

Wolf Awareness



SAVING CARIBOU HABITAT MEANS SAVING WOLVES

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In the last decade, there has been a major trend in western North America to kill predators to save the woodland caribou. In Alberta, since 2005, the Government of Alberta, in cooperation with some researchers from the University of Alberta, have killed nearly 1,000 wolves to "recover" the Little Smoky boreal caribou population. Yet, the population has not increased in numbers. This may be due to the fact that wolves do not significantly impact on caribou numbers (see Kuzyk *et al.* 2006) and prefer upland habitats that are actually avoided by caribou (Proulx 2013). Then, killing wolves does not help caribou. Protecting and restoring habitat can, however, save the caribou and eliminate the need to use wolves as scapegoats. But, in order to conserve habitat, one must know what caribou need during crucial periods of the year.

In 2011 and 2012, I had the opportunity to study the late-winter habitat of the Little Smoky caribou population. This study was conducted during extreme colds with average snow levels, and during warm periods with above average snow depths. Independently of the environmental conditions, however, boreal caribou selected muskegs of mixed black spruce and tamarack, and adjacent lodgepole pine stands (Proulx 2015). This finding was contrary to the Habitat Suitability Model developed by Government of Alberta biologists who had identified pure black spruce as ideal habitat for caribou. In fact, caribou avoided these habitats. My study showed that 20% of the Little Smoky landscape met the habitat requirements of caribou. Knowing that caribou calve in regions that are within or similar to winter habitats, it became obvious that managing muskegs and adjacent pine stands would provide caribou with adequate protection cover and food. On the basis of these findings, I was able to demonstrate that the habitat requirements of the caribou were poorly understood in the Little Smoky region of Alberta, and that it was possible to develop an effective habitat management plan to ensure the sustainability of populations.

The Little Smoky caribou population can recover if its critical habitats, as determined in late-winters 2011 and 2012, become High Priority (Figure 1), i.e., preferred muskegs and adjacent lodgepole pine stands would be protected from logging, and oil & gas activities would be limited to already existing seismic lines, when caribou are not found in the vicinity of their operations. These habitats would be protected by buffer habitats where industrial activities would be reduced in importance and better controlled. These priority habitats would be interconnected by corridors that would allow animals to travel across landscapes. With such a management plan, caribou populations would become sustainable and there would be no need to kill wolves. However, it would be essential that the government and industry representatives sit at the same table with us to produce a working schedule for the conservation of habitats and the maintenance of their exploitation activities.

Biologists state landscape changes due to human activities are the real cause for caribou decline, destroying specialized habitat caribou NEED to survive.



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HOWLINGS

Through education, dispelling the myths.



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Unfortunately, few complete field studies were conducted in Alberta to customize habitat conservation plans for the many caribou populations of the province. So, **knowing that saving caribou means saving wolves, there is a pressing need for wolf advocate organizations and ecological groups to meet together and discuss how adequate resources can be assembled to pursue the study of caribou habitats and the development of effective conservation programs.** If we cannot ensure the future of caribou habitats, and therefore the sustainability of populations, wolf culling programs will continue. More wolves will be killed, biodiversity will be further impoverished, and caribou will eventually disappear.

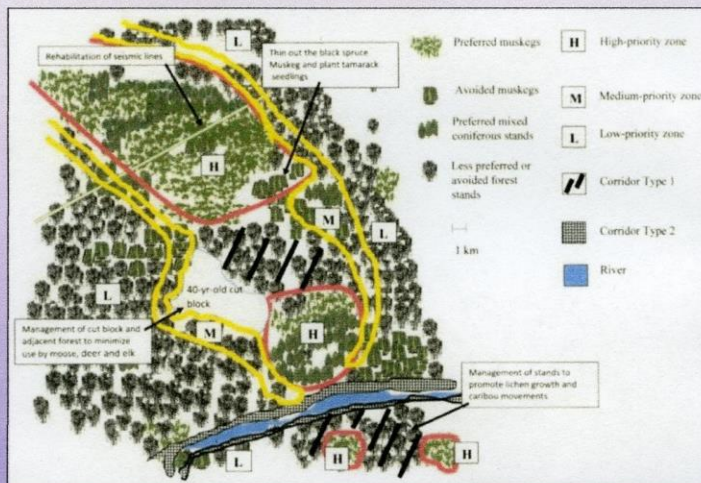


Figure 1. Example of a landscape with caribou movement corridors and habitat management zones (from Proulx 2015).

References

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