

Provincial Caribou Recovery Program Herd Planning Disclaimer



The following herd plans are a result of Phase One planning and are an incomplete product. Additionally, the documents are 'living' reports and will be updated regularly as Phase Two progresses.

Phase Two planning is currently underway for some herds however still at its early stages of development; many plans reflect this as they are in different stages along their scheduled project continuum.

One of the cornerstone guiding principles to the Caribou Recovery Program (the Program) is to use consistent, fact-based approaches for all woodland caribou herds in the province. The Program has refined and adopted a new format to herd planning that will effectively:

- ❖ Provide a consistent approach to managing all woodland caribou herds in BC
- ❖ Recognize the unique circumstances of each herd
- ❖ Build from current (legacy) caribou management plans
- ❖ Consider First Nations' and stakeholder interests and ideas
- ❖ Be included in larger regional plans

Completed herd plans will describe the status of each herd, and the threats faced by that particular herd. The plans will take note of previous actions, and actions that are planned to take place in the future. As we implement the herd plans, the Program will carefully monitor to which extent and magnitude the caribou respond, and modify its actions as accordingly. Herd plans will help us document our decisions and discuss issues with First Nations and with stakeholders.

Phase One consisted of:

- ✓ Status of herd or sub-population
- ✓ Identified threats
- ✓ Literature
- ✓ Previous work completed

Phase Two will consist of input from:

- Engagement with Indigenous communities
- Provincial Caribou Science Team
- Stakeholders
- Decision-support tools

WOODLAND CARIBOU PLAN

Groundhog Subpopulation

Wells Gray - Thompson Local
Population Unit



BRITISH
COLUMBIA

Recommended Citation:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DRAFT

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1 BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAM

All caribou within British Columbia are Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*). The Groundhog caribou are a subpopulation of the Mountain caribou ecotype within the Southern Mountain National Ecological Area (SMNEA), are listed as Threatened by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), and appear on Schedule 1 of the Federal Species at Risk Act (SARA) (EC, 2014; MCTAC, 2002). These caribou herds are red listed in British Columbia and are included in the Provincial Identified Wildlife Management Strategy (IWMS) under the provincial Forest and Range Practices Act (FRPA).

In 2011, COSEWIC defined 12 designatable units (DUs) for caribou in Canada, which represent discrete and evolutionarily-significant units of caribou. The Mountain Caribou ecotype in BC was reorganized into the Southern Mountain Caribou DU (DU9) (COSEWIC, 2014). They were assessed as Endangered in May 2014 (COSEWIC, 2014). This recommended listing of DU9 was submitted to the Federal Minister of the Environment for consideration under SARA in fall 2014.

Environment Canada is proposing a different categorization system, one where the SMNEA is divided into three groups, the Northern, Central, and Southern Groups. The Southern Group from the EC system would be DU9, identical to the Southern Mountain caribou under the COSEWIC system (EC, 2014; COSEWIC, 2014). No decision has been made and the Groundhog caribou subpopulation remains listed in the only category of SMNEA caribou and Threatened under SARA.

Woodland Caribou are further divided into Local Population Units (LPU's) by Environment Canada. Within the proposed DU9 there are eleven LPU's. The Groundhog subpopulation shares the Wells Gray – Thompson LPU with the Wells Gray South subpopulation (EC, 2014).

Recovery plans are required for all woodland caribou populations that will be designated as threatened or endangered in Canada (ECCC, 2016). This document spans the divide between these disparate designations provincially and federally, compiling past research, knowledge and management actions into guidance for the management and recovery of the Groundhog caribou subpopulation.

2 POPULATION DESCRIPTION

2.1 DISTRIBUTION

The Groundhog caribou sub population range includes approximately 2200 km² within the interior mountain ranges in south central British Columbia. The Adams River drainage upstream from the north end of Adams Lake makes up most of the range but it also includes the smaller drainages south and east of Highway 5 between the communities of Clearwater and Blue River (BC Government, 2018) (Figure 1).

Elevations within the subpopulation range from 500 meters to 2800 meters above sea level (Google Earth, 2018). The Groundhog caribou subpopulation borders on the Wells Gray South subpopulation to the west and north and the Columbia North subpopulation to the east. These two subpopulations are also part of DU 9.

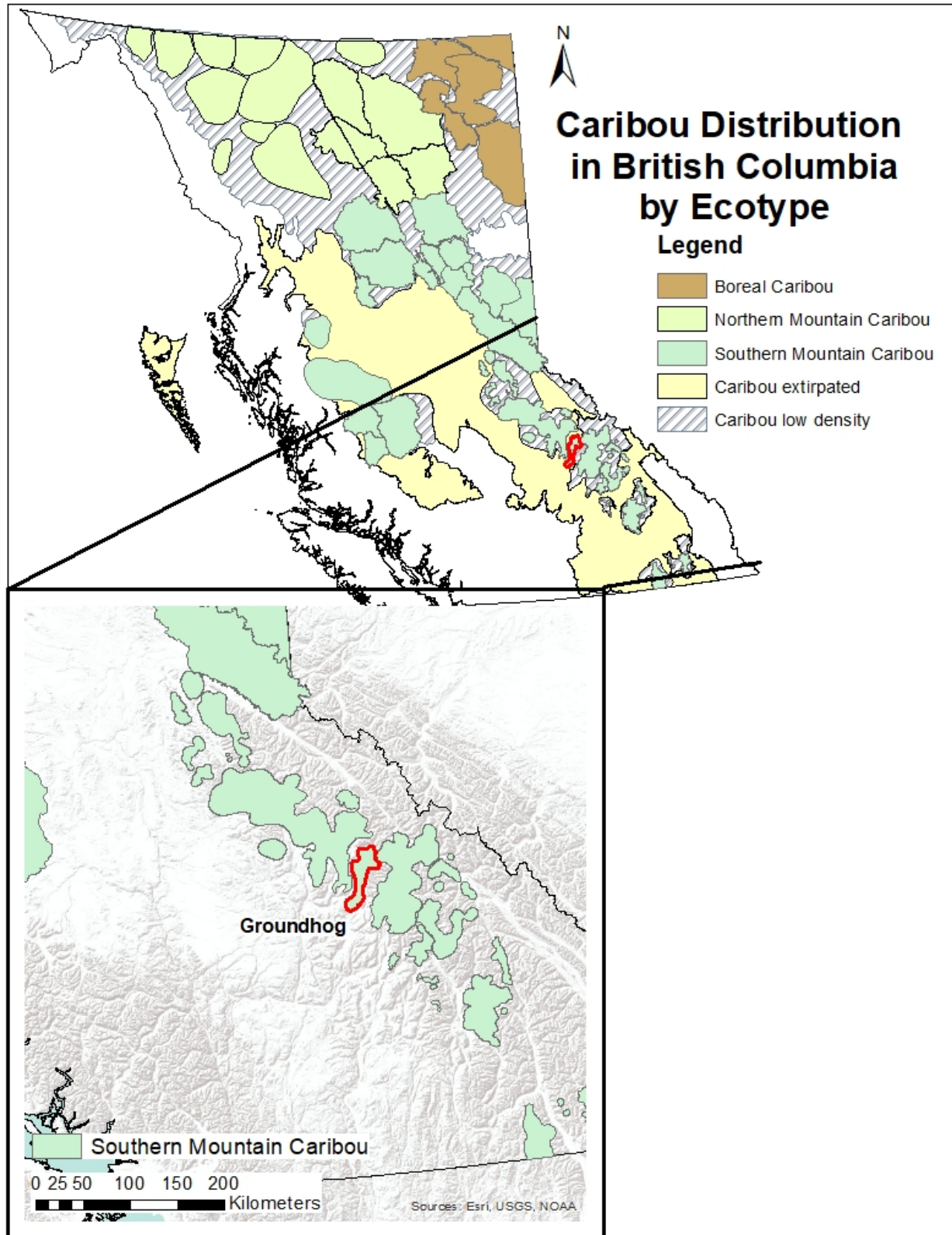


Figure 1. Caribou distribution in BC by ecotype. The Groundhog subpopulation is outlined in red.

2.2 HABITAT AND BEHAVIOUR

Mountain caribou live in the Interior Wet Belt that stretches from northern Idaho and Washington States to central British Columbia. In winter, mountain caribou live in the deep snowpack zone near treeline and feed almost exclusively on arboreal lichens (Young & Freeman, 2002; HCRIG, 2005). This preferred habitat type lies at approximately 1750 meters elevation in this LPU (HCRIG, 2005).

In April these caribou tend to move to lower elevations to feed on new plant growth, some to valley bottom but most descend only slightly returning to near treeline or above in late May to calve. They generally remain at these high elevations all summer feeding on various types of new growth in addition to lichens. Often these summer habitats are in the same locations as their winter habitats, although at times they may exhibit horizontal migration of up to 60 km (Seip, 1990; HCRIG, 2005; Young & Freeman, 2002).

When the initial snows return to the high elevations in the fall the Groundhog caribou descend, most to slightly lower elevations but some, to the cedar / hemlock forests at the valley bottoms (HCRIG, 2005). As the snowpack settles, commonly in January, they tend to move upslope to treeline again (MCTAC, 2002).

2.3 POPULATION SIZE AND TREND

Early survey boundaries were based on limited knowledge of caribou distribution so this data may not be suitable for trend determination. Deployment of radio collars beginning in the mid 1980's allowed refinement of survey boundaries based on the collar data. The Groundhog caribou have experienced significant declines since systematic monitoring began 23 years ago, declining from approximately 110 to 20 caribou.

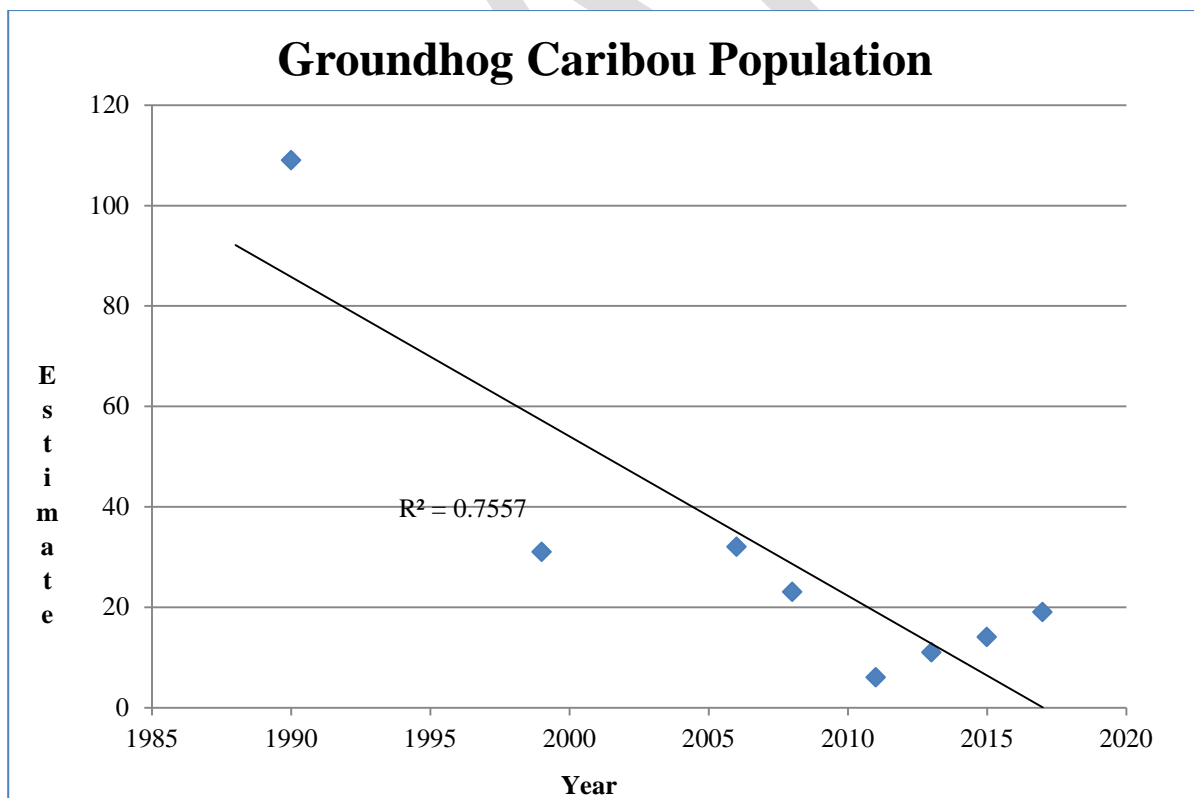


Figure 2: Groundhog caribou population trend based on population estimates (J Surgenor, pers. comm.)

3 THREATS AND LIMITING FACTORS

Current declines in woodland caribou populations have been ultimately attributed to direct and indirect effects of human activities and climate change (Vors & Boyce, 2009; Festa-Bianchet, et al., 2011; Environment Canada, 2014). For most populations, these effects have led to unsustainable rates of predation (McLoughlin, et al., 2003; Wittmer, et al., 2005b; Apps, et al., 2013) resulting in lowered rates of adult female survival and/or juvenile recruitment, two demographic rates that have high influence on caribou population dynamics (DeCesare, et al., 2012). Compared to other ungulates, caribou are particularly vulnerable to increasing predation because they have low reproductive rates (Bergerud, 2000). To reduce predation risk, caribou generally occur at low densities and have evolved to live in low productivity habitats that spatially separate them from other ungulates and their generalist predators (Bergerud, 1992). Effects from human activities and climate change likely compromise this spacing strategy by changing the abundance and spatial distribution of these other ungulates and predators, increasing the likelihood of caribou-predator encounters and consequently increasing predation rates (Festa-Bianchet, et al., 2011).

The federal *Recovery Strategy* for SM caribou (EC, 2014) identified a number of threats potentially affecting caribou populations and their habitat. These threats, in descending order of importance, included: predation, industrial activities, roads and other linear features, recreational activities, natural disturbances (e.g. fire, avalanches), hunting, climate change and parasites and diseases. This section follows a similar approach, discussing these threats – and others – though their order does not reflect their relative importance to a specific population. Note that while threats are discussed individually, they are not mutually exclusive as they may interact and their effects on caribou population dynamics are likely cumulative (Sorensen, et al., 2008; Johnson, et al., 2015).

3.1 PREDATION

Multiple GPS and radio telemetry studies throughout BC have indicated that the dominant, proximal cause of woodland caribou mortality is predation (Wittmer, et al., 2013). Woodland caribou have evolved with their predators and have persisted despite millennia of predation. Their impact on woodland caribou populations has increased due to the result of three dominant processes: apparent competition mediated by increased alternative prey abundance (Hebblewhite, et al., 2007), apparent competition mediated by expanding alternative prey distribution (Wittmer, et al., 2007; DeCesare, et al., 2009; Latham, et al., 2011b), and enhanced predator access to woodland caribou habitat mediated by roads and other industrial developments (James & Stuart-Smith, 2000; Latham, et al., 2011a; Wilson, 2009).

More generally, Bergerud (2007) has calculated that wolf densities greater than 6.5 wolves/1000 km² will result in woodland caribou declines. Out of thirteen known causes of caribou mortality between 1996 and 2004 in the Wells Gray Thompson LPU twelve were attributed to predation, of which four were confirmed as wolf predation (Furk, 2003b; Furk, 2004).

While not specific to the Groundhog caribou subpopulation, studies have demonstrated that bears negatively impact calf recruitment and may impact adult survival (Adams, et al., 1995; Wittmer, et al., 2005a).

3.2 FOOD LIMITATION

Lichens form the main part of caribou's winter diet, while in the summer a variety of vegetation is consumed. A comprehensive study of mountain caribou using bone marrow fat of deceased collared caribou suggests that population declines are linked to excessive predation, not body condition (McLellan, et al., 2012). Other studies also suggest that absolute quantity and quality of food does not limit growth of Woodland Caribou

populations as long as adequate range is available to deal with severe snow conditions or loss of lichen producing habitat (Schaefer & Pruitt, 1991; Bergerud, 1996). However the result of supplemental feeding on the Kennedy Siding subpopulation suggests that caribou movements to reduce predation risk may reduce food intake and therefore lower nutritional condition (Heard & Zimmerman, 2017).

3.3 HUMAN ACTIVITIES

3.3.1 INDUSTRIAL

3.3.1.1 FORESTRY

Woodland caribou are an old-growth forest dependent species (Bergerud, 2000; Theberge & Oosenbrug, 1977) hence forest management affects their distribution and populations. Although some populations live seasonally in treeless, alpine ecosystems, all spend some of the year in forests. For this reason, forestry will affect woodland caribou populations. Forestry effects include “habitat loss” that reduces the amount of old-growth forest thus reducing forest-based food resources (Simpson, et al., 1994) and creating more, early seral forest habitat for apparent competitors such as deer and moose (Simpson & Woods, 1987; Cichowski, 1989; Seip, 1990; Stevenson, 1991). Factors such as the type of forest (Cichowski, 1989) and the size of cutblocks (Edmonds & Bloomfield, 1984) play a role in the effect of forestry practices on woodland caribou populations.

Forest harvesting within the LPU began at lower elevations in the early part of the 20th century. It was not until the 1970’s that the rate of harvest increased dramatically. Most of the harvesting has been clearcutting (WLAP, 2003). Currently regenerating cutblocks of age classes less than 50 years are abundant at all elevations in core and matrix habitat, in almost every valley within the LPU (BC Government, 2018). Clearcut forest harvesting continues at this time within the matrix habitat (Google Earth, 2018).

3.3.1.2 MINING

Mineral exploration and mine sites deter caribou both for the activities that occur there when they are active as well as for the habitat they destroy. Mines have a 2 km zone of influence (ZOI) when they are active, but this shrinks to the physical footprint of the mine site when mines are dormant, inactive or abandoned (Polfus, et al., 2011). This physical footprint usually includes linear features such as roads and possibly powerlines, which increase predator travel efficiency, thus increasing the predation risk to the caribou (Latham, et al., 2011a; DeMars & Boutin, 2017).

Mineral tenures are abundant in the eastern half of the LPU with 523 tenures totally over 100,000 ha, approximately half in core caribou habitat and half in matrix habitat (BC Government, 2018). While most of these tenures are not likely to result in mines the Harper Creek copper / silver / gold mine, located in caribou matrix habitat, was listed on the company’s website as under construction in 2015 (Yellowhead Mining, 2015) but might currently be on hold. The Ruddock Creek zinc - lead mine, located in core caribou habitat, is still in the proposal stage (Imperial Metals, 2017).

3.3.1.3 OIL AND GAS

The potential impacts on caribou of oil and gas development would likely be similar but possibly more extensive than mining. However currently oil and gas extraction related activities are non-existent in this area.

3.3.1.4 CLEAN ENERGY

Clean energy projects could include large hydroelectric dams and reservoirs, smaller run of the river hydroelectric projects, wind farms, and solar power generating projects. Research in southern British Columbia correlated

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hydroelectric development with declines in caribou populations (Simpson, 1987b). There are no large scale hydroelectric generating facilities or reservoirs within the Wells Gray – Thompson LPU. However there are 131 water power tenures for smaller projects involving a total of 5600 ha along with another 97 applications (BC Government, 2018). There are no solar or wind power generating installations or proposals in the LPU.

3.3.1.5 OTHER

No other forms of industrial development are currently planned or underway within the Groundhog subpopulation area.

3.3.2 RECREATION

Recreational activities, both motorized and non-motorized, can impact caribou populations by displacing individuals into sub-optimal habitats (Seip, et al., 2007; Lesmerises, et al., 2018; Simpson & Terry, 2000), increasing stress levels (Freeman, 2008) and / or facilitating predator movement into caribou habitat (Whittington, et al., 2011). Unnecessary movements can deplete critical fat reserves, potentially decreasing the likelihood of successful parturition and calf rearing the following summer and potentially decreasing the ability to avoid predators (Seip, et al., 2007). Additional winter movements may also increase the amount of exposure to steep terrain, increasing the risk of mortality due to avalanches (Simpson, 1987a; Seip, et al., 2007; Kinley, 2003).

3.3.2.1 SNOWMOBILE

Parts of the Groundhog area offer good snowmobiling opportunities and are easily accessible to significant human populations in the Kamloops area as well as foreigners from Alberta. Most of the premium snowmobiling areas are in the no harvest UWR; however the adjacent lower elevations in the valleys are not protected and forest harvesting is widespread. Forestry roads constructed to access these forests also provide the access required by the snowmobilers (Seip, et al., 2007; Lewis, 2005).

3.3.2.2 HELI-SKI / CAT SKI

Helicopter skiing and cat skiing are backcountry recreational activities that enable off-piste skiers to access high mountain terrain using either a helicopter or a tracked snow-cat that shuttles them to the top of ski runs. This is a commercial activity with numerous operators in British Columbia represented under one umbrella organization, HeliCat Canada (HCC). In southern British Columbia, HCC partners with the British Columbia government and non-government organizations to monitor caribou and helicat ski operations and minimize operational impacts (Wilson & Nyberg, 2009).

There are several helicopter and catski operations working in the area of the Wells Gray – Thompson LPU. Canadian Mountain Holidays (Cariboos and Valemount) and Mike Wiegele heliski have ski tenures in this area. From 2013 to 2017, 287 caribou were encountered by these operations, largely in the eastern part of the tenures with a range of animal responses from none to being very alarmed (Wilson, 2010; Pasztor, 2013; Heard, 2016; Wilmshurst & Gordon, 2016).

3.3.2.3 OTHER

Backcountry skiing, snowshoeing, ATV use, hiking, mountain biking, and other similar activities could also stress or displace caribou from preferred habitat (MFLNRO Skeena, 2017). Access for these activities is facilitated by Highway 5 between Kamloops and Valemount, the numerous forestry roads branching off of it, and forestry roads within the Adams Lake system.

3.3.3 OTHER

3.3.3.1 AGRICULTURE

Agricultural development can impact caribou populations in several ways. These include the direct losses of habitat as forests are converted to fields and the supplementation of natural food sources for alternate prey such as elk and deer potentially increasing their populations, which in turn may support increased numbers of predators, increasing the predation risk to the caribou. In addition, domestic livestock could harbour diseases and parasites. Transmission to caribou has not been established within British Columbia (Martin, et al., 2011; Vors & Boyce, 2009).

There is agricultural development along the western edge of the Groundhog caribou range between the communities of Clearwater and Vavenby. Elsewhere within or adjacent to the caribou range agriculture is virtually non-existent (Google Earth, 2018).

3.3.3.2 ROAD CORRIDORS

Direct mortality from collisions with vehicles is the most obvious threat when highways pass through caribou habitat. Less obvious threats applicable to all roads include direct loss of habitat along road right of ways; fragmentation of habitat, especially if traffic volumes form a crossing barrier (Apps & McLellan, 2006); the maintenance of permanent early seral along road edges supporting alternate prey and therefore predators; improved travel efficiencies for predators increasing predation risk; and improving human access for recreational use.

Highway 5 skirts the western edge of the Groundhog caribou range for 100 kilometers between the communities of Blue River and Clearwater. Gravel surfaced forestry roads are abundant, located in almost every major valley. (Google Earth, 2018).

3.3.3.3 LINEAR FEATURES

Linear features could include roads as mentioned above but could also include powerlines, pipelines, railways, and seismic lines. These features often result in direct loss of habitat, create permanent early seral conditions that benefit alternate prey and their predators, and improve travel and therefore hunting efficiency for predators (DeMars & Boutin, 2017). Avoidance by caribou may extend the area of impact well beyond the physical footprint (Vistnes & Nellemann, 2008).

Along with Highway 5 as mentioned above, the 100 kilometers along the North Thompson River corridor is shared with a transcontinental railway, a major powerline, and a major oil pipeline (Google Earth, 2018). There are plans to twin the oil pipeline in the very near future (Kinder Morgan, 2018).

3.3.3.4 HUNTING

Excessive hunting of caribou is likely responsible for the initial declines in and range contraction of sub populations throughout the southern two thirds of the province (Spalding, 2000; Freddy, 1974; Herbison, 1996), including the Groundhog caribou area.

Moose and deer hunting is a common activity within the Groundhog caribou sub-population range (BC Government, 2016a; BC Government, 2016c). While reduction in alternative prey can be beneficial to woodland caribou, active hunting on caribou winter range may also contribute to accidental death by hunters who misidentify their prey. The specific impact to the Groundhog caribou sub-population is unknown.

3.4 NATURAL DISTURBANCE

Caribou populations are subject to impacts from a number of natural disturbances. Being dependent on old-growth forests, caribou are impacted by forest fires. In mountain caribou habitats, it takes a minimum of 150 years for a forest to recover from a fire to become caribou habitat again. In addition the early seral habitat created post-fire may facilitate population increases in alternate prey and their predators. Although caribou are likely adapted to the natural forest fire regime within and adjacent to their ranges, effects of forest fire may act cumulatively with human-mediated disturbances to negatively impact caribou demography (Sorensen, et al., 2008). Caribou may also be affected by insect or disease outbreaks that affect forest stand condition. For mountain-dwelling caribou, avalanches constitute another type of natural disturbance that can potentially impact demography, though under normal conditions their importance as a mortality should be small unless population sizes are small (Hebblewhite, et al., 2007; Seip & Cichowski, 1996).

3.5 PARASITES AND DISEASES

Caribou can be impacted by a range of native and introduced diseases and parasites (Bergerud, et al., 2008; Schwantje, et al., 2014). Disease and parasite outbreaks can limit caribou populations by affecting survival and reproductive rates (Albon, et al., 2002; Klein, 1991) and effects of disease and parasites may interact with other limiting factors such as predation and nutrition. Threats from disease and parasites are predicted to increase with climate change (see *Section 3.6* below), particularly if spatial overlap between caribou and other ungulate species increases (Bradley, et al., 2005; Dobson, 2009; Kutz, et al., 2005). For example, increasing expansion of white-tailed deer into caribou range may increase the prevalence of meningeal worm in caribou, a parasite that is highly pathogenic to caribou and whose usual host is white-tailed deer (Anderson, 1972).

Impacts from parasites and disease on the population dynamics of the Groundhog caribou subpopulation are not well studied however the province has recently increased its sampling program (MacBeth & Schwantje, 2018). Evidence to date from an extensive study suggests that mortality from natural causes (i.e. diseases and nutrition) is low (McLellan, et al., 2012; Apps, et al., 2013) and diseases and parasites are not thought to be a major driver of current declines in populations of southern mountain caribou (EC, 2014).

3.6 CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change can potentially exert numerous effects on caribou population dynamics. Warmer winters may impact forage availability by increasing icing events and / or causing poor snow conditions that limit the ability of caribou to access lichens (Hansen, et al., 2011). A warming climate may also change the abundances and distribution of alternate prey and their generalist predators, potentially increasing rates of caribou predation (Latham, et al., 2011b; Dawe & Boutin, 2016). Climate change may alter the spatial and temporal distribution of insects, diseases and parasites, potentially affecting individual fitness and population dynamics (Bradley, et al., 2005). Changes to the natural disturbance regime (e.g. fire interval, fire intensity, avalanche frequency) may further impact caribou through mechanisms outlined in *Section 3.4*.

There is no specific information on how climate change may be affecting the Groundhog subpopulation of caribou, although the recent mountain pine beetle infestation has likely been exuberated by warmer winters (COSEWIC, 2014).

3.7 SMALL POPULATION SIZE EFFECTS

Caribou subpopulations that are small and isolated may be subject to negative demographic effects that can occur as a result of their small size (Caughley, 1994). Such effects include inbreeding depression, genetic isolation from population fragmentation (Serrouya, et al., 2012), demographic stochasticity (e.g. all offspring produced are

of one sex), environmental stochasticity (e.g. the population is extirpated by a random natural disturbance such as an avalanche; (Hebblewhite, et al., 2010)), and Allee effects (e.g. lowered demographic performance with decreasing population size; (Courchamp, et al., 1999)). For group-living ungulates such as caribou, McLellan et al. documented a predation-mediated Allee effect where the predation rate may increase with declining population size because group size declines at a faster rate than the number of groups in the population and the number of groups dictates the rate of caribou-predator encounters (McLellan, et al., 2010).

4 MANAGEMENT HISTORY

4.1 HABITAT

4.1.1 PROTECTION

Within the Wells Gray Thompson LPU 44% of the core caribou habitat and 20% of the matrix habitat is within Wells Gray Provincial Park and has been off limits to forest harvesting since the park was formed in 1939 (BC Government, 1986; Mahood, 2018).

In 2007 58 % of core habitat outside of the provincial park was designated as no harvest Ungulate Winter Range (UWR) under Government Action Regulation (GAR) orders (Mahood, 2018; BC Government, 2018). Combined with the provincial parks a total of 76 % of core habitat has been protected from further forest harvesting (Mahood, 2018). Protected matrix habitat remains at 20% as there is currently no protection of matrix habitat outside of provincial parks.

There are also coal land reserves, mineral no registration reserves, and old growth management areas (OGMA's) however these may overlap considerably with the UWR and therefore not cumulative (Mahood, 2018).

4.1.2 ENHANCEMENT AND RESTORATION

Caribou habitat enhancement and restoration relates both to recreating or improving habitats for caribou seasonal range (termed ecological restoration) as well as managing linear disturbances (roads, seismic lines, pipelines, transmission rights of way) to prevent facilitated predator access (termed functional restoration) (Alberta Woodland Caribou Recovery Team, 2005; Dickie, et al., 2017; Dickie, et al., 2016). As well, habitat enhancement and restoration must be accompanied by protection to be effective (Schneider, et al., 2010). Restoration of caribou habitat takes place naturally through succession from early seral stages to mature and old forest. Standard silviculture practices could aid this process. Further habitat enhancement and / or restoration has not taken place within the Groundhog caribou subpopulation area.

4.2 RECREATION AND ACCESS MANAGEMENT

From a management perspective recreational activities can be grouped into various categories including commercial / non-commercial, summer / winter, motorized / non-motorized, by specific activity such as snowmobiling / heli skiing, or a combination of these.

In 2007 a five year moratorium on new commercial recreation tenures was enacted. This moratorium was renewed in 2013 and expired on March 31, 2018 (BC FLNRO, 2013). The boundaries mirror the caribou no harvest UWR and as such would cover 58 % of core caribou habitat outside of Wells Gray Provincial Park but within the Wells Gray Thompson LPU (Mahood, 2018).

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4.2.1 SNOWMOBILE

Sixty four percent of core caribou habitat within the LPU but outside of provincial parks is closed to snowmobile use under the BC Wildlife Act (Mahood, 2018; BC Government, 2018) Snowmobiling in the remaining 36 % of core habitat is managed through agreements with the local snowmobile clubs. The Conservation Officer Service provides education and conducts regular compliance and enforcement patrols. Enforcement resulted in:

4.2.2 HELI SKI / CAT SKI

The helicopter and cat skiing industry, through membership with Helicat Canada, Has been guided by best management practices since 2011 (under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)) that stipulate minimum distances that the helicopters and skiers should avoid caribou by (BC Government, 2014). Area closures in some locations were recommended in the 2005 Recovery Implementation Plan (HCRIG, 2005) but were not implemented (BC Government, 2018).

4.2.3 SUMMER RECREATION

There are no specific management actions to regulate or limit other recreational activities such as backcountry skiing or summer motorized or non-motorized activities.

4.3 PREDATORS

4.3.1 WOLF MANAGEMENT

Wolf hunting is managed as general open seasons through the provincial hunting regulations. There are no restrictions on the number of wolves harvested per person annually (no annual bag limit) for the Groundhog caribou subpopulation area (Management Units (MUs) 3-41, 3-42). Wolves are also trapped by registered trappers for their fur. There is no requirement for compulsory inspection or compulsory reporting of wolves harvested in Region 3 (BC Government, 2016a).

Hunting and trapping does not usually result in the removal of complete packs, remaining pack members can reproduce and recover within one year providing food resources are available. Partial pack removal can also splinter packs, resulting in more wolves as their territorial system is compromised (B. McLellan, pers. comm. 2017). Complete pack removal targeting the Groundhog area wolves, carried out from a helicopter, would likely be more effective.

Efforts to determine wolf presence / absence, population size, territories size, etc., was undertaken by the way of transects, howling surveys, and collaring in the 2003 – 2005 period (Jones, 2004; Lewis & Eustache, 2006). Track surveys were again undertaken beginning in 2015 (B. Ernst, pers. comm., 2018).

4.3.2 COUGAR MANAGEMENT

The annual bag limit for cougar is two in MUs 3-41 and 3-42. There is a province wide requirement for compulsory inspection of cougars (BC Government, 2016a).

4.3.3 OTHER

Bear and wolverine predation on neonates and caribou in the spring can also have a significant impact on caribou populations (Wittmer, et al., 2005a; MFLNRO Skeena, 2017). However bears and wolverine populations are likely not greater than historic levels, instead grizzly bears and wolverines themselves may be at risk in some areas (BC Conservation Data Centre, 2017). In addition, as bears are more abundant than caribou and only a small portion of the diet of any one bear would be caribou, a very large number of bears would have to be culled to have an effect (MFLNRO LNG, 2015).

4.4 PRIMARY PREY

Moose, elk, white-tailed deer and mule deer (including black-tailed deer) share large, mammalian predators such as wolves, bears and cougars. In what is known as apparent competition (Holt, 1977) an increase in one prey population will lead to a decrease in a second prey population. It appears as if these two, prey species are competing with each other, but the decline of the second prey species is due to the boost that their shared predator population experiences because of the high density of the first prey species. Woodland caribou have avoided apparent competition by occupying habitats distant from other deer species. However, changes to their habitats, movement barriers and facilitated predator access have limited their ability to continued isolation. Across their range, woodland caribou populations have been subject to apparent competition (DeCesare, et al., 2010b; Wittmer, et al., 2013). For this reason, managing primary prey, either directly through hunting quotas, or indirectly through habitat management has become a needed management action (CCRIG, 2005).

4.4.1 MOOSE MANAGEMENT

Throughout British Columbia, moose are a common and sustaining prey of wolves (Messier, 1994). But their expanding range (Bergerud & Elliot, 1986), a wolf numerical response to moose densities (Messier & Joly, 2000) and apparent competition with woodland caribou mean that even moderate moose densities in or adjacent to caribou range poses a threat to caribou persistence (Seip & Cichowski, 1996; Lessard, et al., 2005; Serrouya, et al., 2017). Moose densities respond positively to early seral forest habitat and negatively to human hunting, and moose numbers have been falling around the province in response to harvest pressure (Moose Management Technical Team 2015). Lessard et al. (2005) found that a 10% increase in the moose harvest could stabilize caribou populations.

Hunting moose in the Groundhog caribou range is managed through a combination of general open seasons and limited entry hunts. Setting and achieving targeted moose populations estimated to natural forest seral conditions (CCRIG, 2005) has not been attempted.

4.4.2 DEER MANAGEMENT

Managing deer populations in support of caribou conservation is a challenge. Both white tail and mule deer can support predator populations that have negative effects on caribou (Latham, et al., 2011b). Both species can transmit diseases that could be catastrophic were they to spread to caribou populations (see above; Habib et al. 2011). Where mule deer and white-tail deer ranges overlap, mule deer tend to decline, perhaps also due to apparent competition (Robinson, et al., 2002). In British Columbia, there is active management to increase mule deer populations through habitat protection (BC Government, 2018) and manage white-tailed deer populations through hunting regulations (BC Government, 2016a). Neither are strictly regulated by either predators or food. White-tailed deer populations respond strongly to food availability as well as hunting or predation (Fryxell, et al., 1991; Messier, 1991; Dumont, et al., 2000). Mule deer are similar, but tend to be more vulnerable to predation, food availability, severe weather and loss of native winter habitat (Pierce, et al., 2012; Forrester & Wittmer, 2013; Bergman, et al., 2015). Indeed, regulating deer density using hunter tags must counter some difficult trends (declining number of hunters, increase prey refugia from hunters and increased use of residential areas by deer) to be successful (Brown, et al., 2000). Managing deer populations to a lower density will require managing artificial food sources (hay, grain), and access to high quality habitats as well as increased hunting pressure.

4.4.3 OTHER

Elk may be present within the Groundhog area however in low enough numbers that there is no harvest (BC Government, 2016a; BC Government, 2016c).

4.5 POPULATION REINFORCEMENT

4.5.1 MATERNITY PENNING

Maternal penning to increase calf recruitment is a tool that has not been used with the Groundhog caribou subpopulation. With a total population around twenty animals all females would have to be penned to form a viable project and even so gains would be slow.

4.5.2 CAPTIVE BREEDING

Captive breeding is defined as “keeping and selectively breeding caribou in captivity, usually at an ex-situ facility, over a relatively long period of time with the purpose of releasing individuals back into the wild” (Hayek, et al., 2016). To date captive breeding of caribou has not been implemented in BC and is not in the plans as a management tool for conserving the Groundhog caribou subpopulation.

4.5.3 TRANSLOCATION

Translocation refers to the movement of individuals from one population (or subpopulation) to another (Hayek, et al., 2016). Numerous translocation efforts for caribou have taken place across North America (Bergerud & Mercer, 1989; Hayek, et al., 2016).

There have been no translocations of caribou into or out of the Groundhog caribou subpopulation.

4.5.4 OTHER

Predator exclusion fencing or other forms of population reinforcement have not been implemented for the Groundhog caribou subpopulation.

4.6 STEWARDSHIP/OUTREACH

Stewardship Management Agreements (SMA's) are in place for many caribou subpopulation areas that also experience high recreational snowmobile use. The general concept is that while key areas of caribou are closed to snowmobile use, the snowmobiling community will act as stewards in implementing best management practices in other areas of caribou habitat that remain open to snowmobile use. Considerable outreach efforts at industry trade shows, snowmobile retailers, etc. may also be undertaken (CO Service, 2013; CO Service, 2014).

4.7 RESEARCH AND MONITORING

There have been decades of research into caribou biology and conservation including research specific to the Wells Gray – Thompson LPU (Furk, 2003a; Furk, 2003b; Furk, 2004; Kellner, et al., 2010; Lewis, et al., 2005; McLellan, et al., n.d.; Mowat & Stanley, 1999; Mowat & Poole, 1999). This body of work has informed scientists and policy makers of the key factors that contribute to caribou population dynamics, important threats and potential solutions. Key findings have been the proximate role of predation and apparent competition in caribou population fluctuations and the ultimate role of habitat destruction in caribou population declines. While these factors are well understood in a broad sense, ongoing research is necessary to fine tune caribou responses to ecological stimuli and human disturbance.

5 IMPLICATIONS TO OTHER WILDLIFE

Management actions focused on conserving caribou will necessarily have impacts on other wildlife species. Caribou require landscapes where densities of other ungulates and predators are low; thus, management actions undertaken for caribou may result in population sizes of moose, deer, and wolf that are much lower than those currently experienced (Serrouya, et al., 2015; Serrouya, et al., 2017). Reducing the populations of these species

may occur from either direct management actions (e.g. lethal control) or through environmental changes (e.g. habitat restoration for caribou) that lowers the extent of their suitable habitat.

Conserving caribou will likely benefit a myriad of other species co-occurring within old-growth forests. In this context, caribou may be considered an “umbrella” species (Bichet, et al., 2016). Such species generally have large spatial requirements and are sensitive to environmental changes, both attributes associated with caribou. Meeting the habitat requirements of caribou will therefore result in the habitat needs of many other species also being met.

6 IMPLICATIONS TO OTHER VALUES

Enacting measures to conserve caribou will likely have impacts on social, political and economic values. Most woodland caribou populations occur in working landscapes managed for natural resource extraction. Conserving caribou in these landscapes will likely require limits on these activities, which will likely invoke socioeconomic costs (Schneider, et al., 2011). To effectively mitigate these impacts while conserving caribou in multi-use landscapes, conservation planning will need to incorporate both economic costs and the biological needs of caribou in a spatially-explicit modelling framework (Schneider, et al., 2011; Schneider, et al., 2012).

In many caribou ranges, reducing the current densities of other ungulate species will be fundamental to conserving caribou (Serrouya, et al., 2015). Lowered populations of big-game species such as moose will initially result in greater hunting opportunity however will result in reduced hunting opportunities in the long term. While incorporating hunters in the initial lowering of these populations can be advantageous and seen as a “win-win” (Serrouya, et al., 2015), the long-term suppression of these populations will likely require support from the regional hunting community.

Caribou have evolved a life history strategy that is dependent on large landscapes of intact wilderness (Bergerud, 2000). For many, such landscapes have inherent and intangible value. Intact wilderness also has economic benefits, including climate regulation, sedimentation control and nutrient cycling (Balmford, et al., 2002).

Caribou conservation can also elicit ethical issues. For many small and rapidly declining populations, management actions may include direct control of predators and other ungulates (Hervieux, et al., 2014). Such actions can elicit considerable controversy and, consequently, require substantial scientific support and justification for their implementation (Boertje, et al., 2010).

7 PARTNERS / NEIGHBOURS

Partners are groups of people, currently existing or with strong future potential, who can assist in some aspect of management, such as expertise, financial contribution, in-kind support or moral support.

Neighbours are groups of people within in the caribou subpopulation area that are currently not participating in caribou management that could be affected by caribou management, such as local governments, industry tenure holders, and recreation groups. These neighbours could potentially become future partners.

8 RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

8.1 SHORT TERM (WITHIN 6-12 MONTHS)

8.1.1 HABITAT PROTECTION

- Begin discussions on methods to increase no harvest protection of core habitat as mapped by Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) to 100%.
- Begin discussions on converting the target of a wolf density of 3 per 1000 km² in matrix habitat to a system tangible to the forest industry, potentially a cap on the amount of early seral forest age classes.
- Initiate Land Act Reserves over remaining untenured areas of core habitat for major industrial uses including metal mining, placer mining, and natural gas.

8.1.2 ALTERNATE PREY MANAGEMENT

- Move towards management of moose populations to densities of < 0.3 / km² in all core and matrix caribou habitat.
- Review if changes are required to white tail deer hunting management to facilitate lower predator populations.

8.1.3 PREDATOR MANAGEMENT

- Collar 1 – 2 wolves per pack to improve current knowledge of wolf densities, movements and populations.
- Review compulsory inspection data and anecdotal reports for cougar to determine prevalence.

8.1.4 RESTORATION

- Initiate discussions with the forestry sector on decommissioning and rehabilitating roads to reduce predator travel efficiency and to limit recreational access.
- Initiate discussions with the forestry sector to begin exploring silviculture and forestry management options and prescriptions which will increase the speed at which early seral forests mature. This will include legislative options under FRPA which could support this work.

8.1.5 RECREATION

- Assess if current snowmobile restrictions are adequate to prevent the displacement of caribou from preferred habitat.
- In conjunction with the Conservation Officer Service, continue compliance monitoring and enforcement of current snowmobile restrictions.
- Update heliski industry best management practices. Experience in other mountain caribou areas suggest that the 500 meter flight and skier avoidance guideline is inadequate; suggest updating to 3 km skier and flight avoidance and / or ensure area closures are in key locations.

8.2 MEDIUM TERM (WITHIN 12-24 MONTHS)

8.2.1 HABITAT PROTECTION

- Increase no harvest protection of core habitat as mapped by Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) to 100%.
- Convert the target of a wolf density of 3 per 1000 km² in matrix habitat to a system tangible to the forest industry, potentially a cap on the amount of early seral forest stages.

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8.2.2 ALTERNATE PREY MANAGEMENT

- Continue management of moose populations to densities of $< 0.3 / \text{km}^2$ in all core and matrix caribou habitat.
- Manage white tail deer populations to lower predator populations if necessary.

8.2.3 PREDATOR MANAGEMENT

- Introduce a wolf cull if densities are greater than 3 wolves / 1000 km^2

8.2.4 RESTORATION

- Rehabilitate forestry road segments to inhibit predator movement and prevent mechanized access.
- Initiate silviculture and forestry management options and prescriptions which will increase the speed at which early seral forests mature.

8.2.5 RECREATION

- Improve on current snowmobile restrictions to prevent the displacement of caribou from preferred habitat if necessary.
- In conjunction with the Conservation Officer Service, continue compliance monitoring and enforcement of current snowmobile restrictions.

8.2.6 POPULATION MONITORING

- Continue caribou population monitoring through annual or bi-annual aerial censuses.

8.3 LONG TERM (WITHIN 24-48 MONTHS)

8.3.1 HABITAT PROTECTION

- Monitor whether the introduction of a cap on the amount of early seral forest is producing the desired result.

8.3.2 ALTERNATE PREY MANAGEMENT

- Continue management of moose populations to densities of $< 0.3 / \text{km}^2$ in all core and matrix caribou habitat.
- Continue management of white tail deer populations if necessary.

8.3.3 PREDATOR MANAGEMENT

- Continue the wolf cull if densities are greater than 3 wolves / 1000 km^2

8.3.4 RESTORATION

- Continue to rehabilitate forestry road segments to inhibit predator movement and prevent mechanized access.
- Continue with silviculture and forestry management options and prescriptions which will increase the speed at which early seral forests mature.

8.3.5 RECREATION

- In conjunction with the Conservation Officer Service, continue compliance monitoring and enforcement of current snowmobile restrictions

8.3.6 POPULATION MONITORING

- Continue caribou population monitoring through annual or bi-annual aerial censuses.

8.3.7 OUTREACH

- Continue with a regional outreach program to foster support for management that will promote growth of the Groundhog caribou program.

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