

Saving Endangered Caribou

Save the caribou or change the *Species at Risk Act* – you can't lose one without losing the other.



Background

In 2018, after many years of study, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Canada (and related federal agencies like the Canada Wildlife Service) determined that there was an “imminent threat” to the recovery of the Central Group of Southern Mountain Caribou herds near Chetwynd and Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia (BC). Consequently, a federal Emergency Order under the Species at Risk Act was a real possibility. Such an order can help species at risk by prohibiting industrial and other activities in fragile habitat, but it can also be a blunt instrument. In this case, an Emergency Order could have covered millions of hectares of caribou habitat, including lands rich in mineral and forest resources, potentially causing enormous economic impacts, and without a well thought out plan for recovering the endangered caribou herds.

“There’s no question that we’ve had to overcome some challenges along the way, but I am proud of how the parties persevered to find solutions – and this agreement today is a significant step forward.”

- **Doug Donaldson**, Minister of Forests for British Columbia

“The caribou have been suffering for decades as their habitat is destroyed piece by piece. They need us now, all of us. This partnership agreement gives us hope. It means that help is on the way.”

- **Roland Willson**, Chief of the West Moberly First Nations

Approach

The alternative was to attempt to negotiate an intergovernmental partnership agreement between the federal, provincial, and First Nations governments with overlapping jurisdictions and rights in the region. In particular, Saulteau First Nations and West Moberly First Nations had already demonstrated remarkable leadership by applying innovative recovery measures and proving that local herd numbers could actually be increased.

Pacific Resolutions was asked to lead the negotiations for BC. Our instructions were to talk to these two Nations and Federal representatives and find out what the best deal would look like – one that struck an appropriate balance between recovery of caribou and the economy.

A deal was hammered out over the next four months, including the creation of a very large protected area focused on the herds with the best chance of recovery, the designation of sustainable resource development areas, and additional measures and resources for other recovery efforts such as maternal penning, predator management, a new focus on habitat reclamation, and more research and monitoring.



Illustration by Kari Rust.

Challenges

Initially, local communities that depended on the forestry industry were opposed to the draft Partnership Agreement because they were not involved in the negotiation and their concerns were fueled by misinformation, rumours, and racist commentary spread on social media. After some constructive dialogue, a few amendments were made to the draft agreement to better address the concerns raised by local governments, and a schedule of commitments was included to ensure that anti-indigenous racism does not reoccur in future processes.



Habitat of the B.C. Southern Mountain Caribou (in green).

Results

The Partnership Agreement was signed in February 2020 and hailed as a historic new milestone for endangered species and for reconciliation. The Central Group herds now have a chance to recover and grow, in a shared ecosystem and landscape. It is hoped that the Partnership Agreement can provide a model for the recovery of other species in other locations, but it must also be recognized that the success of these kinds of recovery efforts will continue to depend on the implementation of the agreement – and public commitment to stewardship and the preservation of endangered species and biodiversity.

Pivotal issues we can help you address

1. Timing of public engagement when issues have major consequences for public interests and involve constitutionally protected rights.
2. Setting anchors that stick in negotiations like this.
3. Reconciling the recovery of endangered species with the patterns of development that are established and relied upon at multiple levels.
How can communities have both?

Are you interested in learning more about complex issues like this and how to manage them? Pacific Resolutions can help.

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