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An integrated approach to communicating and implementing community-based caribou health monitoring

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Management of caribou involves diverse stakeholders with unique objectives. While these multiple stakeholders have a shared interest in caribou and a common desire for their long-term sustainability, there have been important and often severe conflicts between caribou using communities and scientists and government management agencies. These conflicts often reflect differing world views and insufficient meaningful communication between these groups. Scientists and government agencies are now realizing the important role that communities can play in identifying issues, contributing Traditional Ecological Knowledge and as collectors of scientific data, but continue to struggle to find effective ways of interacting with communities effectively. The five communities within the Sahtu region of the Northwest Territories (NWT) (Deline, Tulita, Norman Wells, Colville Lake, and Fort Good Hope) utilize barren-ground and woodland caribou and have a strong interest in maintaining sustainable caribou populations. During a NWT Biophysical Study workshop held in 2002, elders and community observers requested more training for youth in science and for more involvement of hunters and community members in research. In response to these apparent needs, in 2003 we initiated a long-term, integrated approach to foster community-based caribou monitoring and education. Annual trips via winter road have been made to all schools in the Sahtu from 2003 to 2008 to provide hands-on learning for 300 to 500 children each year about diverse wildlife health topics. At the same time, interviews were conducted with 31 hunters and elders to document their traditional knowledge of caribou health. Local caribou hunters were employed as monitors to collect tissue samples and measurements for body condition and disease monitoring from 69 caribou and we meet with them annually. Each year, a graduate student from a southern university in the veterinary or biological sciences has participated in the program, obtaining invaluable experiences working with northern communities and wildlife health issues. The program has evolved over the last six years in response to community input, results of empirical research, and traditional knowledge that are evaluated in an integrated manner.