

Opinion: Alberta's caribou conservation plan is a visionary first step



MARK HEBBLEWHITE

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A member of the Little Smoky caribou herd, photographed in Jasper National Park. *ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION*

In June of 2016, Premier Rachel Notley's government released a [bold conservation plan](http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/wildlife-management/caribou-management/caribou-action-range-planning/documents/OnThePathtoCaribouRecovery-May-2016.pdf) (<http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/wildlife-management/caribou-management/caribou-action-range-planning/documents/OnThePathtoCaribouRecovery-May-2016.pdf>) for one of Alberta's most challenging environmental problems - [woodland caribou](http://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=41892E6E8E071-F5BD-84CC-6CF522ACE9658E41) (<http://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=41892E6E8E071-F5BD-84CC-6CF522ACE9658E41>).

Woodland caribou are a flagship species for the boreal forest, protected under the federal and provincial [Species-at-Risk Act](https://www.ec.gc.ca/alef-ewe/default.asp?lang=en&n=ED2FFC37-1) (<https://www.ec.gc.ca/alef-ewe/default.asp?lang=en&n=ED2FFC37-1>). Nearly all of Alberta's remaining 15 caribou populations are declining after decades of failed policy by previous governments, and without dramatic action, we are facing extirpation of many of Alberta's caribou populations.

Quickly after the last election, Notley's government appointed a special provincial mediator who worked with stakeholders in the Little Smoky and À La Pêche caribou ranges near Grande Cache. The mediator's report informed Notley's caribou plan in June 2016. The plan details recovery actions for these ranges, and provided a provincial strategy that complied with the Species-At-Risk Act (SARA), while minimizing industry concerns.

Central to this plan is the creation 18,000 square kilometres of new protected areas in the boreal forest, habitat for some of the healthiest caribou populations in northwestern Alberta. This land would be a massive addition to the province's protected areas (approximately 4.4 per cent), and help achieve Notley's campaign promises of protecting 17 per cent of Alberta's land as recommended by the [International Union for Conservation in Nature](https://www.iucn.org/content/new-unesco-report-unveils-world-track-meet-2020-target-protected-areas-land-and-sea) (<https://www.iucn.org/content/new-unesco-report-unveils-world-track-meet-2020-target-protected-areas-land-and-sea>).

Alberta also commits millions of dollars to habitat restoration in the

heavily developed Little Smoky and À La Pêche caribou ranges. This ecological restoration will repair damage to caribou habitat from oil, gas and forestry activities. Forestry in these ranges will be limited and focused in already disturbed areas. Enhanced restrictions on oil and gas development also in the plan, although more details are needed.

Wolf management has been ongoing in these two caribou ranges for 10 years and will continue under the Alberta plan, drawing much criticism from some environmental groups.

Published scientific studies confirm that wolf management has bought time for these critically endangered caribou, but habitat protection and restoration activities are urgently needed. These caribou populations will be lost forever before habitat can recover without wolf management. Focusing on wolf control misses the huge conservation gains in new protected areas and the bold restoration activities planned on these two ranges.

The plan also proposes a large-scale captive-breeding facility (a caribou “pen”) that would reduce the need for wolf control, and provide a guaranteed source of caribou into the future. This is a controversial idea – but one with some merit as the West Moberly Lake First Nation’s successful maternity penning (<http://www.westmo.org/news/klinse-za-caribou-maternal-release>) shows us from British Columbia.

Some critics decry wolf control and caribou fencing as a loss of wilderness; they object to the perceived ethics of these hands-on wildlife management activities. Yet these two caribou ranges are nowhere near wilderness. You can hit a baseball almost anywhere in the Little Smoky range and it will land in the human development footprint. That there are still caribou speaks to their resilience and provides hope.

The Alberta caribou plan also is a key step forward in compliance with the 2012 federal caribou recovery plan (https://www.registrelep-sararegistry.gc.ca/virtual_sara/files/plans/rs_caribou_boreal_caribou_0912_e1.pdf) that Alberta is legally obliged to follow. The federal recovery plan was guided by over 25 academic, government and industry scientists from across Canada and the U.S.

In 2017, the federal government will audit the first five years of caribou recovery, and the Alberta plan lays out the best scientifically-supported vision scientists have ever seen. Failure to comply with SARA has the potential to dramatically affect future economic activities across all caribou range, so Alberta's plan also deserves praise from industry seeking regulatory certainty.

Alberta's caribou conservation plan deserves to be praised and supported. Continued commitment and more steps will be needed.

Predictable industry pushback and wishful thinking by wilderness advocates will not help recover caribou. Its time to get serious and take concrete steps, supported by the best available science. This caribou plan does just that.

Mark Hebblewhite is an associate professor with the University of Montana's wildlife biology program in Missoula Mont. He served for five years on a science panel to review Canada's boreal caribou recovery strategy.

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Ryan Kendall Brook · Professor at University of Saskatchewan

The one key thing that this proposal lacks is ethics. This opinion fails to note that this approach has also been significantly criticized by Canadian scientists as well (including myself), given the serious ethical failures of this proposed work that claims to be based on good science but in truth is based on what I would argue is now actually discredited science given the unacceptable methods used. That a university-based researcher is continuing to promote ongoing killing of wolves that has been using highly unethical methods (deadly strychnine poison that causes slow painful death and unne... [See More](#)

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Protect Edmonton Parks

Opposition to the ongoing wolf cull is understandable, given the AB Govt's longstanding failure to protect habitat.

Albertans' skepticism is richly deserved. For years, AB Environment was content to kill wolves without addressing the real issue: uncontrolled, unsustainable industrial development in caribou habitat.

Killing wolves because of human greed, selfishness, and lack of foresight is morally repugnant. We need human management, not wolf management.

Reducing the wolf population increases the number of deer, which may reduce the caribou food supply. Deer also carry diseases that can infect caribou.

"Wolf management" is an offensive euphemism. Call it what it is. Shooting and poisoning wolves —with no end of collateral damage.

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Brad Bergstrom · Works at Professor of Biology, Valdosta State Univ.

"Wolf management" is an inexcusable euphemism for killing. So is the deceptive phrase "hands-on wildlife management." You apparently can't bring yourself to use the word "kill." And, it's not just "some environmental groups" who oppose the killing; plenty of independent ecologists and wildlife biologists do, as well. It's not "perceived ethics" they object to; rather it is the complete lack of acknowledgment of the ethical bankruptcy of a policy that slaughters--including by inhumane methods--a native apex predator, which is also a highly intelligent and social creature.

(And here's some unsolicited editorial advice for your next publication: it's about time you learned not to split your infinitives or hyphenate after an "-ly" adverb.)

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