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Bathurst Caribou Status and Management Winter 2015-2016

We are writing to follow up on our letter of September 2, 2015. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) completed a calving photo survey in June 2015 for the Bathurst caribou herd. We have now received the final survey results. This survey has resulted in a final estimate of $8,075 \pm 3,377$ (95 percent CI) breeding females and 19,769 $\pm 7,420$ adult caribou in the herd. This demonstrates a substantial and rapid decline since 2012 when the last calving photo survey was carried out.

Since our September 2, 2015 letter, there have been a number of meetings and discussions about management of the Bathurst herd that have taken place this fall with Aboriginal governments and we have received some input from the Wek'èezhii Renewable Resources Board (WRRB). In this letter, we wish to describe the interim management actions ENR will be using to guide us through the winter 2015-2016 season. We expect to participate in a public hearing before the WRRB in early 2016 and receive recommendations from the WRRB for future years. All of the meetings and discussions that we have had with our various co-management partners over the last few months have informed our proposed management actions.

1. Bathurst Herd Status in 2015

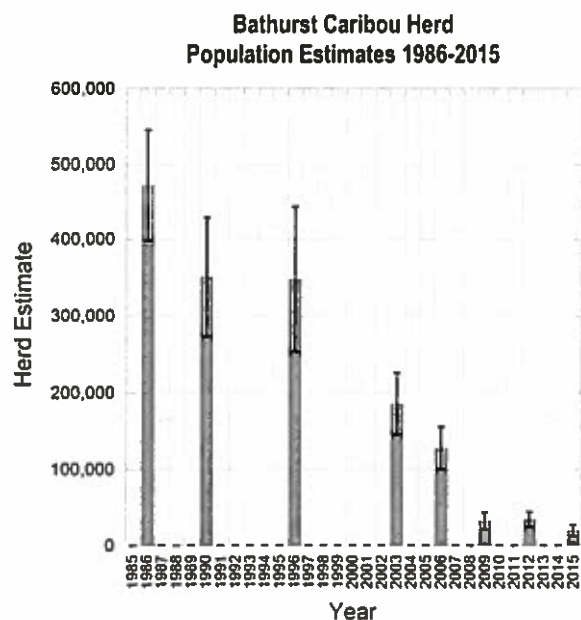


Figure 1. Estimated size of the Bathurst Caribou Herd between 1986 and 2015, based on calving photo surveys in June.

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The survey results from June 2015 confirm the steep declining trend suggested by the reconnaissance survey over the Bathurst calving grounds in June 2014. The number of breeding cows in the Bathurst herd has declined almost 50 percent since the 2012 survey when just under 16,000 breeding females were estimated and the overall herd estimate was about 35,000 caribou. Overall, the herd has declined by about 96 percent since 1986 when a similar survey estimated about 470,000 caribou in the Bathurst herd, as shown in the graph above. Survey conditions in June 2015 were good, a very high proportion of the herd's collared cows was within the main photo stratum, and extensive areas north, south, east and west of the calving ground were flown to ensure that no significant numbers of caribou were missed.

Additional indicators of the herd's reproduction and survival rates have been consistent with a declining population trend in the last few years:

- There was a lower pregnancy rate in 2015 than in previous surveys, as indicated by a 65 percent proportion of breeding females on the calving grounds (compared to over 80 percent in 2009 and 2012);
- The calf:cow ratio estimated in late winter has been below 30 calves for every 100 cows in recent years, indicating that too few calves are surviving their first year to support a stable herd; and
- The cow survival rate continues to be below the 82-85 percent needed to maintain a stable herd; it was as low as 67 percent in 2009 and was last estimated at 78 percent in 2012.

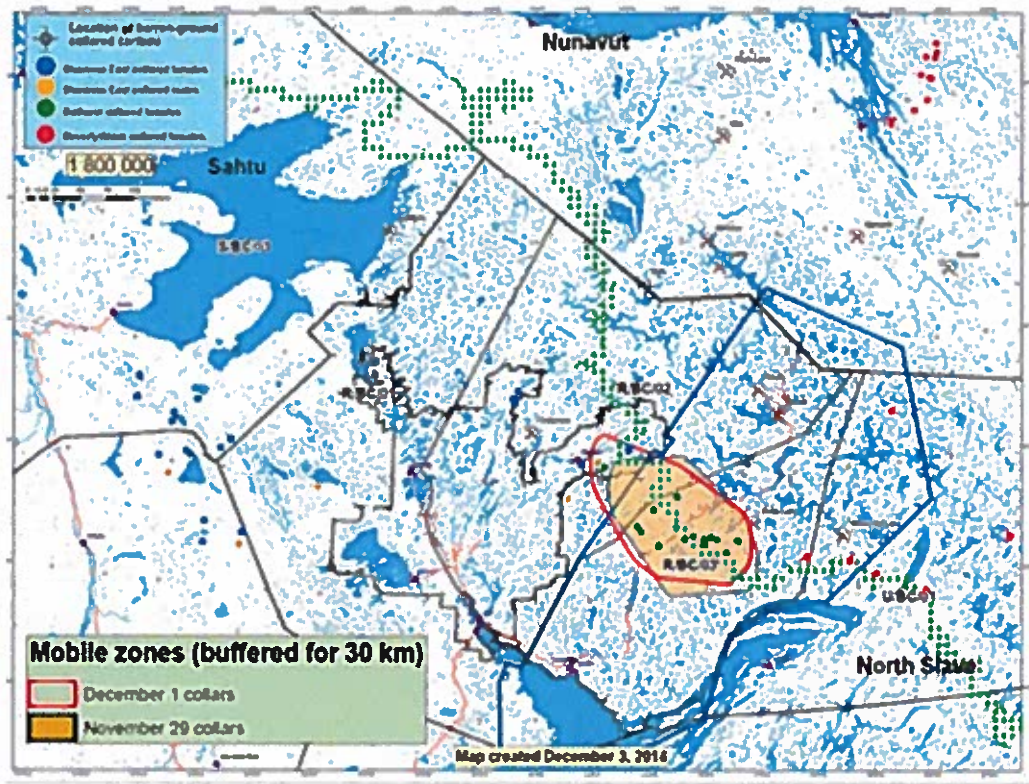
Although harvest in the Northwest Territories (NWT) from this herd was reduced to 300 or less in 2010 and zero for the 2014-2015 harvest season, the herd has continued to decline and is likely to decline further unless the population indicators noted above improve substantially. Given these circumstances, it is absolutely critical that we work together quickly to take immediate steps to conserve the herd during the 2015-2016 hunting season.

2. Proposed Harvest Management for the Bathurst Herd Winter 2015-2016

(i) Continuation of the Bathurst Caribou Mobile Zone

With respect to harvest of Bathurst caribou, we are proposing continuation of a mobile zone for winter 2015-2016, within which no caribou harvest would be permitted. Earlier this year, we established a conservation area in Wildlife Management Zones R/BC/02 and R/BC/03 that moved with the caribou. There was no harvest allowed in the mobile conservation area. The location of the mobile zone was determined by the most recent location of collared Bathurst animals in addition to information from periodic aerial surveys. This allowed us to be flexible and define the area based on the movement of the animals.

This approach allowed us to provide protection to the Bathurst herd by limiting harvesting within a relatively small area around the caribou rather than closing the entire R/BC/02 and R/BC/03 zones to all barren-ground caribou harvest. The mobile zone was mapped weekly and maps were distributed widely by ENR to Aboriginal groups that had traditionally harvested the Bathurst herd. The maps were also distributed by the Tłıchǫ and Yellowknives Dene First Nation (YKDFN) to their membership.



Map of collared caribou locations and proposed Bathurst mobile zone in December 2014. Mobile zone was centered on Bathurst collared caribou locations (in green).

This approach would be continued in 2015-2016. No caribou harvest would be allowed within the mobile zone. Any barren-ground caribou harvested in R/BC/01, R/BC/02 or R/BC/03 outside of the mobile zone would again require an appropriate authorization. Authorizations would be managed and administered by the respective Aboriginal governments who would be responsible for ensuring that sound harvest reporting is provided to ENR on a regular basis.

Through the winter of 2014-2015, the Bathurst herd largely stayed together which ensured that the size of the mobile zone was as small as possible.

One of the concerns expressed was about the potential size of the zone if the herd was to separate. In our assessment, that could be a reasonable concern and so we are prepared to take the steps to ensure that there can be more than one mobile zone to provide protection to the herd while minimizing areas where harvest is restricted. On a longer term basis, we expect to work with our co-management partners to develop sub-zones which could more readily be opened and closed. We are enclosing a copy of the map showing the current location of the mobile zone.

3. Other Management Measures for the Bathurst Herd

In meetings in fall and winter 2014-2015 and again this fall, we heard from a number of parties that a comprehensive approach to management of Bathurst caribou that includes more than harvest restrictions is needed. ENR agrees. We provide a brief review here of other initiatives and proposals under consideration for the Bathurst herd.

A. Wolf Harvest

Through discussions with the Tłıchq Government (TG), during a meeting in Lutsel K'e, during the Northwest Territory Métis Nation (NWTMN) Annual General Assembly, and in other discussions with representatives of Aboriginal communities, we understand there is interest in increasing the winter harvest of wolves associated with the Bathurst herd. ENR will continue to provide incentives to hunters and trappers who harvest wolves. Currently ENR is also working with the TG on an approach for winter 2015-2016 that would support Tłıchq hunters to harvest wolves associated with the Bathurst herd in culturally appropriate ways. Hunters from Lutsel K'e and the NWTMN have expressed interest in a similar approach, and ENR is prepared to explore this type of approach with Aboriginal governments concerned about the Bathurst herd's status.

B. Industrial development, Bathurst range planning and environmental assessment

ENR has led a collaborative process since 2013 to build a range plan for the Bathurst herd across its entire range in NWT, Nunavut and Saskatchewan. This plan will make recommendations on industrial development and other human activity on the herd's range to help ensure that healthy habitat is available and that key habitats like calving grounds and water crossings are given adequate protection. ENR encourages concerned parties with an interest in the Bathurst herd to provide input into the range planning process to ensure it meets their needs. ENR has also participated in environmental assessments for development projects that may affect the Bathurst herd's range to ensure concerns over potential impacts to caribou are addressed. Parties with an interest in the Bathurst herd are encouraged to also participate in these processes in view of the Bathurst herd's vulnerable status and low resiliency. ENR also participated in meetings in Nunavut in June 2015 and November 2015 on protection of caribou habitat, including calving grounds, and supported the Government of Nunavut's position opposing development on any caribou calving grounds.

C. Overall management process and board for Bathurst herd

One of the requirements of the Tłıchq Agreement is the development of an overall management process for the Bathurst herd, which could include a caribou management board. A number of meetings among traditional users were held in 2012-2014 to develop a comprehensive overall management process for the herd. ENR will continue to support this process, including the potential establishment of a management board, to ensure effective long term management of the Bathurst herd.

D. Hunter education and enhanced communication in communities

For a number of years, ENR, in collaboration with our co-management partners, has promoted sound hunter harvest practices, reduction of wastage, harvesting bulls instead of cows, and related conservation education in NWT communities. In response to community demands, ENR is currently developing a Hunter Education program. A working group, with participants from regional organizations and communities, developed the hunter education materials, which are currently out for review with individuals, boards, agencies and organizations across the NWT.

ENR recognizes that increasing public acceptance and participation in caribou conservation will require increased collaboration with communities with respect to the serious issues facing caribou, the actions being taken to address declines, and the need for responsible reporting on harvest and on-the-land wildlife observations. ENR looks forward to continued cooperation in these areas.

4. Recent discussions on proposed management actions for Bathurst herd

Beginning in August 2015, ENR and the TG exchanged correspondence with the WRRB about proposed management actions for the Bathurst herd as required under the Tłıchq Agreement. In September 2015, the WRRB wrote to TG and ENR recognizing that there was an emergency situation with the Bathurst herd. The Board identified the need to hold a public hearing and indicated it would not be possible for the Board to do so in time for the 2015-2016 harvest season. The Board issued a series of recommendations to TG and ENR that the two governments are addressing. Both leaders and senior staff officials from the TG and ENR met several times in fall 2015 and were able to come to an agreement that Bathurst harvest should be zero in winter 2015-2016, the harvest limit should be reviewed annually, the mobile Bathurst conservation zone should be continued in winter 2015-2016, and that there should be increased winter wolf hunting targeting wolves within the Bathurst mobile zone. TG held several meetings in Tłıchq communities on caribou issues in fall 2015 and a workshop on wolf harvest in November 2015.

A series of community meetings on caribou will occur in in the Tłıchq communities through late November 2015 and December 2015 with representation from TG and ENR.

ENR met on September 16, 2015 with representatives of the YKDFN to discuss caribou management. YKDFN supported the Bathurst mobile conservation zone in 2014-2015 and expressed support for the mobile zone again for 2015-2016. YKDFN requested support for community monitoring and for community hunts.

ENR met in November 2015 with representatives of Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation (LKDFN) to discuss the status and management of Bathurst and other caribou herds. LKDFN agreed that the Bathurst herd's decline was serious and required management action. There was general support for limiting harvest from the herd and for increased incentives for community hunters harvesting wolves. LKDFN also expressed concern over the mines and roads and effects of disturbance on the caribou and asked for support for a community monitoring program.

In response to our September 2, 2015 letter, the North Slave Métis Alliance (NSMA) wrote to ENR on September 16, 2015 expressing support for management actions proposed for caribou herds in the North Slave region, provided that NSMA received an equitable share of any proposed harvests in the North Slave region for the 2015-2016 harvest season.

ENR met on November 20, 2015 with representatives of the NWTMN to discuss caribou management. NWTMN representatives wanted to see increased incentives for harvesting wolves so that wolf harvesting becomes a worthwhile undertaking.

5. Next Steps

These measures to conserve the Bathurst herd, including continuation of the Bathurst Caribou Mobile Zone, are being put forward on an interim basis for the 2015-2016 harvesting season.

TG and ENR are developing a joint management proposal for the Bathurst herd for 2016-2019 that will be submitted to WRRB in December 2015. It is expected that the WRRB will hold a public hearing in early 2016 on the management actions put forward in the joint proposal.

The next population survey for the Bathurst herd is planned for 2018; however, management for this herd will be continuously re-evaluated both on an annual basis and as new information becomes available.

If it would be helpful, ENR would be pleased to explore opportunities to deliver further presentations in your communities on the status of the Bathurst caribou herd, the Mobile Zone and our Hunter Education programs.

Given the serious decline of the Bathurst herd, it is critical that we all work together to do everything we can to conserve this valuable resource. We look to all of you for leadership and guidance during these difficult times. Together, we can do what is right for the caribou.

Sincerely,



Ernie Campbell
Deputy Minister

Enclosure

- c. Chief Louis Balsille, Deninu K'ue First Nation
- Ms. Laura Duncan, Tłıchq Executive Officer, TG
- Mr. Sjoerd van der Wielen, Lands Protection Manager, TG
- Ms. Ursula Vogt, Executive Director, NWTMN
- Ms. Jody Pellissey, Executive Director, WRRB
- Ms. Amy Amos, Executive Director, Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board
- Mr. Gary Bohnet, Principal Secretary, Office of the Premier
- Mr. Martin Goldney, Deputy Minister
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