



June 10, 2022

Mr. Joseph Judas, Chair
Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resources Board
4504 49TH AVENUE
YELLOWKNIFE NT X1A 1A7

Dear Mr. Judas:

Joint Management Proposal for Kòk'èetì (Bathurst) Ekwò Herd

Thank you for your letter dated May 27, 2022 providing the Wek'èezhìi Renewable Resource Board's (WRRB) recommendations on the joint management proposal for the Kòk'èetì (Bathurst) Ekwò Herd. As required under the Tìchq Agreement, the Tìchq Government and Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) will jointly respond to all of the board's recommendations on the Kòk'èetì Ekwò and Sahtì (Bluenose-East) Ekwò management proposals. However, as one of the recommendations (#2-2022) relates to a survey that will begin in early June, the GNWT is providing a response to that recommendation now.

WRRB Recommendation #2-2022 (Kòk'èetì Ekwò) – TG and GNWT will not conduct the June 2022 aerial reconnaissance survey to (i) assess distribution and separation/overlap of Kòk'èetì and Beverly Ekwò during calving, ii) assess relative abundance of Kòk'èetì Ekwò, and (iii) assess sex and age proportions nor the calving ground photo survey for the Kòk'èetì Ekwò herd.

Response: The GNWT, with the support of the Tìchq Government, rejects this recommendation for the reasons set out below.

Reasons: The Bathurst herd has gone through the largest documented decline of any barren-ground caribou herd that is found entirely or partially in the Northwest Territories (NWT), declining from an estimated 470,000 in 1986 to an estimated 6,200 in 2021.

In June 2021, a calving ground survey of the Bathurst caribou herd included an area east of Bathurst Inlet which had both Bathurst and Beverly collared caribou. The degree of this observed overlap was unexpected, and created challenges in trying to estimate the numbers of Bathurst caribou given that a portion of the herd was mixed with much higher numbers of Beverly caribou. Clear separation of the herds was found only in late June and July 2021, followed by mixing in August which continued through the rest of the year.

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The mixing and apparent emigration of some Bathurst caribou has raised the level of concern among co-management partners. The GNWT acknowledges that these factors are important and need to be monitored to assess their impact on the Bathurst herd. While the herd's numeric decline slowed between 2018 and 2021, apparent emigration of some collared Bathurst caribou to the neighbouring range of the much larger Beverly herd has occurred. In 2021-2022, mixing of Bathurst and Beverly caribou was more extensive than what has been documented previously. Given these factors and the herd's significant importance to Indigenous peoples and cultures in the NWT and Nunavut, the GNWT has a responsibility to all of its co-management partners to clearly document the herd's changes in abundance, demography and movement patterns to inform timely management.

Given recent trends in mixing during calving and at other times of the year, opportunities to obtain reliable estimates of the Bathurst herd may become less predictable. If there is mixing of Bathurst and Beverly caribou during calving and the two calving ranges are not separate, then a reliable numeric estimate of Bathurst caribou from a calving ground survey may not be possible. While a calving ground photo survey of the Bathurst herd has been planned for June 2023, it is possible that conditions and the degree of mixing of Bathurst and Beverly caribou may not allow for a reliable Bathurst estimate. ENR has made plans for a potential calving photo survey of the Bathurst calving ground in June 2022 in the event that there is clear separation of Bathurst and Beverly caribou and a suitable weather window is available.

Based on current collar distribution, it appears that there may be separation of Bathurst and Beverly caribou. It is important to note that there can sometimes be large numbers of caribou (particularly Beverly) in areas where there are no collared animals. For this reason, we will not know if there is actual separation until the areas is flown and densities of caribou are estimated.

An assessment of the number and type of caribou (breeding cows, non-breeding cows, yearlings and bulls) may provide us with some insights on emigration during and after calving. As an example, survey flying east of Bathurst Inlet in June 2021 showed that many of the caribou were bulls, yearlings and non-breeding cows, which indicated that most of the caribou were part of the "trailing edge" at the back of the northward calving migration. It appeared that this movement of thousands of Beverly caribou drew much smaller numbers of Bathurst caribou toward the Beverly calving grounds further east in the Queen Maud Gulf.

After the 2018 June calving photo surveys of the Bathurst and Bluenose-East herds, the Tłı̨chǫ Government and GNWT proposed, and WRRB accepted, closer monitoring of the two herds in recognition of the steep declines and very low numbers in both herds. This included reducing the population survey interval from 3 years to 2 years, and flying annual June, October and March composition surveys to estimate the productivity and survival of calves.

In June 2021, the calf:cow ratio in breeding cows in the main calving core area was 62 calves: 100 cows about a week after the peak of calving, which suggested substantial calf mortality in that first week. A helicopter-based composition survey in June 2022 is part of the monitoring that was proposed and accepted as part of the 2019 Bathurst Caribou Herd Proceeding.

The June surveys proposed for the K̄q̄k'èet̄i Ekw̄ò and Saht̄i (Bluenose-East) Ekw̄ò herds in Nunavut was approved under a Wildlife Research Permit issued by the Government of Nunavut (GN). The GN's process includes review by one or more affected Hunters and Trappers' Organizations (HTOs), which in this case included the Kugluktuk HTO.

As the WRRB notes, some have expressed a viewpoint to "leave ̄ekw̄ò alone". The GNWT will take a number of steps to keep disturbance to a minimum to address these concerns:

- (1) During the composition survey, larger groups of caribou will be classified from the ground, wherever practical. In addition, the aerial classification will be carried out using motion-stabilized 10 power binoculars, which allows us to maintain distance between the helicopter and caribou on the ground such that disturbance is minimized.
- (2) Fixed-wing flying at 400 feet over the main calving concentrations will be limited to the initial reconnaissance flying to estimate overall densities of caribou across the survey area. In our experience, over-flights by Cessna caravan at 400 feet altitude usually have limited effects on caribou and in many cases bedded caribou remain bedded or get up and move a short distance.
- (3) If conditions are suitable for a calving ground photo-survey, we will aim for aerial photo coverage of all survey blocks (high, medium and low density) to minimize low altitude flying. In 2018 and 2021, aerial photos were flown at an altitude of about 4000 feet above ground; our experience has been that small aircraft flown at that altitude have little to no effect on caribou.

The GNWT appreciates the WRRB's role in ongoing efforts to support recovery of the K̄q̄k'èet̄i Ekw̄ò, and will provide a response to the remainder of the boards recommendations.

Sincerely,



Shane Thompson

Minister

Environment and Natural Resources

c. Distribution list

Distribution list

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