

Protecting Endangered Mountain Caribou

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Wildsight, Conservation Northwest and other ENGOs participated in the BC government's 2006 Mountain Caribou Implementation Plan (MCRIP) to ensure that habitat protections and population recovery measures were properly mandated and implemented. The MCRIP has protected more than five million acres of mountain caribou habitat from logging and road building and another three million or so from motorized winter recreation – by any measure significant habitat protections in the biologically rich Inland Temperate Rainforest.

The BC Mountain Caribou Recovery Science Team included provisions for predator management (wolves and cougars) in their 2006 recommendations, which formed the basis for the (MCRIP). The BC government announced it will proceed with wolf control in southeast BC to protect the South Selkirks mountain caribou herd which ranges between BC, WA and ID and has dwindled to 18 animals, down from 46 in 2009. The South Selkirks herd is the southernmost of 18 mountain caribou herds that together comprise fewer than 1700 endangered animals across their entire range.

This decision comes after years of field research and policy debate over the controversial and emotionally charged issue. Most herds are in decline as a result of widespread changes in their old growth forest habitat from logging, road building and myriad other development. The science is clear that the habitat fragmentation and conversion of old forests to new have made mountain caribou more vulnerable to predation. In fall of 2009 the Science Team confirmed the need for short-term wolf controls for herds where caribou numbers are very low (fewer than 50 animals) and where wolf predation is expected to hasten their demise before the benefits of other recovery actions (e.g. habitat protections and restoration) are realized.

Our groups have communicated a clear and consistent position to the BC government on predator controls for the benefit of mountain caribou persistence: that we could only support predator removals if the habitat of the herd in question was “effectively protected” from further development impacts and restored where possible; if there was clear evidence linking wolves to caribou deaths; and, if the controls proposed were carefully targeted to remove only the wolf packs responsible.

There is certainly more work to be done to protect caribou habitat, particularly in the valley bottom corridors where caribou are most vulnerable to predation. But that doesn't preclude the current need to protect the South Selkirks caribou herd now.

We have consistently and forcefully opposed a broad-brush strategy of predator controls through much liberalized wolf hunting and trapping rules as inhumane, ecologically destructive and ineffective for

protecting caribou. We believe the criteria we set forth for lending support to wolf control actions in the South Selkirks have been met. Our groups have not endorsed the April 2014 Provincial Grey Wolf Management Plan and believe predator control should only be used as a last resort in protecting species at risk.

We are very concerned and generally do not support predator control as a management tool except in rare and extreme cases involving endangered species. Predators are often scapegoated and pay the price for human caused habitat loss and when government policies result in reduction of ungulate species. We share the public sentiment against wolf kills. But we recognize that in some rare cases it may be necessary to keep a globally unique animal like mountain caribou on the landscape and, in so doing maintain its protected habitats. It's a short term, desperate strategy to grow herds and heal degraded habitat to the point where predation is less of an issue.

Clearly, there will be intense pressure to reopen those habitats to logging, road building and motorized recreation if the caribou disappear – habitat that is critical to thousands of other plants and animals.

The short-term strategies to remove wolves may not ultimately lead to mountain caribou recovery. We recognize and accept that risk. But the wolves will come back, the caribou will not.