

Backgrounder: Urgent need for Canadian environment ministers to protect caribou habitat

February 20, 2017

In 2007, Environment Canada, tasked with developing a national recovery strategy for boreal woodland caribou under the federal Species at Risk Act, commissioned a team of North America's leading caribou experts to review the science necessary to determine the habitat boreal caribou need to survive/recover — called critical habitat. These scientists conducted meta-analyses of all boreal woodland caribou science in Canada, and researched and refined current provincial, national and territorial data sets, first releasing *Scientific Review for the Identification of Critical Habitat for Woodland Caribou, Boreal Population* in 2008, with a second phase in 2011.¹ The Environment Canada team consulted with more than 100 First Nation communities across Canada's boreal, and incorporated traditional knowledge into the final recovery strategy, which they released in 2012.²

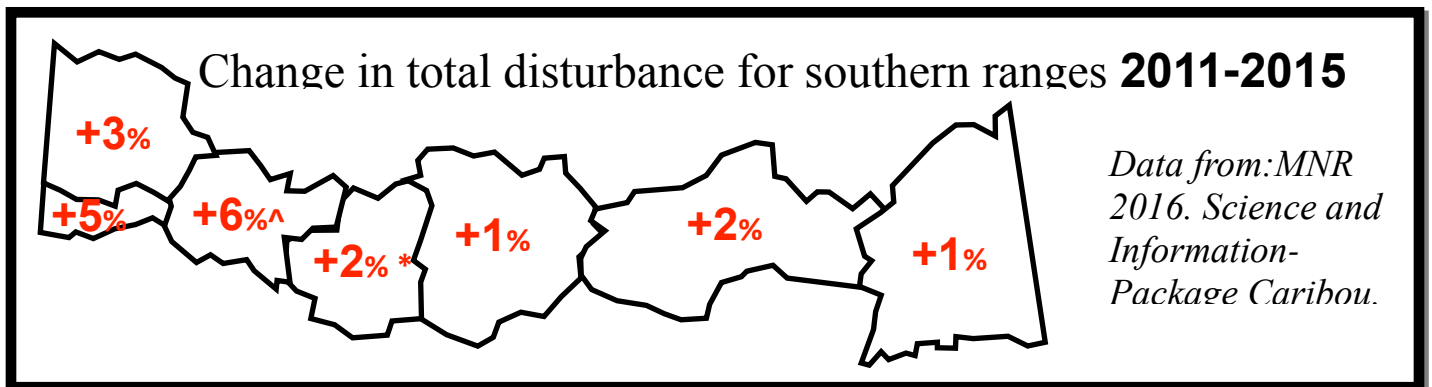
The recovery strategy notes that: the disturbance management threshold of at least 65 per cent undisturbed habitat in a range provides a measurable probability (60 per cent) for a local population to be self-sustaining. This threshold is considered a minimum because, at 65 per cent undisturbed habitat, there remains a significant risk (40 per cent) that local populations will not be self-sustaining.³

Further, it directs that: "In ranges with less than 65% undisturbed habitat, initially, critical habitat is the existing habitat that over time would contribute to the attainment of 65% undisturbed habitat."⁴

Below are examples from Ontario and Alberta that illustrate how the provinces' management of caribou habitat is inconsistent with the direction outlined by the federal government.

Ontario

In Ontario, disturbance has increased in every southern range in which industrial logging occurs, pushing some populations, such as the Brightsand Range caribou, from a persistence rating of "uncertain" in 2012 to "unlikely to survive" now.



Source: <http://www.olt.tbaytelirectit.com/Science%20and%20Information%20-%20Package%20Caribou.pdf>

The Ontario government operates according to a “mosaic approach” that moves cut blocks across the landscape without regard to the total cumulative disturbance in a given caribou range.

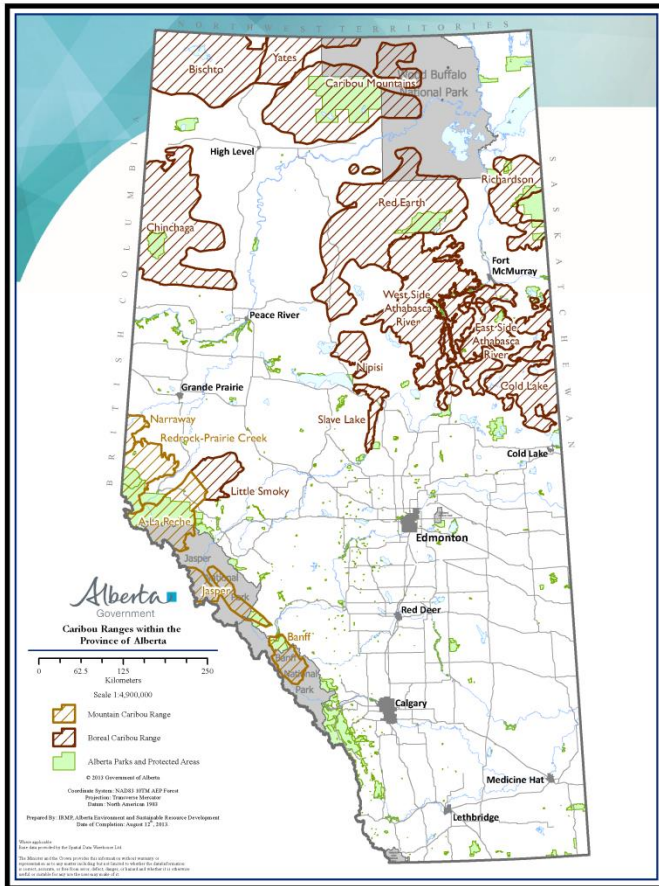
In recent years, the potential of provincial measures to protect species at risk has eroded, as the Endangered Species Act has been weakened through amendments that exempt industries such as logging companies from having to comply with the prohibitions against habitat destruction, as long as generic terms and conditions are met. Ontario has put no specific limit on disturbance in caribou ranges in accordance with the risk analysis of disturbance in the federal recovery strategy.

Alberta

Habitat disturbance in the west-central Alberta Little Smoky boreal caribou range was rated at 95 per cent in 2011, the highest in Canada. Since late 2005, the Alberta government has killed approximately 100 wolves each winter to reduce caribou predation, but continues to authorize habitat destruction that drives wolf predation of caribou. Alberta has released only one boreal caribou draft range plan to date, covering Little Smoky and the neighbouring A La Pêche mountain caribou range. The draft plan would allow critical habitat destruction in the ranges from continued clearcut logging and oil and gas-related surface disturbance. It proposes more wildlife manipulation, including building a large fence to confine wild caribou females, with their calves released as yearlings into worsening habitat. Alberta has less than two per cent of its foothills region in protected areas, yet there are no protected areas proposed for the Little Smoky range. Positive aspects of the draft plan are an extensive seismic line restoration program, and clustering of the excessive new logging near already-disturbed areas for five years.

The Cold Lake northeast Alberta caribou range largely overlaps with federal leased lands of the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range. It also overlaps with oilsands deposits that are drilled and steamed to extract bitumen. The 2011 habitat disturbance rating for the range was 85 per cent, and calf survival in this population has been low in recent years. There are no industrial disturbance limits within this caribou range; between 2012 and 2014, 3,847 wells were drilled within the Cold Lake range, according to recent research⁵. In the early 2000s, Saskatchewan protected large sections of its side of the CLAWR in wildlife reserves compatible with military use. Alberta’s northeast regional land use plan set aside only five per cent of the Alberta Cold Lake caribou range in protected area, none of it on the CLAWR.

The Bistcho caribou range, in Alberta’s far northwest adjacent to B.C. and Northwest Territories, was rated at 71 per cent habitat disturbance in 2011. Since the 2012 federal caribou recovery strategy, the Alberta government auctioned off 1,500 square kilometres of energy leases in this range before halting sales in August 2015. There are no industrial disturbance limits or protected areas within this caribou range. In June 2016, the Alberta government committed to establish a permanent protected area covering 87,000 square kilometres, or 60 per cent of this range; however, there have been few follow-up actions to date.



Source: Government of Alberta, 2013. <http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/wildlife-management/caribou-management/caribou-action-range-planning/documents/CaribouRanges-AlbertaMap-Aug12-2013.pdf>

¹ Environment Canada. 2008. *Scientific Review for the Identification of Critical Habitat for Boreal Woodland Caribou*.

² Environment Canada. 2012. Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*), Boreal population, in Canada. *Species at Risk Act Recovery Strategy Series*. Environment Canada, Ottawa.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 34

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35

⁵ Hebblewhite, Mark. 2017. Billion dollar boreal woodland caribou and the biodiversity impacts of the global oil and gas industry. *Biological Conservation* 206:102-111.