Ten years after the Alberta Caribou Recovery Plan was drafted, Alberta’s caribou are declining faster than ever. What needs to be done differently?

Ten years ago, the Government of Alberta drafted the Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan 2004/05 - 2013/14 (here: Recovery Plan) that promised that real and bold steps would be taken to ensure the caribou’s future in the province. The Recovery Plan outlines steps to protect all of Alberta’s woodland herds, both boreal and mountain. The draft was formalized in July of 2005.

Today, the province is about to present its first boreal woodland caribou range plan – a site specific plan with measures to protect caribou – to the world. We are told that by the end of the year a plan for the Little Smoky and A La Peche Ranges, located in the foothills just north of Jasper National Park, will be available.

This is a big step and if the new strategy prioritizes the need to protect caribou habitat from disturbance and restore habitat to an undisturbed state as defined in the Federal Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou (Rangifer tarandus caribou), Boreal population, in Canada (here: 2012 Federal Recovery Strategy), a new and positive one.

The Little Smoky and A La Peche range plans would be the first to be completed in Alberta, despite

a) The government allocating nearly $350,000 in 2004 with the commitment that all range plans would be completed by the end of 2006.

b) The creation of an Alberta Caribou Committee in 2006 to guide the planning process

c) The creation of plans by a multi stakeholder group for both the West Central and Athabasca regions that were submitted to the Minister in 2008, but never acted on by the government.

And what a place they picked to start! Today, the Little Smoky is one of the most disturbed ranges in Canada due to industrial activity, giving both the caribou and the government little room to maneuver. However, thanks to voluntary actions taken by the forestry industry in 2008 as part of their work on a regional plan, some caribou habitat still exists.

Had they started the process in 2004 or even 2008, the task would have been easier, not only in the Little Smoky, but across the province. Today, the province’s woodland caribou populations are declining at an increased rate, their habitat is more fragmented than ever, and with an increasing number of actors having a stake on each hectare.

Meeting the province’s goal of having self-sustaining herds across the province has only grown in urgency and difficulty, but it is not impossible. There are stakeholders willing to take action, and solutions that can be found, but the government needs to show the way.

**Numbers show the story of caribou’s decline**

Despite the Alberta government goal to take urgent action to arrest caribou herd declines and bring them back to self-sustaining population levels in 2004, the caribou are doing worse, not better:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Woodland Caribou Herd – name and designation</th>
<th>Population Number(^4) and Status –2004(^1)</th>
<th>Latest Population Number and Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Banff – Mountain</td>
<td>5, Immediate Risk of Extirpation</td>
<td>Extirpated (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slave Lake &amp; Nipisi – Boreal</td>
<td>145, Immediate Risk of Extirpation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Smoky – Boreal</td>
<td>80, Immediate Risk of Extirpation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Jasper – Mountain</td>
<td>87 (2009)(^2), In Decline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribou Mountains</td>
<td>400-500, In Decline</td>
<td>315-394, Declining(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Earth</td>
<td>250 – 300, In Decline</td>
<td>172-206, Declining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold Lake</td>
<td>In Decline</td>
<td>150, Declining(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Side Athabasca River</td>
<td>150-250, In Decline</td>
<td>90-150, Declining(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinchaga</td>
<td>250-300, In Decline</td>
<td>250, Declining(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steen River/Yates</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>350, Stable(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bistcho</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>195, Declining(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richardson</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>150, Unknown(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narraway</td>
<td>100, Unknown</td>
<td>96, Decreasing(^3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Rock/ Prairie Creek</td>
<td>325, Stable</td>
<td>127, Decreasing(^3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Side Athabasca River</td>
<td>300-400, Stable</td>
<td>204-272, Declining(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A La Peche – Mountain</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>88, Decreasing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)From Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan 2004/05 - 2013/14 (2005)
\(^3\)From Federal Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*), Southern Mountain population, in Canada (2014), data based on extrapolations of 2009 data
\(^4\)Alberta Woodland Caribou Update (2010), caribou numbers from 2009

A 2013 paper by Hervieux et al. found similar results to those published in the 2010 Alberta Woodland Caribou Update and the 2012 Federal Recovery Strategy, and estimates that caribou herds in Alberta are declining by **about 50% every 8 years**. In 2012, the Federal Recovery Strategy for boreal woodland caribou clearly laid out the link between level of disturbance on landscape and population health.

**Actions putting Caribou at Greater Risk**

Despite these alarming population trends and the knowledge that arresting these declines will require protecting caribou habitat and reducing industrial disturbance, every year more caribou habitat is lost to industrial activities in Alberta.

According to Alberta Wilderness Association, **3,325,658 hectares** have been auctioned off to oil and gas leases and licenses alone within the ranges since July of 2004, around the time when the Recovery Plan was first finalized (see Figure 1). While some of these areas had already been allocated previous to 2004, it is increasing the density and complexity of the actors on the landscape. In the first year alone, and during the approval of the Recovery Plan, **353,792 hectares** were auctioned off. In these areas, roads, well pads and other intrusions will increasingly fragment the landscapes, bringing moose, deer and wolves to areas where caribou once found refuge.
Though already large, these numbers do not include areas from oil sands, forest harvesting or other forms of disturbance. In 2012, Global Forest Watch Canada estimated that 53.7% of caribou ranges in Alberta have been disturbed by industrial activity. Between 2012 and the release of the federal recovery strategy and October 23, 2014, 490,518 ha of land in boreal ranges have been leased out to oil and gas development (again, excluding oil sand development). In other words, if there is to be any habitat to be left, **urgent action is needed.**

**Figure 1:**

[Map of Alberta showing oil and gas leases and caribou ranges]
What has gone wrong?

It’s essential that urgent actions are also the right actions. And for that we can look back at the 2004 Recovery Plan and what was implemented to see why Alberta caribou are still in trouble.

Of significant concern is that while there has been a large investment in monitoring caribou and predator management, there have been few concrete actions taken to protect, limit further damage, or restore caribou habitat in the ten years following the release of the Recovery Plan, compared to the actions that have damaged habitat.

The Alberta government has focused on killing caribou predators, mainly wolves, as their primary approach to keeping the caribou alive in the Little Smoky, and there are pressure to expand this to some of the other more damaged ranges. This however is an unsustainable practice. In his book, Bob Hayes, a biologist who led the Yukon’s wolf control program in the 80s and 90s writes that he now believes that wolf eradication programs merely buy time without addressing the real problem and that killing wolves is “biologically wrong.”

The work of the teams working on range plans for 2006-2008 was ignored.

There are three red flags in the Recovery Plan which may have led to this outcome:

1. When government of Alberta had adopted the recovery plan, it rejected a section recommending that moratoriums be imposed on further mineral and timber allocations in the three ranges where caribou are deemed in immediate risk of extirpation. As a result, while some forestry companies later volunteered to limit their harvesting activities to the periphery of some of the more damaged ranges until more concrete plans were developed, oil and gas activities continued apace. As can been seen in Figure 1, in 2013, when a moratorium on releasing new oil and gas licenses in the Little Smoky range was finally put in place, over 95% of caribou habitat there had already disturbed by legacy oil and gas, active oil and gas projects, and some forestry cut blocks. With continued road expansion and other disturbances by existing tenure holders (see the pictures below), the moratorium feels rather empty in terms of changing the landscape for caribou.

2. While the recovery plan notes that action is needed to reduce industrial and human interventions in the ranges, the document does not clearly identify that some areas may need to be more fully protected from any new anthropogenic footprint. Unlike in recovery plans developed in Ontario and Quebec, the possibility of creating protected areas or even long-term deferrals to industrial activities in caribou habitat are not clearly listed as an option.

3. The recovery plan does not recommend specific limits on industrial activity in the ranges. As a result, as demonstrated in a 2012 Federal Recovery Strategy, Alberta caribou face some of the most fragmented and disturbed ranges in the country and there is no legal tool to stop further disturbances or ensure impacts are mitigated.
Figure 3: Oil and gas disturbance in the heart of the Little Smoky Range where forest companies have voluntarily stopped activities until the range plan is completed. While there is a moratorium on new oil and gas permits being granted in the Little Smoky, this was after more than 90% of permits had been allocated (see Figure 1), and it does not stop current permit holders from opening up new roads or creating new disturbances in the range.

Can 2014 launch a new decade for caribou?

Despite the seriousness of the situation, it is not too late to take action.

This first caribou range plan presents an opportunity for the Alberta government, and especially new Premier Jim Prentice, to demonstrate that this time Alberta is serious about conserving caribou habitat and giving the species an opportunity to thrive. This means enacting plans that will make a difference.

The new Little Smoky and A La Peche range plans need to protect what is left of caribou habitat from further degradation, restore those areas that are most important for caribou, and help the companies and communities that were planning on extracting the resources in that area to find new economic opportunities. Many have indicated a willingness to be part of the solution.
The range plans need to show that Alberta is using the scientific information included in the Federal Recovery Strategy to update the 2004 ideas of what should be done for caribou.

We’ll be looking to the Alberta government to show leadership not only in this small and highly damaged range, but for all the herds in Alberta. Being a global leader in environmental performance will require that serious action is taken. The state of caribou and their habitat requires that there be no more delays.

Figure 4: In the heart of the Little Smoky caribou range, a road is being widened and straightened to improve access for oil and gas activities, and also for wolves. Another example of continued disturbance in this range despite the moratorium and government plans to complete a range plan for this herd.

Sources


