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*Abstract*

## Woodland caribou management in Alberta: historical perspectives and future opportunities

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Woodland caribou conservation has been the topic of much debate for the past few decades. By the late 1970s there was growing concern about declining woodland caribou populations and the interaction between industrial activities and woodland caribou. Initial concerns led to the closure of the licensed hunting season in 1981. Early confrontation between government and industry in the late 1980s transformed into a series of evolving collaborative ventures. Improving our understanding of the basic ecology of woodland caribou in Alberta was at the center of early research efforts; more recent studies have examined the effects of industrial activities on caribou and effectiveness of various mitigation factors. Despite having amassed an impressive body of information from a research and monitoring perspective, progress on implementing effective management actions has been less dramatic. Industry has endured significant costs implementing a variety of perceived conservation initiatives, but caribou populations continued to decline through the last few decades. While some parties feel more research is needed, there is growing consensus that changes to habitat as induced by human activities are important factors influencing current caribou declines. Predation is a proximate cause of most caribou mortality. Climate change mediated alterations to habitat and predator-prey interactions remain a key source of uncertainty relative to future caribou population trends. Management actions will need to deal with long term habitat changes associated with human land use and short term implications of increased predation.

In 2005, the provincial minister responsible for caribou conservation responded to the draft 2004 recovery plan and created the Alberta Caribou Committee (ACC). The goal of the ACC is to maintain and recover woodland caribou in Alberta's forest ecosystems while providing opportunities for resource development, following guidance provided by the Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Plan, as qualified by the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. The current and future challenge involves conserving and recovering caribou populations and habitat through use of knowledge-based processes, applied through existing or other mechanisms, as deemed appropriate. As outlined in the ACC terms of reference, this complex challenge is to be achieved in an atmosphere of co-operation and trust amongst participants. The mandate of the ACC is to bring together the expertise and experience of its members under a consensus-based partnership for the purpose of: 1) providing thoughtful advice to government and, 2) implementing or supporting approved caribou population and habitat conservation and recovery programs. The ACC provides advice to government regarding policy and program matters, but does not create government policy or programs. Compared to previous multi-stakeholder committees dealing with caribou in Alberta, the ACC has an expanded membership that includes representatives from aboriginal organizations, industry (forestry and energy sector), environmental non-government organizations, the scientific community, and the government of Alberta. In addition to the expanded 'breadth' in committee membership and mandate scope, is an increased 'height' of influence in that the governance board provides advice to the Alberta government through the Deputy Minister of Sustainable Resource Development (the provincial department responsible for land and wildlife management). This new collaboration brings new optimism for translating knowledge to effective cumulative effects management alternatives. For more information on the Alberta Caribou Committee see: <http://www.albertacariboucommittee.ca/>

While the federal government is not represented on the ACC, there are a number of opportunities exist for engagement of federal government agencies and personnel in the evolving caribou conservation arena. As woodland caribou are listed as a threatened species, there is an obvious role for Environment Canada to develop a national recovery strategy and administer the Species At Risk Act (including facilitating a definition of critical habitat). Additional opportunities for federal involvement include the development of strategies specific to lands under federal jurisdiction and, where appropriate, participation on landscape teams to develop management strategies for herds whose range crosses provincial and/or federal boundaries.

**Key words:** boreal forest, conservation, industrial development, species at risk.