcomers they were mostly

Cree and Stoney Nakoda. In the 1800s Iroquois, Ojibwe and Métis people from eastern Canada guided and supported fur traders as they headed west. When the group arrived in the area around what is now known as the Jasper Valley some Indigenous and Métis members of the crew decided to stay and live with the people who already called it home. Their territory was so remote that when various Indigenous groups and the Crown signed Treaty 8 in 1899, they were left out. That means that as far as the federal government is concerned, they don’t have First Nation or Treaty status.

All the land surrounding Grande Cache is public multi-use lands, recreational parks, or wilderness parks. Only Indigenous people are allowed to live on the Crown land in communities known as “cooperatives.” So, when industry moves in to clear cut a forest, carve out an open pit coal mine, or dig up a pipeline route, Indigenous people can be deeply affected.

According to Stephanie Leonard who works with Veness, AWN has only 12-18 percent of its Traditional Territory available to exercise its inherent rights. She has worked with the Caribou Patrol for five years but she’s ready to expand her horizons and fight for AWN’s right to take more control of their Traditional Territory by asserting inherent Indigenous rights which include self-government.

“So now it’s a chance to take what I’ve learned from caribou, apply it to everything in the land base and help AWN get to that stage where people will have to listen because they have no choice,” she says.

For Landon Delorme, an Indigenous knowledge holder and trapper with a trap line that was handed down to him by his father, the cumulative effects of industrial development are closing in on the land and the people who live there. So much caribou habitat has been disturbed or destroyed that wolves now find it easier to traverse clear cuts and seismic roads to prey on deer, elk, and caribou. In 2005 Alberta Environment and Parks initiated an annual winter program to save caribou by poisoning and aerial gunning wolves. Delorme went to 16 poison sites and described what he witnessed:

“First, they would herd a moose by

helicopter into a certain spot and then they would shoot it. The carcass was left on the ground and piles of snow laced with strychnine meat bait were shoveled in around it. As the wolves caught the scent of blood they gathered around the carcass,” Delorme said over coffee in Grande Cache. “But in a wolf pack there are alpha wolves, and they always get to eat first while the others wait. And while they waited, getting hungrier and hungrier, they started sniffing around the snow piles with the strychnine baits and eventually ate some and died. When the alpha wolves had finished eating, they were left with a much smaller pack.”

The strychnine affected more than the wolves; other animals and birds were also in danger of absorbing strychnine from the snow or a wolf carcass. And since Indigenous people and other locals hunt for game they could be in danger too. “The devastation is just stupid,” says Delorme. By 2016 1200 wolves had been culled and 250 other animals had been accidentally poisoned, according to government documents. The poisonings stopped two years ago but the aerial gunning continues. Dave Hervieux, senior wildlife biologist with Alberta Environment and Parks, managed the wolf reduction program. He says it is only a stop gap measure, but it has helped to halt the decline of the caribou herds.

### **Court Cases Advancing Indigenous Rights**

Recent court cases have affirmed that First Nations’ treaty rights – promises made to them when they ceded land to The Crown – must be recognized and honoured. This includes territory that a First Nation had been accustomed to using for traditional activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and cultural and spiritual practices that may be outside land allotted for a reserve.

In 2021 the British Columbia Supreme Court ruled that the B.C. government had unjustifiably infringed the treaty rights of Blueberry River First Nation (BRFN) in the northeast of the province through the cumulative effects of provincially-authorized industrial development, including the authorization of forestry and



*Landon Delorme, Indigenous knowledge holder, takes the author through his trapline area, handed down to him by his father.*  
Photo © Alberta Wilderness Association

petroleum projects over several decades. If fish are poisoned and wildlife habitat can no longer support wildlife, Indigenous peoples' right to hunt trap and fish in their Traditional Territory is breached. The court also declared that BRFN and the B.C. government must consult and negotiate to determine what mechanisms can be used to manage the cumulative impact of industrial development and how they can be enforced.

In 2022 Duncan's First Nation just across the B.C. border and also a signatory to Treaty 8, filed a lawsuit against the Alberta government that alleges the province has permitted so much activity and sold off so much Crown land that band members can only live their constitutionally guaranteed way of life with great difficulty.

Back in Grande Cache the AWN is studying those lawsuits closely because they recognize so much of the supporting evidence. But AWN doesn't have treaty status making it much more complicated for them to fight the impact of cumulative industrial development.

"So, we've reached out to federal

officials to see how they're influencing the conversation. And I would say we're optimistic that there could be a federal process that helps caribou, but we shall see, we're a long way from hearing back from those federal forces as well," says Veness. One thing Veness knows for sure; AWN is tired of dealing with the Alberta government; they are tired of being referred to as "stakeholders" just like all the other parties seated around the Task Force table.

"It's outrageous and fundamentally demonstrates that there's no will. I don't think that it's been done out of a looseness. I think it is actually quite purposeful to put everybody into the same category. It fits a narrative that they've gone through consultation. Yeah, those task forces are something else," Veness adds. For Veness the task forces are focused on getting consensus even though consensus is not the same as consent as far as AWN is concerned.

Caribou recovery became a vehicle for opening up more comprehensive

land-use issues, Veness says. And to his surprise he has found that industry players are just as frustrated with the government processes as AWN. "Some of those companies value the jurisdiction of AWN. It may be easier to work with them than government," he adds.

There is no question that the decline of the caribou herds in this part of Alberta can be attributed to the decline of the natural habitat that sustains them. The old-growth forests are where they can find tree and ground lichens, their main source of nutrition in the winter months. Those thick older forests are not hospitable to moose or deer, and they also keep away predators such as wolves.

For the AWN the decline of the caribou is but another sign of the deterioration of the natural world. That's why a Berland land-use plan that addresses environmental concerns and Indigenous rights is so important. The longer it is delayed the harder it will be for the caribou to recover and for Indigenous peoples to protect what has been and is still their home. 🌲