

Local caribou habitat mostly disturbed: study

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Researchers are warning that damage to caribou habitat in Alberta's foothills is so severe that restoration will have to be prioritized.

Seismic lines, together with gravel and access roads, oil rigs, and deforestation, have all penetrated traditional caribou forest habitat that often still looks pristine from the highway.

"The research we are focused on is habitat restoration of high impact seismic lines – these are a historical footprint on the landscape and have not been built since the mid 1980s," said Sean Kinney, spokesperson for the Foothills Research Institute.

Just one year into a planned three-year study on habitat restoration, researchers at the Foothills Research Institute (FRI) have discovered that the Little Smoky herd north of Hinton has just five per cent of their natural habitat left undisturbed by seismic lines and other human activity. That number is well below the federal government's target of keeping 65 per cent of caribou land untouched.

The federal government's Southern Mountain Caribou recovery strategy does not give figures on how much land is left undisturbed for the A La Peche herd west of Hinton.

"The Little Smoky and A La Peche Caribou Ranges overlap significant natural energy and forest resources

that have been under development for decades," said Duncan MacDonnell, public affairs officer for Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD).

He said the estimate of five per cent undisturbed is based on buffering existing features ("footprint") by 500 meters on either side. The application of these buffers to historic seismic cut lines, found throughout these ranges, results in a low undisturbed estimate, said MacDonnell.

"What this means is that targeted restoration can increase the undisturbed figure and allow us to work towards 65 per cent over time. The difference between five per cent and the target of 65 per cent represents intensive and ongoing natural resource development in this area and a legacy of historical footprint that remains on the landscape," added MacDonnell.

Typically, caribou prefer old-growth forest and muskeg areas where they can feast on lichens and will not come within 500 metres of seismic lines or any other human disturbance, giving such human activity a total width of one kilometre. Not only does this restrict or damage caribou habitat, but roads and seismic lines allow predators, which include bears, cougars and wolves, easier access to caribou herds and further threaten their populations.

"Basically the avoidance of linear disturbances has been observed and

documented by various researchers and there are a few theories as to why this is (wolves may use these features so they associate them with predation, etc.). Caribou feed on lichen and it is found in older forested areas," said Kinney.

But it takes at least 70 years for damage wrought by seismic lines to be repaired by nature and vegetation mature enough for caribou to grow.

"The research we are doing at Foothills is using animal movement data and field assessments, in combination with remote sensing measurement of vegetation height, to determine when animals (caribou and their predators) no longer consider these seismic lines as disturbed habitat – this in turn can be used, in combination with ongoing government work, to prioritize areas for restoration," said Kinney.

The Little Smoky boreal caribou herd north of Hinton had just 78 animals in 2011 and the population trend is decreasing, according to federal government statistics. The A La Peche mountain caribou herd northwest of Hinton has 88 members. Local Caribou Patrol figures show that only 21 animals were spotted along the Hwy. 40 corridor in the fall/winter of 2013 - 2014. This compares to a total of 1,475 moose, elk, and deer spotted in the same period.

"Loss of habitat that leads to extirpation of caribou in the eastern foothills would also have a negative impact on other plant, fish and animal species that rely on the same habitat types. In general, the loss of species can reduce the stability and productivity of ecosystems and the services they provide. The loss of caribou from this area would also represent a diminishment of Alberta's biodiversity," said MacDonnell.

He said that ESRD and Alberta Energy are spearheading the development of caribou range plans for both the A La Peche and Little Smoky habitats. Those plans are expected to be completed next month.

"Restoration will be targeted to achieve the most benefit for caribou habitat, taking into consideration ongoing traditional, recreational, and industrial use," said MacDonnell.

Around Town

Participatory Budget

Project submissions from the public for the inaugural Town of Hinton participatory budget process are due by Sept. 30.

Community viewing of the proposals will take place Oct. 15 from 6 - 8 pm and voting will take place by paper ballot on Oct. 29 from 5 - 7 pm and Nov. 1 from 10 am to noon in the Teck Coal Room at the Hinton Municipal Library.

Potential projects need to directly benefit the community within 12 months and submissions will be posted to the Town webpage as they come in.

Harvest Supper

The public is invited to the 3rd Annual Harvest Supper being held Oct. 8 at the Hinton Centre from 5 - 7:30 pm. The event includes food, entertainment and prizes and features free admission with a donation for either the Hinton Youth Centre or BRIDGES. Pick up tickets at FCSS at The Guild, the Hinton Municipal Library, or The Old Grind.

MLA named to Finance

West Yellowhead MLA Robin Campbell was named Finance minister, as well as president of the Treasury Board, when Premier Jim Prentice announced his cabinet after being sworn in Sept. 14 at Government House.

Campbell, who was first elected in 2008 and was then reelected in 2012, was also named to Prentice's transition team last week.

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