

Comments on the proposed Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou, Southern Mountain population (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) in Canada - 2014

The Bulkley Valley is home to one of the 35 local herds of woodland caribou which will be included in the recently announced Federal Endangered Species Recovery Plan. Since 1997 it has also been subject to a largely unsuccessful provincial recovery effort. It seems worthwhile to examine the provincial plan and perhaps learn from it.

Background:

In 1965 a viable herd of 271+ woodland mountain caribou roamed the Telkwa Mountains. In the late 60s and early 70s, in conjunction with increased public access due to mining activity and hunting, the herd numbers crashed. At that time hunting by helicopter was allowed in BC – not shooting from helicopters, but using them to access hunting sites and transport meat and trophies. However, following the ban on caribou hunting in 1973 and the collapse of mining interests in the region, which reduced the number of people accessing the area, the herd appeared to be making a slow recovery.

To assist this recovery, in 1981, recreation access restrictions were proposed which were approved by the Deputy Minister of Parks and reached Order in Council stage. However, due to strong lobbying by snowmobilers, the local MLA and the Forest Minister at the time vetoed the proposal. The inevitable happened. By 1993 the herd was down to 11 animals and by 1997 just 6 caribou (no calves) roamed the Telkwa Mountains. Extirpation seemed imminent for the Telkwa Caribou Herd. This second collapse occurred in conjunction with increased recreational use into the area as well as advances in all terrain vehicle and snowmobile technology, which allowed machines to roam in formerly inaccessible places.

Faced with the imminent collapse of the herd, the BC Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, under direction of the Bulkley Land and Resource Management Plan, developed a Telkwa Mountains Caribou Herd Recovery Plan. The recovery plan identified potential liabilities to the herd, such as: reduced productivity and recruitment to the herd because of disturbance caused by recreationists; reduced habitat effectiveness due to human caused displacement and harassment, and increased winter predation due to the creation of hard packed trails (by snowmobiles and back-country skiers) over which wolves could freely move and thereby negating the caribou's natural evolutionary advantage of being able to outrun their predators in deep snow.

With overwhelming community support, the recovery plan was launched. In November 1997 BC Environment began the daunting and problematic task of catching animals from the Chase-Sustut herd and relocating them into the Telkwas. 12 caribou were released in 1997 and 20 more followed in the fall of 1998. To address recreational impacts to the herd, relocation efforts were augmented by community backed voluntary access restrictions which, at least on paper, are still in place to this day.

Against all odds the recovery project appeared to be working. By 2005 the herd was estimated at 95 animals, including 23 calves. A fixed wing telemetry flight on July 19, 2006, counted 114 caribou, including that year's crop of calves. Thus, at that point, the herd was one third of the way towards establishing a genetically viable herd of 300 caribou. The fact that the recovery effort worked at all is due in large measure to the skill and dedication of BC Environment/WLAP staff, backed by a supporting community that, in the most part, had voluntarily given up most of their recreational activities in what is, perhaps, our most magnificent mountain area.

Sadly, with herd numbers at their peak, the plight of the Telkwa caribou herd seemed to fall off the radar and voluntary compliance with the access restrictions by the public appeared to be eroding. At a September 20th, 2006, meeting of the local access management group, the Voluntary Recreation Access Management Group (VRAMG), a multi-stakeholder group consisting of snowmobilers, backpackers, trappers, hunters, prospectors, naturalists and back-country horsemen, amongst others, the following concerns were expressed:

- Increasing use of motorized vehicles in the non-motorized area (documented by photographs).
- Increasing number of dogs being taken into the CORE area.
- The amount of winter motorized use in the non-motorized area (including use as per "side agreements" with individual snowmobile clubs) may be reducing the effectiveness of the prime

habitat with the result that caribou do not use it.

- Non-motorized user activities may be displacing caribou.
- Increasing forest development is creating more potential access points making it logistically harder to control users.

For these reasons, the VRAMG made a unanimous recommendation that MOE pursue legislated closures in an effort to reduce the continued decline in herd numbers. A follow-up meeting was proposed for the following month (i.e. November, 2006) at which the then Regional Manager Hugh Markides would be present to explain possible legislated options. For unknown reasons, that meeting never took place, in fact the VRAMG group was not called back for another meeting for two and a half years.

The fears expressed by the VRAMG appear to have been well founded as subsequently the decline of the herd continued. In addition, monitoring flights became intermittent due of lack of funds. In a recruitment survey conducted on November 10, 2008 only 47 animals (significantly only 2 calves) were sighted. This was reduced to only 22 animals sighted (including 4 yearlings) on the March 09, 2009, survey, the lowest March count on record since the recovery project began.

The table below shows the drastic declines between 2004 and 2010:

Spring (March) 2010 Telkwa Caribou Survey Results

Year	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004
Total # cows observed	15	35	48	51	42	35	34
# of yearlings	4	5	7	19	22	10	21
# of bulls	3	4	16	13	12	9	19
# not classified	0	0				2	0
Total number of caribou observed	22	44	71	83	76	56	74

In 2010 a further pressure was put on the herd when MOE endorsed a proposal put forward by Skeena Hunters Advisory Group to expand Limited Entry Hunting Opportunity (LEH) goat hunting into the Telkwa Caribou Core Recovery Area. This plan was strongly opposed by B C Nature, B V Naturalists Club, BV Backpackers, B V Outdoor Recreation Society and the VRAMG due to the fact that it would inevitably increase access into the area, would jeopardize the credibility for the recovery plan because of the optics and undermine the efforts and sacrifices made by people to date. This opposition delayed implementation of the LEH goat hunting by one year but in 2011 it did go ahead.

The recovery project was not without financial cost. Between 1997 and 2004 approximately half a million dollars was spent: \$235,000 from the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund and \$310,000 from Forest Resources BC.

It appears that as of spring 2013 a new provincial effort is underway to halt the decline of the Telkwa caribou herd:

- Firm funding has been secured from the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund up to 2017 for installing more collars, conduct monitoring flights and also to investigate the role of wolf predation (including collaring some wolves) and motorized recreational access in the recovery area.
- In two flights, in February and March, four caribou were captured by net and physical restraints, (not tranquilizers) and two males and two females were fitted with advanced GPS collars. These collars are programmed to collect 6 locations per day during winter and calving time and 4 locations the rest of the year. In the case of a mortality, the collar will send an instant email response so that the cause of death can be determined before the animal is scavenged.
- Some of the older VHF collars are still active on adult female caribou but two were in mortality mode. Unfortunately, there was no time to investigate them and recover the collars.
- 12 caribou were observed on the February, 2013 flight, but only 11 in the March flight, although an extensive search was conducted.
- To better assess voluntary compliance, multiple access sensors have been placed along hiking trails. These include buried magnetic detectors that will record vehicles passing over them, photo beams that will detect both people and

vehicles (also animals) and remote cameras.

On the negative side:

- During the February and March flights extensive snowmobile tracks were observed in the non-motorized area and the caribou seem to have moved away from tracked areas.
- Goat hunting in the Recovery Area is now an established fact.
- Skeena Hunters' Advisory Council have actually made a submission to increase the goat hunt. It is significant that the Skeena Hunters' Advisory Council is not on board with these renewed recovery efforts. They object to Habitat Conservation Trust Fund money (which comes from Hunting Licences) being used. They are also on record as saying that caribou were not native to this area, that the recovery effort was an ill advised and costly experiment that has failed and that we should give up on it and go back to business as usual. The first part of course is incorrect. In 1965, 271 animals were counted in the Telkwas and I personally have found old caribou antlers as far away as the Astlais Mountain in the Babines and Evelyn Mountain, north of Hudson Bay Mountain. The historical record is also backed by First Nations accounts.

Regarding converting the failed voluntary access guidelines with legislated closures (a measure unanimously endorsed by the multi-stakeholder VRAMG as far back as September 20th, 2006 because they had clearly been shown not to work), this is still awaiting the establishment of a WHA (Wildlife Habitat Area) designation for the Recovery Area. This supposed 18 month process, which began in 2009, is still ongoing 5 years later because the ministry and the timber license holder (PIR) cannot agree on land swaps.

What can we learn from this lamentable failure that might inform future federal efforts? Some obvious conclusions are:

- 1) For the plan to succeed stable long term funding is required. The provincial government were quite happy to accept the \$235,000 from the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund and \$310,000 from Forest Resources BC to initiate the plan but thereafter were not prepared to commit to the essential continuing funds needed to monitor the project. Each year the local wildlife manager had to submit applications for grants to conduct monitoring flights, some of which were successful and some not. Generally, no funds were available to investigate cause of death in animals whose collars were in mortality mode – a critical piece of information, though they were sometimes recovered by hikers on a voluntary basis long after the event.
- 2) Voluntary access restrictions have been shown not to work. While, for the most part, non-motorized recreationists did observe the voluntary access guidelines, the motorized community did not and the provincial government were not prepared to go against this very powerful lobby.
- 3) Access restrictions need to be backed by enforcement. Again, this is something our provincial government does not have the will to do.
- 4) When an animal is in serious decline and part of that decline is due to human caused displacement from its most productive habitat, it does not make sense to increase that pressure by introducing hunting to the area. The LEH goat hunt in the Caribou Recovery Area needs to be curtailed.
- 5) Penalties for violating access restrictions need to be strong to be effective. For example, high fines or the ability to confiscate machines.
- 6) We need to get away from a wildlife policy based on consumptive use and the maximization of income from hunting licenses. Note that the call to extend goat hunting into the Core Recovery Area came initially from a Guide/Outfitter who had just acquired the local hunting territory.
- 7) Management needs to be for the long term and not just "crisis management" - i.e. only reacting when the herd is near collapse.
- 8) A recovery strategy needs the full commitment of senior levels of government. In the case of the provincial plan we had very dedicated and committed local wildlife managers, but they did not get the support they needed from the higher echelons of government in Victoria.
- 9) Supporting species at risk should transcend local politics. Had the local MLA and Forest Minister at the time, not vetoed the proposed recreation access restrictions that reached Order in Council stage in 1981 we may have been in a very different situation today and the \$1/2 million spent on the relocation of animals from the Chase-Sustut herd might have been saved.
- 10) Our history here shows that the local population can become quite engaged and supportive of the recovery effort

and, therefore, the Stewardship components of the Plan should be implemented at the earliest opportunity. This would assist in both enforcement of restrictions imposed to protect the caribou and the deployment of resources through citizen science efforts to monitor and acquire data.

- 11) The need to protect the Caribou should not result in the effort focusing on killing wolves and alternate prey species such as moose. In most cases, caribou are an opportunistic and not the primary food source for wolves. Also, there would likely be increased predation on caribou by other predators whose primary prey has been decreased. In most cases when wildlife managers have interfered in historical predator – prey relationships they have triggered a cascade of unintended consequences. The Plan must concentrate on the real causes: habitat destruction and human activity.
- 12) Related to the above, industrial activity is increasing with more logging and pipelines, including Northern Gateway proposed for the area. The cumulative effects of these activities have already driven the herd close to extirpation and there needs to be limitations on any further development.
- 13) The importance of old growth forests must be recognized, and critical core habitat for all seasons should be protected, including connecting corridors. Access for caribou to adequate supplies of lichen food, on which they depend in winter, is essential. Logging of old growth and mature forest habitat is a key factor in the decline of our local caribou herd and there needs to be a moratorium on those logging areas until the recovery action plan is finalized.

In short, the march toward extirpation that we see in our local caribou herd is directly related to increased human activity in their prime habitat, resulting in disturbance and fragmentation of their home range. A properly funded science-based approach that includes the precautionary principle and adaptive management is necessary for the recovery of the herd and is essential to an effective recovery action plan.

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Endorsed by:

- B C Nature
- Bulkley Valley Naturalists
- Bulkley Valley Stewardship Coalition