

Mark Bradley / Parks Canada photo

A herd of caribou in Jasper National Park. The number of caribou has been declining in the foothills in recent years.

# Aboriginals called upon for caribou patrolling

**Eric Plummer**  
Hinton Parklander

Teams of Aboriginal observers have been hired to monitor factors affecting the ongoing decline of caribou in an area north of Hinton. Since Sept. 17 two crews from the Aseniwuche Nation have been patrolling the 100-kilometre radius around Grande Cache. Each team is made up of an older experienced member and a young adult who carefully watch for caribou and document any environmental factors affecting herd populations.

The caribou patrollers have taken on the role of clearing any animals away from Highway 40 or any of the surrounding industrial gravel roads, and the teams are collecting data to help give researchers a better understanding of why the migrating herds have been declining. Useful information being collected includes traffic volumes on the roads around Grande Cache, as well as numbers of caribou and other wildlife spotted in the area. Patrollers are also assessing the

presence of gates and other traffic-control barriers erected by industry to determine if these structures are serving their intended purpose.

The Aseniwuche pairs were contracted for the monitoring work by Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resources Development and the Foothills Landscape Management Forum, with additional funding from Canada's Aboriginal Fund for Species at Risk.

"It makes sense to us from the FLMF industrial sector that they would be the logical people with their background and traditional knowledge," said Wayne Thorp of the Foothills Landscape Management Forum.

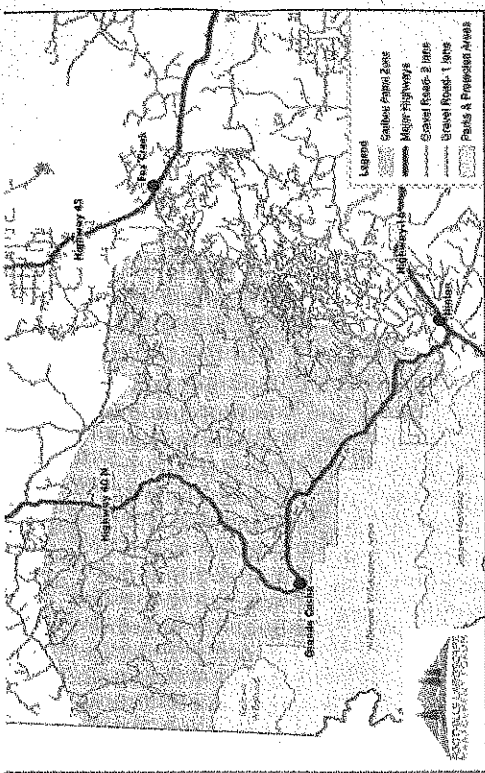
Organizers chose to combine older and young Aseniwuche Nation members to provide a useful transfer of knowledge among the generations. The pairs also bring a useful combination of skills.

"[Elders] know the area very well and the youth wouldn't," Thorpe said. "Conversely, the youth would know some of the technology for loading the data that they collect. We're doing that electronically

using an iPod type of technology." Alberta Environment estimates that the province's caribou populations have declined by nearly two thirds since the 1960s, leaving about 3,000 of the animals existing today. The two groups that roam the Grande Cache area include the Little Smokey and the A La Pêche herds, comprised of populations of 90 and 160 animals respectively.

Thorp believes that the current trend could lead the Little Smokey and A La Pêche herds to extinction. "If we can do anything at all to reduce that it would be beneficial because the herds are relatively low in numbers," he said. "Most of the populations in Alberta and across Canada are in decline mode right now."

Thorp said there have been incidences in the past of caribou poaching, and the current patrolling was launched this fall to coincide with higher levels of traffic in the area during hunting season for other wildlife. "We selected that as a window of opportunity to try and get these



FLMF graphic

A map showing the caribou patrol zone around Grande Cache. Patrols out when the hunters are actually out there," he said. The current patrolling project has been modeled after the Caribou Cowboy monitoring program that was in place for several years along Highway 40 between Grande Cache and the Yellowhead.

"There have been incidences of upward of five and six animals a year that get killed by vehicle collisions along that stretch," Thorp said. The Caribou patrol teams will be working around Grande Cache until the end of November, with the possibility of this work stretching later into the winter if results warrant further monitoring.