

Woodland Caribou, a hunter's view

There has been increasing emphasis on caribou conservation and management in Ontario since the early 1990s, including a status assessment report (Harris, 1999). A provincial Caribou Recovery Team was established, and produced a provincial Caribou Recovery Strategy (Ontario Woodland Caribou Recovery Team, 2008). Woodland caribou was designated as **threatened** in 2002 by the **Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada** with populations found farther north than the historic habitat, and MNRF decided to reintroduce woodland caribou in Northern Ontario.

To understand why caribou is moving North we have to realize that woodland caribou habitat is moving North as well, due to numerous factors such as global climate change, increased forest fires, logging, increased human activities, road building, mining. The other factors are disease (brain worm mainly) parasites and predators.

In 2014 MNRF published **State of the Woodland Caribou Resource Report** with the stated goal "to maintain self-sustaining, genetically-connected local populations of woodland caribou (forest-dwelling boreal population) where they currently exist, improve security and connections among isolated mainland local populations, and facilitate the return of caribou to strategic areas near their current extent of occurrence". The plan outlines MNRF' research line and the strategies they employ to achieve their goal. What is interesting is that the whole plan is based on a number of hypotheses developed by MNRF.

1. The Predator Road Use Hypothesis
2. The Prey Escape Hypothesis
3. Apparent Competition,
4. Sensory Disturbance, and Energetic Balance
5. Cumulative Effects Hypotheses where all previous hypothesis are considered.

To make sure I understand the term I Googled it and this is what I found out: "**Hypothesis**: A proposed explanation for a phenomenon made as a starting point for further investigation. ... **Theory**: A well-substantiated explanation acquired through the scientific method **and** repeatedly tested **and** confirmed through observation **and** experimentation."

In other words, MNRF spent millions of tax payers money and implemented measures that affect Northern Ontario businesses, moose population, and hunters to name a few, on the basis of assumptions regarding caribou survival, habitat, predators, moose population etc. To me this looks like they are taking a big gamble with the natural ecological balance of the area on taxpayer's money.

I say this because some of the measures they put in place are:

"Ontario will assess the relationship between Moose and caribou numbers in order to develop recommended objectives for maximum Moose numbers in Wildlife Management Units within continuous caribou distribution. This process will be implemented through the Moose management program by the establishment of Moose population objectives and harvest management strategies."

This is scary for all of us because MNRFC suggests "maintaining or restoring caribou populations may mean managing to ≤ 10 moose per 100 km²" Considering that normal moose population densities are around 30 moose per 100 km² the measures that MNRFC is taking will reduce considerably the moose population.

Furthermore, " this will include the management of land and resource uses to maintain naturally-occurring low densities of prey (e.g. Moose, White-tailed Deer) and predators." and " Ontario will assess the feasibility and effectiveness of directly and indirectly influencing predator densities in very specific situations, and develop criteria and guidelines for managing the prey-predator balance as required." Which means that MNRFC will control the prey population (wolf and bear) by reducing moose and white-tailed deer. Double whammy for moose. Instead of controlling predators population through hunting MNRFC intention is to reduce moose population in order to reduce predators. This to me is revolting because MNRFC reduced moose tag allocations for years in order to help moose recover and now when considerable result are observed in increased moose numbers they want to upset this balance to achieve a questionable recovery of caribou. Another thing MNRFC didn't consider is that once there are fewer moose to prey, wolves will turn and prey on caribou, they will not starve to death just because they read about MNRFC caribou conservation plan.

Christopher J. A. Wilkinson opinion in his study **An Analysis of Government Actions for the Protection and Recovery of Forest-dwelling Woodland Caribou in Ontario (2010)** concludes that: "MNR (2009:1) touts this conservation plan as "science-based." The central pervading assumptions of the conservation plan are that Rangifer, 30 (1), 2010 75 development can be tweaked to mitigate disturbances and, at some point in the future, woodland caribou will re-occupy habitat that has been impacted by development. In effect, this approach is the very status quo that has caused the northward range recession of woodland caribou."

Boutin et al., (2006) note that "there is no evidence of a woodland caribou herd successfully re-colonizing an area after industrial activity has occurred" and that "practices that minimize the footprint caused by industrial activity are unlikely to protect woodland caribou populations."

The results of 1993 study **Survival of woodland caribou in commercial forests of northern Ontario** indicate that "from available data, forest harvesting appears to be the only factor present in every case of local caribou band decline or loss"

The 2014 study **Managing wolves (*Canis lupus*) to recover threatened woodland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) in Alberta** concludes that "the short-term efficacy of predator reduction, when combined with long-term habitat conservation, restoration, and management, may be the only path forward for recovering many woodland caribou populations."

The 2017 **Report on the Progress of Recovery Strategy Implementation for the Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*), Boreal population in Canada for the Period 2012 to 2017** shows that all the other provinces will research and/or take measures to reduce the impact of the wolves (main caribou predator) on caribou population except Ontario.

What I'm trying to show everyone here is that MNR's approach in Ontario regarding re-establishing woodland caribou is first of all not based on science but on assumptions. These assumptions lead to decisions that contradict the natural ecological balance and are not followed by any other province in the country. Recovering caribou by reducing moose population is not only gross interference in the ecological balance and further upsetting moose population numbers but also mismanagement of public funds. As numerous studies show the main reason for caribou moving north is the lack of human activity combined with global climate change. As long as MNR will not take measures to reduce or even stop logging in continuous caribou ranges, caribou will not self sustain in these areas.