



May 26, 2009

Ted Armstrong  
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Dear Mr. Armstrong:

Re: EBR Registry: 010-4421

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Caribou Conservation Plan (CCP). Please find Save Ontario's Species (SOS)'s recommendations and expectations below, as well as a brief analysis of the Plan, and an overview of the recommendations made in *Scientific Review for the identification of Critical Habitat for Woodland Caribou, Boreal Population in Canada* (hereafter referred to as the SAG review).

### ***SOS Recommendations***

A strong, science-based caribou conservation plan must:

1. Assess the condition of the hypothetical ranges to determine, based on the science in the SAG review, if they can withstand additional disturbance without jeopardizing caribou calf recruitment rates, and identify an expedited timeline for completing this action.
2. Halt logging and road building in intact caribou habitat immediately.
3. Ensure that the habitat regulation for caribou under the Endangered Species Act, 2007 (ESA) captures all currently occupied woodland caribou range, plus historical range where restoration is biologically feasible

### ***Brief overview of CCP content***

#### **1. Overview of strengths of draft Caribou Conservation Plan**

- **Goal:** SOS supports the CCP's goal to "*Maintain self-sustaining, genetically connected local populations of forest-dwelling woodland caribou where they currently exist, improve security and connections among isolated mainland local populations, and facilitate the return of caribou to strategic areas near the current extent occurrence.*"
- **Scale:** SOS supports the adoption of a range management approach.
- **Corridors as a CCP component:** SOS supports the idea of potential connectivity corridors.
- **Protected areas as a CCP component:** SOS supports the fact that the MNR is open to new protected areas within FMUs to protect caribou habitat (as outlined in section 3.3).

However, the CCP should detail a process through which protected area candidates would be determined.

- **Forest areas set aside from logging as a CCP component:** The plan references deferrals (i.e., ‘insurance policy’) wherein forest areas are set aside from logging until it is determined that there is sufficient habitat and that local caribou populations are viable. However, the CCP takes a backward approach: instead of stopping threats to the species while research and monitoring is conducted, it allows logging and road building to continue to take place while populations (many of which may already be in decline) are monitored. In order to truly adopt an ‘insurance policy’, a halt to logging and road building in the intact Boreal Forest must be implemented while monitoring is being done.
- **Thresholds included as a CCP component:** The Plan does, at times, reference the components for management that are outlined in the SAG review (for example, the plan references management decisions that stay within known thresholds of human disturbance, s. 2.3). However, the MNR should use the information in the SAG review on thresholds now, while it does research to refine them. This is in fact, consistent with the approach outlined in the draft CCP: “Thresholds of human disturbance will be considered and will support land-use planning decisions. Until research on thresholds are established, the best available scientific information will be used to support planning and management.” (s.3.6.4) But the CCP falls short of referencing the SAG review, and, in the end, balks from using best available science. The CCP should include an explicit reference to threats management.
- **Inclusion of precautionary principle as guiding principle:** The CCP notes the principle, but ultimately fails to apply it. The CCP must pay more than lip service to this important principle.

## 2. Overview of weaknesses of draft Caribou Conservation Plan

- **No interim protection measures:** In the absence of interim protection measures, habitat degradation and ensuing caribou decline will continue under the purview of the CCP as written.
- **Science muddled by economic objectives:** The statement in the CCP that “Our decisions about boreal ecosystem management must balance the demand for northern resources, boreal forest health, and the needs of woodland caribou” is inappropriate. Decisions must first and foremost meet the purpose of the ESA by promoting the protection and recovery of this threatened species: the plan needs a science-based conservation strategy for ensuring long-term caribou survival and recovery that is not weakened by economic concerns (which usually translate into maintaining status quo economic operations.)
- **Lack of timelines:** Caribou are threatened with extinction. They need a plan with timelines, not a plan that can be indefinitely delayed. Even elements such as the geographical priority areas, which, the CCP states, will trigger ‘immediate’ recovery efforts, have no timelines through which to be held accountable (Nor do the immediate recovery efforts outline a plan for decreasing the threats—i.e., disturbance, within the southernmost threatened ranges.)
- **Over-emphasis on mitigation:** There is no scientific evidence right now to support continued logging in intact areas. Logging cannot be tweaked to support caribou in intact areas. Caribou need intact, roadless areas that are free of industrial activity, up to the thresholds outlined in the SAG review.

- **Unclear language:** Unclear language is employed throughout the plan: words such as ‘deferral’, ‘insurance policy’ and ‘currently suitable habitat’ have multiple meanings and are often misused. For example, the CCP states that caribou ranges will be the basis for identifying caribou habitat (s.2.1). But ranges ARE caribou habitat, as strongly emphasized in the SAG review (which recommends that, for Ontario, the habitat critical to caribou survival and recovery is the current range).
- **‘Dynamic Caribou Habitat Plan’ fails to include disturbance levels as a tool:** The focus on forest cover as opposed to level of disturbance is out of touch with the science in the SAG review; disturbance is the primary threat facing caribou. Similarly, the CCP does not differentiate between forests that are intact and forests that are already disturbed, despite the importance of such a distinction when planning for caribou recovery.
- **Status quo principles that have failed caribou to date pervade the plan:** For example, the plan states that Ontario will provide for and renew caribou habitat during forest management planning (s.3.5), and ‘enhance caribou habitat’ (page 12), despite the fact that the MNR has been unable to prove that it CAN renew caribou habitat. Reliance upon the re-occupancy hypothesis as a component of the conservation plan is not applied in a precautionary way: the CCP should specify that this “log-now-and-the-caribou-will-come-back-later” experiment will be conducted only in the already impacted forest—not in the intact forests upon which caribou depend for survival and recovery.
- **Reductionist view of habitat:** Although the CCP says that it will manage at the range scale, it also often dips into a reductionist management regime that would purport to manage components of range (for example, section 4.1.1 references ‘minimum and maximum limits for the amount and distribution of habitat’ that ‘will provide for an adequate supply of habitat to be available over time.’) This reductionist approach is inappropriate for caribou conservation and out of step with the most recent science.
- **Band-aid measures considered:** Measures such as predator control and caribou translocation are considered when the root problem is habitat disturbance and the need to protect sufficient intact habitat (i.e., there are not too many wolves; there are too many forestry roads that wolves can utilize.) [The root problems driving caribou decline should be addressed in the CCP, and that references to predator control and caribou translocation should be removed.](#)

***Background: the need for a plan consistent with the most up-to-date, comprehensive science***

It is the assumption of SOS that any defensible provincial caribou conservation plan must incorporate the most recent, comprehensive science on what boreal woodland caribou need to recover. This science is available in a report commissioned by Environment Canada, released earlier this spring, titled: *Scientific Review for the identification of Critical Habitat for Woodland Caribou, Boreal Population in Canada*. The science advisory group review (SAG review) was conducted by 18 of North America’s leading caribou scientists, with support from the Science and Technical Branch of Environment Canada, and includes recommendations to ensure boreal woodland caribou survival and recovery.

**1. Habitat needed to ensure caribou survival and recovery, as recommended in SAG review:**

A tenet of the SAG review is the relationship between the level of range disturbance and calf recruitment rates. Based on this relationship, precautionary management measures can be taken to ensure that disturbance levels do not threaten a caribou population’s viability. (p. 25)

The recommendations in the SAG review include recommendations that are specific to Ontario's boreal woodland populations. The review recommends that: "Current range condition and extent are required to maintain potential for self-sustaining population."(p. 28)

The report did identify some caribou population ranges that were deemed resilient, which means that these ranges could likely afford further disturbance. However, Ontario was not identified as range-resilient. The SAG review states that, for Ontario, "delineation of local populations or units of analysis has not yet occurred. Population units must be identified and evaluated before resilience can be assessed. Pattern of distribution exhibits north/south gradient, with higher anthropogenic disturbance in the southern portion of extent." (p.44)

This give a clear directive for the provincial conservation plan: **the science recommends that current habitat needs to be maintained—in other words, that no additional disturbances occur—until research has been conducted to identify and evaluate population units.**

2. Implications if habitat further degraded, as detailed in SAG review:

The SAG review states that: "**Further degradation of the current range may compromise the ability to meet the recovery goal.**"(p. 50)

3. Summary of SAG review recommendations for Ontario:

To summarize, the most recent and robust science states that Ontario should maintain current conditions of caribou ranges until research is done to delineate the ranges and determine the degree of disturbance within them—in essence, to determine whether or not further disturbance will jeopardize persistence, based on the relationship between disturbance and calf recruitment.

The CCP often tips its hat to scientific principles, but ultimately fails to incorporate them into a plan with concrete action items and timelines. In order for SOS to support the CCP, it must integrate and apply the scientific findings of the SAG review as it relates to Ontario. The draft CCP fails to do this.

**Conclusion**

The MNR has all the necessary tools at its disposal to determine the appropriate level of industrial activity within caribou ranges right now, and, therefore, to manage caribou habitat to ensure their recovery and persistence. Although the MNR summoned up the information and political will to generate hypothetical ranges reasonably quickly, it has failed to determine the level of disturbance within these ranges. This is not for lack of data: there is enough information available to generate a reasonable understanding of the aggregate disturbance currently present in each of these ranges without undue effort. Both the data (a simple overlap of fire and anthropogenic disturbance by area, within established hypothetical range boundaries) and an available protocol from the SAG review are readily available to do this with minimal GIS effort.

That the MNR at present has failed in the draft CCP to outline a conservation plan that sets out a plan to complete these straightforward steps with an expedited timeline and interim protection measures until the research is completed, is an abdication of the province's responsibility to protect this threatened species as mandated under Ontario's ESA.

There is no question that protecting existing intact habitat is a critical tool for caribou survival and recovery in the province; as it is written, the CCP will not achieve its own conservation goal. As a response to the recovery strategy, the CCP fails to uphold the requirements of the Act--that is, it fails to clearly outline actions that the government plans to take to recover the species and a timeline for any such actions.

To reiterate, in order for SOS to support MNR's approach to caribou recovery, the CCP must assess the condition of the hypothetical ranges to determine, and halt logging and road-building in intact caribou habitat until this is assessed. In addition, the MNR must ensure that the habitat regulation for caribou under the ESA captures all currently occupied woodland caribou range, plus historical range where restoration is biologically feasible.

Yours truly,



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