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PRESS RELEASE

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BC'S MOUNTAIN CARIBOU RECOVERY PLAN IS FAILING DISASTROUSLY

Slaughtering wolves from helicopters, transplanting healthy animals to areas that little viable habitat left, where they are quickly killed by predators: some of our smallest and most endangered herds of Mountain Caribou are receiving intensive efforts to boost their numbers. Brutal or desperate, hotly protested or widely lauded, these quick fixes create an appearance of vigorous action to save the caribou; but they are disguising the widespread failure of BC's Recovery Plan — and the equal failure of the BC Government to correct the fatal sellouts that have compromised the Plan.

Even our larger subpopulations that started out with a much greater chance of surviving have been declining rapidly. These areas still have unprotected intact habitat that could be protected, and they have serious problems with snowmobiles and heli-skiing in critical winter feeding grounds — so there are options for extending and improving the Recovery Plan other than blasting away at wolves from the air; but they are largely being ignored.

When the Plan was announced in 2008, BC had an estimated 1,885 Mountain Caribou. (1) The stated goal was to increase caribou numbers to 2,500 within 20 years; but today, with more than one-third of the time passed, the government says there are only about 1,500 caribou left. (2)

One recent, shocking indicator of the failure of the Recovery Plan is the decline of the Central Selkirk herd by 40% in 2012 and 2014. This subpopulation had been stable for ten years. The government census report says that scientists do not know the cause of the losses, "However displacement of caribou from preferred habitat by recreational activities remains a major concern." (3)

Another crash is happening in the Wells Gray-North Thompson unit. In this unit the Groundhog caribou population dropped by 74% in a three-year period between 2008 and 2011, from 23 animals down to 6 (4); and over all the Wells Gray-North

Thompson unit, which includes the Groundhog, caribou have apparently declined by at least 40% from 2007 to the present.

According to the habitat scientists, the Wells Gray Thompson Planning Unit had 274 caribou in 2007 (5), but the 2011 census for this unit could only find 172 animals. And that's where the public information stops. There is abundant evidence that some of these losses may be due to heavy snowmobile use in the North Thomson area.

The Recovery Plan's farcical Snowmobile Management Agreements (SMA's) allow snowmobile clubs to develop plans to voluntarily stay out of caribou habitat and monitor themselves. This program has miserably failed. In the North Thompson area snowmobile trespasses into closure zones have been recorded in the Foam Creek Snowmobile Mtn. Caribou Ungulate Winter Range, and the North Blue River Valley closure zone. Government scientists have extensive documentation of snowmobile trespasses in the South Purcells (6) and other planning units, yet the political level of government is turning a blind eye.

In the North Thompson area, the government is even permitting the snowmobile clubs to maintain groomed snowmobile trails that give wolves easy access to critical caribou habitat in an SMA area. (7) Yet the public has been locked out of these internal decisions that continue to erode the taxpayer-funded Recovery Plan.

Faced with these facts, the government hides behind how many gross hectares land it has protected in habitat reserves for the caribou (2.2 million), and how many hectares are "off-limits" to snowmobiles (one million). These figures are very misleading, since most of the 2.2 million hectares is old protection predating the Recovery Plan, and there is very little new protection for the habitat type that's presently being destroyed and thereby causing the caribou to decline: old-growth low- and mid-elevation forest on gentle slopes.

There are three park proposals in the Mountain Caribou range that would provide substantial habitat support: the Selkirk Mountain Caribou Park Proposal, the proposed Quesnel Lake Wilderness, and the Walker Wilderness proposal near Prince George. But under the current Recovery Plan, the government has never protected even one park in the region of any substantial size.

Regarding the snowmobile closures, a government map shows that extensive areas recommended by government scientists for closure were left open (8). Field assessments by Valhalla Wilderness Watch chairperson, Craig Pettitt, have determined that in some cases, the caribou's winter habitat was split up between the caribou and the snowmobiles, with the snowmobiles getting the best caribou habitat, and the caribou expected to use steep areas where the snowmobiles can't go.

The Recovery Plan took some laudable steps forward, but almost every aspect of it has been hollowed out by numerous concessions to vested interests. Mountain Caribou are

tragically disappearing, and the government is shamelessly using wolves as a scapegoat for what it hasn't done to protect the caribou.

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- (1) Ministry of Environment, Mountain Caribou Implementation Plan, February, 2009.
- (2) Vancouver Sun, January 5, 2015, "Maternity penning offers hope for mountain caribou."
- (3) Ministry of Environment, "2014 Mountain Caribou Census: Central Selkirk Mountains": "Displacement of caribou from preferred habitat by recreational disturbance has long been a concern in many areas. In particular, the Great Northern Mountain / Mohawk Creek area, the majority of Silvercup Ridge, and the Silent Pass area. These areas contain suitable but unused late winter habitat that is heavily used by snowmobilers and/or snowcat operators and / or heli ski operators.
- (4) Surgenor, J., 2011. Mountain Caribou Census for Wells Gray South Subpopulation.
- (5) Local Habitat Team, 2007 Mountain Caribou Population Recovery Initiative Wells Gray
Thompson Local Habitat Team Report to Directors, December 17, 2007.
- (6) Ministry of Environment, "Winter Recreational Activities in Mountain Caribou Habitat: 2007-2010 Monitoring and Compliance".
- (7) Photo and further details available. From the Foam Creek parking lot north of Avola in the North Thompson River valley, over 60 km of twelve foot wide roadway is groomed after every major snowfall, right through critical caribou habitat and up onto subalpine terrain that have in the past been prime occupied caribou habitat.
- (8) Harding, Lee, "Southern Mountain Caribou Critical Habitat: A reviews of maps and data to support recovery plans", March 18, 2014.