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7. WILDLIFE: Caribou protections in British Columbia seen as first step to broader endangered species law (10/18/2007)

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The British Columbia provincial government this week announced a recovery plan to restore depleting populations of mountain caribou by prohibiting logging and road building on 2.2 million hectares – roughly 5 million acres – of Crown lands while limiting such recreational activities as snowmobiling and helicopter skiing that threaten to displace the iconic species.

While the action was cheered by a coalition of environmental organizations based in both Canada and the United States, they view this as a first step toward establishing a provincial endangered species law that would afford new protections for more than 1,360 animal and plant species that are now considered "at risk" in B.C.

Canada has a "species at-risk" law that applies only to federally owned properties – comprising just 2 percent of land in the province, explained Rob Duncan, forestry specialist for the Sierra Club of Canada's B.C. chapter. "What's next is something that will be more encompassing provincially," he said. He cited the example of Ottawa's provincial law as a model.

"We need one strong law," said Candace Batycki, B.C. endangered forest program director for ForestEthics. "We can't just go species by species."

The caribou recovery plan announced this week represents several years of active campaigning by the environmental organizations, working together as the [Mountain Caribou Project](#). Agriculture Minister Pat Bell praised the work of the project members for their significant contributions to reaching an agreement. "For the past three years, they have been deeply involved in building this collaborative solution, and we all look forward to its implementation on the ground," Bell said.

The formal ministry announcement also was joined by representatives of tribes, the forestry industry and snowmobile associations – each of whom pledged to continue working cooperatively to balance their activities with the preservation of the herds. "We firmly believe that together we can protect values such as mountain caribou while ensuring the economic stability of the forest sector and the many families and communities that depend on it," said John Allen, president of the Council of Forest Industries.

Besides reaching a recovery plan at all, the Sierra Club's Duncan said, a great success for environmentalists was moving "the government's approach from a broad-based predator kill program to something based more on habitat protection. Otherwise caribou survival would come at the expense of other species."

Predator control is still part of the recovery plan, but it takes a back seat to adaptive management of the huge area used by the caribou. The goal is to restore populations to the levels seen in the 1990s – something above 2,600 animals. According to ministry figures, in 2006 there were only 1,960 caribou documented in 12 herd management units, with the most stable herds found in the far northern reaches of the Hart Range.

The two Kootenay units that sit on the U.S.-Canada border have some of the more ambitious recovery goals in the plan. In Southwest Kootenay, for example, there were just 20 caribou recorded last year; the goal is to bring that herd up to 159 animals. In Southeast Kootenay the target is to raise the herd figure from 37 to 91 caribou. Parts of those southern herds frequently cross the border into northern Idaho and eastern Washington, noted Batycki.

Part of the program will include transplanting caribou from other locations to boost herd levels in hopes of ensuring viability.



A herd of mountain caribou in the Kootenay Pass area. Fewer than 1,960 caribou were documented last year, leading British Columbia officials to enact a landmark habitat protection and recovery plan this week. Photo by Milo Burcham. Courtesy of ForestEthics.