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STOP CRYING WOLF OVER CARIBOU

The province should stop poisoning and shooting wolves, and instead, train its metaphorical guns on the real culprit in the decline of caribou populations — itself.

Last spring, Justina Ray, a biologist working with Environment Canada's Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, said mountain caribou numbers have fallen by 60 per cent in 10 years, due mostly to "industrial disturbance" and "everything from snowmobiles to helicopter skiing."

And more than 1,000 wolves have either been shot from helicopters or poisoned with strychnine-laced bait in an effort to save dwindling herds of woodland caribou in west- central Alberta. However, if the government hadn't helped destroy the caribou's habitat, wolves would not be an overwhelming problem for the herd.

"This is a true case of scapegoating wolves for something that we're all responsible for. There's no effort to address the ultimate causes of caribou endangerment — industrial development over numerous years," eminent wolf specialist Paul Paquet told the Rocky Mountain Outlook.

In a brief for the Raincoast Conservation Foundation, Paquet wrote: "the role of wolves in the ongoing decline of mountain and boreal caribou is a symptom of eroded and lost caribou habitat, not an underlying cause ... governments have habitually favoured the destruction of wolves over any consequential protection, enhancement, or restoration of caribou habitat ... Killing wolves will not aid caribou recovery nor prevent their continued decline. Other predators, roaded and fragmented habitat, food limitations, and human intrusion into key habitat, will perpetuate caribou decline."

Dave Hervieux, provincial caribou management co- ordinator with Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, said predator control has helped save the Little Smoky caribou from extinction.

However, other studies have found that cougars and grizzly bears still prey on the caribou.

In the last 21/2 years, 136 new wells were drilled in the Little Smoky herd's range. ESRD spokesperson Jamieson Hanlon claims the province is working "to minimize new disturbances ... by not selling further mineral rights and requiring new restrictions on seismic activity."

However, within days of the federal scientists releasing their report last spring, Alberta Energy auctioned off 1,700 hectares north of Grande Cache — prime mountain caribou habitat.

At the time, Alberta Energy spokesman Mike Feenstra said temporary holds had been put on lease sales in the habitats of two woodland caribou herds.

The wolf cull is counter- productive anyway. A study reported in the journal Functional Ecology found that wolves subjected to heavy hunting compensate for it by having more puppies.

The province should stop crying wolf — and stop killing them, too.

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