

## Caribou Management Challenges Outdoor Recreation

Caribou! Are there caribou in Alberta? You may never have seen one; There may not be any remaining in the National parks. Trappers, foresters and those that spend a lot of time outdoors, in the boreal forest of Northern Alberta see them occasionally. I read that caribou may once have been the most populous cervid in their range area, not so now! There may be 2000 individuals scattered over many thousands of sq. kl. All 12 of Alberta's the woodland caribou local populations are classified as endangered. All populations are also listed as Not Self-Sustaining, in the Federal Governments Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou Boreal Population in Canada (2012)

The Alberta Government's first response to this long-standing situation has been to issue the Little Smoky A La Peche (LS/ALP) Range Plan Draft June 2, 2016.

The main causes being attributed to the Caribou decline are habitat degradation and human disturbance. Habitat in this range is listed as 95% disturbed

This plan proposes to recover habitat to a 65% suitable state and establish a self-sustaining population within 50+ years, through the following actions:

- Limit recreational access to the Caribou range, an area of approx. 5000 Sq. Kilometers east and north of Grande Cache Ab. to reduce disturbance to the caribou.
- Permanently close access to, and reforest 10,000 Kl. of abandoned roads, trails and cut lines etc. to restore these areas to caribou habitat.
- Reduce the activities of the forest and energy industry so as to prevent further degradation the caribou habitat.
- Erect a 100 Sq. Kl. Caribou rearing pen to supplement natural caribou recruitment.
- Continue the Provinces ongoing program of poisoning and other methods to reduce an excessive wolf population as long as necessary. Wolves are the principle predators of caribou.
- Continue licensed and Indigenous hunting to reduce an excessive population of moose, elk and deer. These competing species are said to support the larger than normal wolf population.

The history of caribou management in this province is nearly 100 years of observed decline, studies and recommendations which were not implemented adequately to reverse the near constant reduction of the Caribou population.

The federal species at Risk Act (SARA) legislation seems to be setting the schedule for the current recovery effort. The Alberta Government commissioned Mediators Report (Setting Alberta on a Path to Caribou Recovery), precursor of the draft plan for LS/ALP indicates only fair confidence that the proposed recovery plan will work in the LS/ALP area. Yet, the draft plan largely follows the Mediators recommendations.

Mediators report specifies the end of 2017 as the requirement to have range plans in place for all 12 caribou ranges to comply with federal law.

The map from the Alberta Caribou Action Plan indicates the location of the Caribou ranges. The local population in these areas is estimated from 55 to about 350 and totals about 2000; most local populations are listed (in The Federal Governments Recovery Strategy for the Woodland

Caribou Boreal Population in Canada (2012)) as declining. These estimates are “often based on professional judgement as little data is available” due the small numbers of animals in small groups over vast areas of boreal forest habitat.

The draft plan for LS/ALP ranges refers to a stabilizing phase (duration 5 years) where 100 animals is the goal so I don't think that there are many in this area! This, even with the implementation of a rearing pen to supplement natural recruitment.

The Draft Plan for LS/ALP ranges follows the Alberta Government appointed Mediator's report issued in May 2016, “Setting Alberta on a Path to Caribou Recovery”. This was a first step by the current provincial government toward action to comply with a Federal Species at Risk Act (SARA) requirement to have range plans for the endangered woodland Caribou Ranges in place by the end of 2017.

In addition; the mediators report recommends a vast array of Wildland Parks or similar designations to preserve caribou habitat in the other Alberta ranges.

The schedule the Alberta. Gov. is working to is very short (June 2016 to Oct 2017) considering the scope of work required. There are concerns by stakeholders that the timeline will not allow for proper involvement (indigenous peoples and well as the various stakeholders) in the process and so anticipate inadequate final plans.

The Province has done their development process for the Little Smoky and A La Peche (LS/ALP) ranges (2 populations) and I have heard speculation that they plan to use that plan (now in draft review) as a template or basis for all plans (12 in total).

A stakeholder group termed the Northwest Species at Risk group coordinated by Mackenzie County has been formed by counties, forestry and Energy companies and others in the north-west area, concerned that the current approach will be injurious in their area.

I favor an approach which would support growth and sustainability of the caribou in less disturbed ranges and greater caribou populations. Better success in less time may result in greater assurance of self-sustaining caribou populations. Habitat could be recovered in the worst disturbed areas and the caribou reintroduced as required. This may be a more cost-effective approach however may have obstacles due to both biophysical and political issues.

Impacts on hunting, trapping, fishing and general recreational activity, included in the draft Range plan for the LS/ALP range are severe due to restrictions on access to many existing roads, trails etc. There is a reference to continue or increase harvest (via indigenous and licensed hunters) of competing species (moose, elk, and deer as well as wolves). It is not clear how reduced access and an effective harvest by these methods can be achieved. Restored habitat and reduced disturbance can be achieved without this level of restricted access.

The Range planning process is continuing and comments are being accepted by the Alberta Government on the draft LS/ALP range plan as well as other range plans in early development. This is a chance to help shape the form of caribou management in Alberta.

**A comment and survey website has been established; See <https://talkaep.alberta.ca/caribou-range-planning> . I strongly recommend that anyone with an interest in accessing the caribou range areas in the future use this opportunity to make your views known.**

**There is a potential that recreational access will be limited to walking or horseback in vast areas of the province (like a wildland park) due to the extent of the Caribou ranges. See the map.**

I believe we all should support the recovery of Woodland Caribou in Alberta and that they be returned to self-sustaining status within the province. To accomplish this in all traditional ranges may not be practical. Just consider the impacts on the socio-economic fabric of the area and the whole province as well as the stated 60% chance of success after recovery to 65% undisturbed habitat for the already near extirpated local caribou populations in some of the Provinces ranges?

Suppose the Government of the day had established a vast park to protect the declining buffalo population; this at the expense of today's human activity on the plains area of the province. I wish they had established a reserve area where buffalo could be living today in self-sustaining fashion

