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## ‘Negative Population Growth’ for Boreal Caribou in Alberta

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**Report Commented On:** First [Report](#) on the implementation of the Section 11 agreement for the conservation and recovery of the woodland caribou in Alberta (January 19, 2024)

In late January, Alberta issued the first [Report](#) on implementation of the [Agreement for the conservation and recovery of the Woodland Caribou in Alberta](#), signed by Alberta and Canada under section 11 of the *Species at Risk Act*, [SC 2002, c 29](#) [SARA] in October 2020. Commentators have noted that the Report reveals [little progress](#) by Alberta on protecting what is left of boreal caribou in this province. This criticism is certainly warranted, however the commitments made by Alberta in this Agreement will never result in progress towards halting the march of caribou towards extirpation (see “[Canada and Alberta Agree to More Pie-In-The-Sky on Woodland Caribou](#)”). What the Report does make transparent is: (1) Alberta continues to authorize the destruction of caribou habitat despite saying publicly that the government is committed to achieving population recovery; and (2) Alberta’s only real action plan to save caribou is to kill wolves.

The decline of continental terrestrial mammals is perhaps the most visible sign of the [Anthropocene](#) extinction. These signs are everywhere (e.g. see [here](#) for a recent study on the decline of elephants in Nigeria), and habitat loss is the known culprit. Caribou are woven into the essence of Canada. However, this significance has not protected them from devastating habitat loss. The absence of meaningful action to address the decline of woodland caribou is surely a major failure of late-20th century environmental policy in Canada.

Alberta is the epicentre of this failure. Habitat loss caused by resource extraction has decimated all remaining boreal caribou herds in Alberta. The map below shows the distribution of ranges across Canada with coding to indicate whether the minimum threshold of necessary undisturbed habitat within the range is currently met (green and orange), and those ranges where the minimum threshold is not met (mauve):

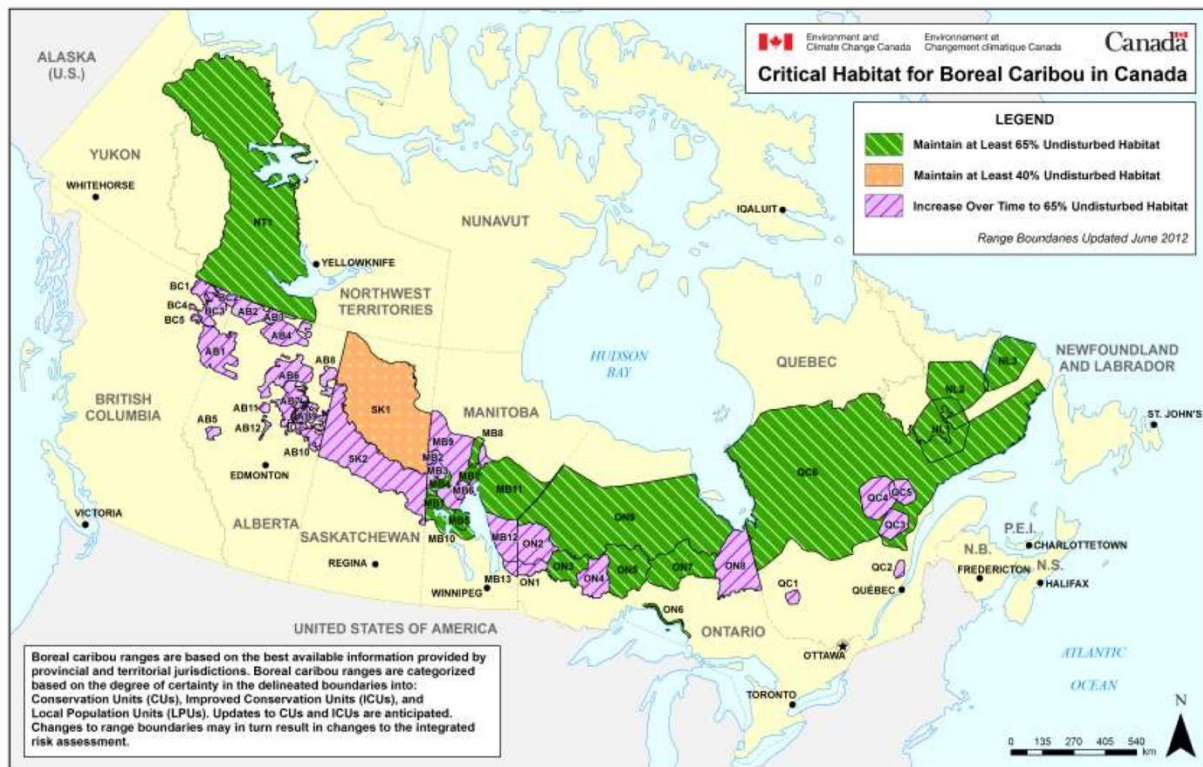


Figure 5. Critical habitat for boreal caribou in Canada as of 2019. Updated information includes the identification of critical habitat in SK1. MB6 and QC5 have also been updated from green to mauve based on habitat condition information previously published in the 5-Year Progress Report (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2017).

(Source: “[Amended Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou \(\*Rangifer tarandus caribou\*\), Boreal Population, in Canada 2020](#)” at 35)

Alberta is clearly home to the most fragmented and threatened habitat of boreal caribou populations across Canada. Oil and gas extraction and logging have fragmented old-growth forests with clearcuts and linear disturbances like roads and pipelines (see [here](#)), transforming the landscape into early-seral forests which do not provide adequate food sources, exposing caribou as secondary prey for wolves, and enabling recreation access, which displaces caribou. Despite declining caribou population numbers and government policy that purports to be concerned about this, there is little sign of abatement for any of these activities in areas where caribou remain (see [here](#)).

Boreal caribou are considered to be emblematic of the ‘extinction paradox’: a proliferation of endangered species legislation that purports to implement habitat protection, alongside a steady pattern of decline in wildlife populations caused by habitat destroying activities authorized by the very same state authority which enacts the legal protection (see [here](#)). However, I would argue that in the case of Alberta’s endangered boreal caribou there is no paradox because there is no real legal protection of habitat, outside of a few protected areas where industrial activity is prohibited.

Caribou recovery strategies and range plans say all the right things about identifying, restoring, and protecting habitat, but this is an illusion. Dig through the clutter of proposals, plans to plan, fuzzy maps, and cumbersome data tables, and you will notice that non-discretionary protection

with legal rules that absolutely prohibit destruction of caribou habitat in Alberta is pretty much non-existent. Alberta relies heavily on its regulatory delegates (such as the industry-controlled Alberta Energy Regulator) to impose ‘manage and mitigate’ measures in an exercise of discretionary power to regulate impacts to caribou habitat. On the forestry side of things, Alberta delegates caribou habitat recovery actions (aka endless planning and monitoring) to an industry-controlled association (see the [Caribou Habitat Recovery Program](#)). This is neo-liberalism par excellence.

The evidence is clear. Alberta has approved the drilling of thousands of oil and gas wells in areas with identified critical habitat for boreal caribou (see [here](#)). More generally, a recent study used satellite data to illustrate the loss of forest cover (i.e. habitat loss) across most caribou ranges in British Columbia and Alberta from 2000 to 2018, the very same timeframe in which governments have been promising real action on protecting caribou (see [here](#)). The only tangible effort to protect habitat usually comes in the form of discretionary measures like access or timing restrictions on project approvals, or habitat [offsets](#). However, this is merely an illusion to distract the public. The highly disturbed state of caribou ranges in the face of industrial activities shows that these discretionary measures are not effective at preventing habitat loss.

Ongoing habitat loss means that caribou population numbers continue to decline in Alberta, with a few exceptions for herds in areas where invasive recovery actions have been implemented: fenced maternal pens and killing wolves. A [maternal pen](#) consists of a fenced area within caribou habitat wherein pregnant adults are captured, fed, and held under daily monitoring until they give birth to calves, and then all are subsequently released. Alberta has tried maternal pens with mixed and difficult to measure results (see [here](#)). Research suggests the effectiveness of maternal pens is context-specific (e.g. location specific) and will have more positive outcomes when paired with a wolf cull program (see [here](#)). This is the only action plan on boreal caribou recovery in this province. Alberta spends millions of dollars annually on aerial shooting of wolves (Alberta spent \$1.6 million annually between 2019 and 2022 on its aerial ‘caribou and wolf management’ program according to records obtained under the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, [RSA 2000, c F-25](#), and on file with the author) and while an ethically dubious recovery measure, wolf culls are known to correlate with growth in caribou populations (see [here](#)). However, it is also clear that neither maternal pens nor wolf culls will result in a recovery of sustainable caribou populations without the restoration of damaged habitat and protection of what habitat remains.

In the face of provincial inaction on habitat protection, caribou advocates have directed their efforts at the federal government and its powers under SARA. However, the federal government is steadfast in its refusal to use discretionary powers to implement SARA habitat protection for caribou on provincial lands. For example, in 2012 the federal Minister of the Environment refused to recommend an emergency protection order for boreal caribou in Alberta (see “[Public Notice on the Minister of the Environment's Reconsideration of the Emergency Order for Boreal Caribou](#)”). In 2021 the Governor in Council declined to issue an emergency protection order for southern mountain caribou in British Columbia (see “[Statement: Government of Canada’s approach to addressing the imminent threats to the recovery of Southern Mountain Caribou](#)”). This reluctance was most recently apparent in the 2023 decision by the Governor in Council to refuse a section 80

emergency order for boreal caribou in Ontario (see [“Protection Assessment: Critical Habitat and Individuals of Boreal Caribou in Ontario”](#)).

Instead of exercising its habitat protection powers under *SARA*, the federal government has negotiated *SARA* section 11 conservation agreements. Section 11 provides the federal government with power to enter agreements with other governments to facilitate measures to recover and protect species-at-risk, including habitat protection. Currently, 11 of the 14 conservation agreements posted to the [SARA public registry](#) pertain to woodland caribou. In Alberta, the commencement of litigation over habitat protection for five boreal woodland caribou herds was ultimately settled with the signing of the 2020 [Agreement for the conservation and recovery of the Woodland Caribou in Alberta](#) between Alberta and Canada (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

This Agreement is nothing more than a planning framework with empty promises. As I explained in [“Canada and Alberta Agree to More Pie-In-The-Sky on Woodland Caribou”](#), it is very misleading to describe it in terms of caribou protection:

[I]n this agreement Canada and Alberta gave themselves up to 100 years to achieve the following outcomes: to achieve naturally self-sustaining status for all woodland caribou local populations in Alberta (at s 8.2.3); to achieve the critical habitat outcomes outlined in the *SARA* Recovery Strategy (at s 8.3.3.1). Why bother with any of this, if that is the timeline – particularly in relation to achieving critical habitat objects in the recovery strategy? The caribou will have long disappeared from Alberta by 2120 without real protection for critical habitat, none of which is offered or even mentioned in this agreement.

What are Alberta’s actual commitments in this agreement? These are set out in tables in Appendix B. In sum, these amount to more of the same: set up committees, establish programs, map, plan, evaluate, manage, monitor, coordinate, mitigate, and kill the wolves. . . . The word “protection” appears a mere 7 times in the agreement: 5 of those instances are in the preamble, and the other 2 instances are in relation to a commitment by Canada and Alberta to consider information in relation to caribou protection provided by Indigenous peoples and other “stakeholders.” In fact, the agreement reveals Alberta is actually taking a step backwards in habitat protection by resuming the sale of sub-surface mineral leases in caribou habitat (s 8.3.1.3). To the extent that the agreement focuses Alberta on ‘manage and mitigate’ commitments which better align with the federal *SARA* Recovery Strategy (something the agreement arguably does – I’m being generous here), one wonders who will enforce these commitments if Alberta comes up short on these deliverables?

The one tangible thing this Agreement (and other section 11 agreements) could deliver is enhanced transparency because it commits to reporting on progress and outcomes that go beyond statutory requirements. Section 12 of the Agreement requires annual and multi-year reporting on steps taken on implementation, as well as on substantive matters such as population metrics and habitat protection.

However, section 11 agreement disclosure has been thin. For instance, the only published report on the SARA public registry concerning steps taken under any of these agreements as of the end of 2023 was the following paragraph included in the [2021 SARA Report to Parliament](#) (at 29):

Conservation measures under 2 SARA s.11 conservation agreements for Southern Mountain Caribou in British Columbia, with British Columbia, Sauteau First Nations and West Moberly First Nations, also continued to be implemented, including: Indigenous engagement, monitoring, herd planning, habitat protection, maternal penning, predator management and habitat restoration, with some delays in implementation of activities occurring due to COVID-19.

All of which brings me to the Report on the implementation of the 2020 Canada-Alberta Agreement, which is the subject of this post. For starters, it is disappointing that the Report is not on the SARA Public Registry as a regulatory document pertaining to the boreal woodland caribou. Secondly, the Report is already stale. It was published in January 2024, and describes planning and actions taken by Alberta in 2021. There are no apparent legal consequences for a failure to report in a timely manner (or at all for that matter). If reporting were taken seriously by government officials, the Report would be published on the SARA public registry and it would be current.

On substance, this is a 50-page report describing prior planning commitments with a whole lot of nothing on action. Even establishing committees and the plan to plan for caribou recovery hardly got underway in 2021 (at 5 – 7). Despite strong intention to plan for the restoration of seismic lines, the industry-led Caribou Habitat Recovery Program only managed to actually restore 138 kms (at 8 – 9). The plan to save the highly disturbed and isolated Little Smoky herd has taken a hit with a decision not to proceed with captive breeding (at 11) (not to be conflated with maternal pens – Parks Canada describes captive breeding of caribou [here](#)).

Negative population growth – a sanitized phrase used in the Report to describe population decline caused by habitat loss – was reported in 2021 for all boreal caribou herds in Alberta, other than those ranges where the wolf cull program operated (at 12 and 36). Interestingly, the Report does not provide any information on how much public money was spent to kill 574 wolves in 2020 and 356 wolves in 2021 (at 35 – 36). This is a glaring omission given that the operations budget for the ‘caribou and wolf management’ program (disclosed in [FOIP records](#) on file with the author) was submitted at \$1.6 million per year, with the following description of overall importance of killing wolves to the entire caribou recovery program:

**Caribou and Wolf Management:** This program element is central to overall program delivery, and to avoiding the further loss of caribou populations in the province. Contract is for helicopters, pilots, and crews with highly specialized qualifications, including caribou capture/net-gun/firearms deployment personnel to capture and collar caribou across the province, and to conduct aerial wolf control on seven caribou ranges; these two components are paired since caribou and wolf delivery aspects will occur concurrently. Deploying GPS collars on adult female caribou in all of Alberta's caribou ranges enables estimates of adult female survival (see item #3 below) which in combination with estimates of calf survival (see item #2 below) allows for annual estimates caribou population growth, identification of caribou habitat use, distribution



and movement patterns, and documentation of caribou mortality causes. 'This information is critical to informing all provincial management actions and planning, species status assessments, and enables Alberta to fulfill reporting requirements under the federal *Species at Risk Act*. Lethal wolf removal is crucial to avoid extirpation of a number of caribou populations in Alberta; no other management actions or plans are useful if caribou populations become extirpated in the near-term.

([FOIP Records](#), emphasis added)

A crude back-of-the-envelope calculation puts the cost at approximately \$5000 per wolf in 2021. This is a clear externality of resource extraction. Why isn't industry paying for this very expensive, inefficient, ethically dubious, and largely hopeless endeavour?

On habitat, the Report describes what is already well-known: with just a few exceptions, Alberta's boreal caribou ranges are more than 90% disturbed (at 12 – 18).

Surely most problematic of all, the Report reveals that industry approvals continued to be granted in highly disturbed boreal caribou ranges (at 49). Unfortunately for boreal caribou, their home is not a 'pristine viewscape' worthy of protection. There is no talk of any protected buffer zones around designated caribou habitat, in contrast to protection zones proposed by the UCP government in its [de facto renewables moratorium](#) to protect 'pristine viewscapes'. The hypocrisy of Alberta environmental policy has never been more apparent.

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