After years of debate, a new effort is underway to protect Alberta’s caribou from development

BY DARRELL STONEHOUSE
Managing Alberta's woodland caribou population has been a vexing issue for governments, resource developers, First Nations and environmentalists for much of the last 20 years.

But it appears that the issue is finally coming to a head after the Alberta government brought in a mediator to settle on a strategy to protect what remains of the province's caribou population.

Eric Denhoff, a seasoned mediator with government, First Nations and private sector experience, was retained to talk to the different groups using land in northwestern Alberta and provide advice and recommendations on a made-in-Alberta caribou protection strategy. The Alberta government has accepted Denhoff's recommendations and used them to complete the first draft of a range plan for the Little Smoky and A La Peche ranges.

Key highlights of the mediator's recommendations include cooperating with industry to ensure the restoration of over 10,000 kilometres of legacy seismic lines back to caribou habitat in the Little Smoky and A La Peche caribou ranges, increasing the Little Smoky population and reducing reliance on wolf control through a caribou-rearing facility, and providing permanent protection to an additional 1.8 million hectares of caribou range in the Chinchaga, Bischof, Yates and Caribou Mountains ranges for a grand total of 4.9 million hectares protected provincially.

"Our government inherited a policy logjam and a looming federal deadline to file our plan to recover the caribou and manage critical habitat for caribou throughout the province. Rather than admiring the problem, as had been done for two decades, our government took action," said Shannon Phillips, minister of environment and parks, in announcing the draft range plan.

Caribou are a threatened species federally and provincially, and their populations are declining. Under the Species at Risk Act, the federal government requires Alberta to manage 65 per cent of critical caribou habitat by October 2017. The Alberta government said it is taking action to provide economic certainty for industries and workers who make their living in the north and to do what's right to protect this iconic animal.

With this move, Alberta becomes Canada's leader in permanent protection of woodland caribou ranges, providing more permanent protection than any other province or territory in Canada, both in absolute area and percentage of provincial caribou range area.

Industry seems supportive of the new caribou protection plan. "We anticipate the mediator's report and range plan will provide clarity for stakeholders operating within these ranges. The innovative funding approach will enable significant restoration activity in the near term while recognizing the challenges industry is facing in the current economic downturn. While the timeline set forth by government for range restoration is ambitious, the oil and natural gas industry is committed to doing its part to achieve this goal," says Brad Herald, vice-president of western Canada operations for the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.

The Little Smoky and A La Peche draft plan is being released first as those ranges are the most challenging landscapes for caribou management in Canada. When implemented, the draft range plan will create hundreds of jobs related to range restoration, said the government in a release.

First Nations groups are also supportive of the plan. "We can't turn back the clock for the caribou, but we can choose to make the right decisions for them now and for their future," said David MacPhee, the president of the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation of Canada.

The primary cause of caribou mortality is wolf predation. However, wolves and caribou have coexisted for millennia. The current hypothesis with the most scientific support is that increased development and destruction of habitat has...

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Cenovus launches Cold Lake caribou project

Cenovus Energy has launched an unprecedented initiative to help protect threatened woodland caribou near the company’s operations in northeastern Alberta.

“At Cenovus, we’ve been working on cutting-edge caribou habitat restoration for several years,” says Jon Mitchell, Cenovus vice-president of environment and sustainability. “We’re taking our voluntary efforts to a whole new level with this ambitious project to restore fragmented boreal forest in an area that is home to the Cold Lake caribou herd. While much needs to be done to support caribou recovery, we believe our project will contribute significantly to the provincial government’s developing caribou action and range plans.”

Over the course of the project, Cenovus expects to achieve a more than tenfold expansion of the caribou habitat restoration work it has already completed in northeastern Alberta, treating forest fragmentation within an area of approximately 3,900 square kilometres. This is the largest single area of caribou habitat restoration undertaken by a company anywhere in the world and goes above and beyond current regulatory requirements.

Using a unique combination of proven forestry techniques tested during a three-year pilot project, Cenovus plans to restore old oil and gas seismic lines, access roads and other types of linear disturbance that have not naturally returned to forest cover over the past 20–30 years. This includes plans to plant approximately four million trees. These measures are expected to reduce forest fragmentation and make it more difficult for predators like wolves to hunt caribou in the open.

“Protection of habitat and landscape scale restoration of critical features are essential to help recover caribou populations in Alberta,” says Simon Dyer, associate regional director for Alberta at the Pembina Institute.

Much of the restoration work completed by Cenovus to date has been done by local First Nations contracting companies, and there will continue to be opportunities for aboriginal businesses to participate in this new 10-year initiative. Cenovus is sharing its approach to caribou habitat restoration with its peers through Canada’s Oil Sands Innovation Alliance. The Cenovus Caribou Habitat Restoration project is one of several coordinated industry caribou initiatives currently underway.

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allowed wolves to increase their predation of caribou beyond sustainable levels. Caribou have receded from large parts of their historical range in the province. Currently it is estimated that only 3,500 remain in Alberta.

Stan Boutin, University of Alberta professor and Alberta Biodiversity Conservation Chair, will oversee the advisory panel implementing and monitoring the new plan.

“The caribou file has simmered for at least ten years,” says Boutin in a release, noting that the announcement is a major accomplishment after a half-decade of failed attempts to negotiate a range management plan.

“To the credit of this NDP government, they brought in a mediator to see if he could stick-handle his way through this morass,” he adds.

Boutin says that caribou need large patches of undisturbed forest to avoid predators and see the announcement as a major step in the right direction.

“The plan has all the prongs needed for potential recovery: protection, aggressive restoration of features we created as humans through seismic lines and reforestation, and some control of predators for the time being.”

A mix of human activity and natural climate change has made caribou a threatened species both provincially and federally.

“In reality, this caribou system is so complicated. Not only have our activities changed things, the changing climate has
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created an environment for deer to thrive, driving up the wolf population, which is ultimately bad for caribou,” he explains. The solution up until now has been a controversial wolf control program.

“It’s a full-fledged war on wolves,” says Boutin, who advocates instead for a solution that protects both species. “How are we accepting that this is ongoing?”

In addition to advocating for caribou habitat recreation, Boutin has been pushing for a somewhat provocative solution to caribou conservation that will ultimately help the wolf population as well. With an ambitious time frame to break ground by the end of 2016, Boutin will be piloting a fenced-in protected area for female caribou and their young offspring as a refuge from wolves.

“The major pressures are on early survival. If we can improve that, we can really help the plight of the caribou,” he explains.

Though predatory control can stabilize the caribou population, the goal for the fenced-in area is to bump up the herd, providing a “pulse” to the caribou population each year. Boutin sees this as a benefit not only to caribou but also to wolves. “Hopefully we can start to wean ourselves off of the wolf control.”

Boutin has also been in ongoing discussions with industry partners to expand similar experiments in eastern Alberta.

Though fences are widely used around the world for animal conservation—in Hawaii and New Zealand for nesting birds and in Africa for game management, for example—it is a relatively new concept for North America. The idea of protective fencing for caribou is untested, but Boutin is optimistic.

“We are into major intervention,” he explains. “No one should ever dream that this won’t be somewhat artificial. We are going to aggressively manage it. That’s why these fences aren’t out of the question. If this experiment is a success, we can cut back on the removal of wolves. I see a potential double win.”

Caribou facts

- Canada has three types of caribou: Peary, barren-ground and woodland. These types are sub-classified by eco-type, based on where they live and how they behave.
- This member of the deer family is the only ungulate (hoofed grazer) with antlers on both male and female. Adult bulls shed theirs in late autumn after mating, but the females often retain theirs until spring. A bull’s antlers can grow as much as 2.5 centimetres every day.
- Woodland caribou have grey-brown coats with thick, creamy white patches on their shoulders, chests, bellies and under tails. A layer of semi-hollow guard hair supplements a dense undercoat, providing insulation against cold and wind and buoyancy while swimming.
- They are the only large mammals able to assimilate a primary winter diet of terrestrial and arborescent lichen. As snow melts, caribou seek sedges, new leaves and flowers providing nitrogen, as pregnant cows rely on this to produce milk.
- The caribou use perfectly designed concave hooves with sharp edges to locate and dig through the snow in search of lichens. The scoop shape also serves as an efficient paddle for swimming. Two half-moon shaped toes grow longer in winter, providing purchase on icy surfaces.
- Scent glands at the base of the ankle dispense a distinct scent when the animal is startled, sending a warning message to other animals nearby.
- Caribou cows typically produce only one calf each spring, seeking traditional calving grounds in very remote, isolated areas. When these areas are compromised by commercial operations, calf survival is affected. Calf survival rates are 30–50 per cent, significantly reducing the herd’s ability to recover when numbers are threatened.