

## Backgrounder

### The Survival of Boreal Woodland Caribou in the Northwest Territories

#### **What are the specific concerns in the Northwest Territories?**

Six distinct boreal caribou ranges are found within the Northwest Territories. The population trends of these ranges are variable, with 2 declining, 1 increasing and the the rest unknown.

Presently, 50% of the Northwest Territories' boreal caribou ranges are deemed sufficient in extent and quality to support self-sustaining caribou populations. The Dehcho and the South Slave caribou ranges are considered "not self-sustaining," meaning that the range size and habitat quality are currently unable to support a self-sustaining caribou population.

#### **What is the extent of habitat already disturbed by humans?**

The extent of disturbance within boreal caribou ranges within the Northwest Territories is low, compared to neighbouring jurisdictions like Alberta and British Columbia. On average, 8% of the area of caribou ranges in the Northwest Territories is impacted directly by human disturbance. In total, 38,257 km<sup>2</sup> have been directly affected by human disturbance.

#### **What proportion of caribou range is in the Northwest Territories?**

Approximately 5,800 boreal caribou reside within the Northwest Territories, though a population estimate is not available for the Inuvialuit range. Boreal caribou range covers approximately 477,496 km<sup>2</sup> of land in the Northwest Territories.

#### **What is the extent of restoration efforts needed?**

The current range size and extent of human disturbance within the two southernmost boreal caribou range are of insufficient quality for these populations to be self-sustaining. Restoration efforts are therefore required for these two ranges: Dehcho (N/SW) and the South Slave/SE Dehcho.

#### **What extent of habitat maintenance is required to sustain populations?**

Range extent and condition are currently sufficient to support self-sustaining caribou populations in two Northwest Territories ranges, the Inuvialuit and North Slave. Habitat maintenance within these ranges is necessary to perpetuate their self-sustainability.

#### **What extent of disturbance would be permissible and still enable caribou to survive?**

The Gwitch'in and Sahtu boreal caribou ranges in the Northwest Territories may be resilient to further human disturbance, because of their high caribou populations and low existing human footprint. It is not yet known, however, what level of human disturbance is compatible with long-term caribou persistence.

#### **How great is the probability that boreal caribou will survive in the Northwest Territories, given the current situation?**

In general there is less human disturbance in the NWT, relative to other provinces, so boreal caribou are more sheltered in this region. The caribou populations found in the northern part of the territory are considered self-sustaining and more disturbance is possible in this area. There is a high probability of long-term persistence among these local populations.

The populations in the southern part of the territory are, however, more vulnerable to the level of disturbance and require improved habitat in order to survive in the long-term. If we maintain the status quo there is a less than 50% chance these populations will survive under current conditions.

**What are the implications of the report's findings for decision makers in NWT regarding:**

**Protected area planning and establishment**

- Aboriginal traditional knowledge should be consulted to identify core areas of caribou habitat use, particularly in the Inuvialuit range, for which population size data have not been collected
- The relatively large range sizes and low human footprint in the Inuvialuit, Gwich'in, Sahtu and North Slave ranges present the opportunity for establishment of large protected areas

**Current industrial practices and woodland caribou recovery planning**

- Additional human disturbance should not proceed in the Dehcho (N/SW) and South Slave/SE Dehcho ranges, which have the highest industrial footprint of all Northwest Territories ranges and do not currently support self-sustaining caribou populations
- Population size and trend data must be collected for the Inuvialuit range to determine its resilience
- Collection of population trend data for the North Slave range will inform whether this range is self-sustaining
- Experimental testing of critical thresholds for industrial disturbance and caribou persistence may be possible in the Gwich'in and Sahtu ranges, though ongoing, intensive monitoring of population size and habitat use will be necessary to assess the efficacy of thresholds
- All existing caribou habitat should be maintained, with habitat restoration efforts emphasized for the Dehcho (N/SW) and South Slave/SE Dehcho ranges
- Ongoing monitoring of population trends and habitat use by caribou are required to evaluate the efficacy of current and future land use and management strategies

For more information including media release, map, national summary, images and B-Roll visit:

[www.caribouandyou.ca](http://www.caribouandyou.ca)

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