



Caribou Update



February 2011

Good news on the census but the HMP continues

The Porcupine Caribou Management Board received the recent good news about Alaskan biologists' progress on counting the census photos taken in July 2010. The Board is very pleased indeed that the Porcupine Caribou Herd (PCH) seems to have increased since the last estimate in 2001.

Although they have not yet finished counting all the photos, the number of caribou the Alaskan biologists have counted so far indicates that we should expect the herd size will be "significantly greater" than 123,000 caribou as estimated in the last census.

We have a good long-term record of herd size estimates for the PCH. In fact, this is the eleventh census done using this technique. Results from these estimates show that the PCH grew from 105,000 caribou in 1972 to a peak of 178,000 caribou in 1989. Five censuses since the peak in 1989 showed a slow but steady decline in caribou numbers. The last census in 2001 documented 123,000 caribou in the herd, or 55,000 fewer caribou than was recorded 12 years before. Cooperating biologists in Alaska and Canada have been trying to get another census each year since 2003 without success.

With each passing year without a census, the uncertainty stemming from the lack of a recent herd size estimate, as well as reports of declines in other northern caribou herds, made all who work with and depend on the herd very cautious about its current status and future.

If the declining trend that was seen between 1989 and 2001 had continued, it was possible that the herd could have numbered as low as 90,000 or 100,000 caribou in 2010, or about half of its size at the peak of the cycle.

We still don't know exactly why the herd declined from 1989 to 2001. That means we don't know why the declining trend appears to have reversed either. Over the next few months, biologists will be studying the annual biological indicators such as calf birth rates and survival rates to see if there are any possible explanations.

The *Harvest Management Plan for the Porcupine Caribou Herd in Canada* (HMP) was developed mainly in response to this uncertainty. There are a whole suite of factors that could have contributed to the herd decline but how humans respond to changing herd size is the only factor we can really control. As such, the Board and the eight Parties to the *Porcupine Caribou Management Agreement* developed a system to guide harvest management under different herd sizes.

The HMP is intended to coordinate harvest management across the Canadian range of the herd. It allows managers and users to be proactive, with many hard decisions already agreed to by the Parties. The HMP was signed in the summer of 2010 and Parties developed an Implementation Plan for the HMP over the fall. The Implementation Plan is currently with the Parties for final signatures.

There are four general management regimes, represented as different colour zones. The initial consideration for determining which colour zone the herd is in starts with an estimate of herd size. Other

information is also considered, such as: population indicators (e.g. calf survival), hunting indicators (e.g. level and composition of the harvest) and habitat indicators (e.g. amount of habitat burned by forest fires).

The HMP is a plan for all times, good and bad. Although times are not as bad as some of us feared, there are still actions in the HMP that need to be carried out and the Board remains committed to implementing the HMP as agreed to by the Parties.

As directed in the HMP, the Board will be hosting the first Annual Harvest Meeting in Inuvik from February 8 to 10, 2011. This meeting is broken into three days: a public information and comment session; a meeting of the Board and the Parties; and a deliberation meeting of the Board.

During the first day, the Parties, stakeholders and biologists will share all current information affecting the status of the herd and its habitat. Members of the general public are welcome to attend this day.

During the second day, the Board and the Parties will meet privately to discuss the information provided during the previous day as well as any sensitive information and topics. This meeting is closed to the general public to allow participants to speak openly and frankly.

During the third day, the Board will hold an *in camera* meeting to deliberate on all information and discussions from the previous two days. The Board will determine their recommendations about which colour zone the herd is in and the harvest management actions for the coming year.

Within 30 days of the Annual Harvest meeting, the Board will forward its recommendations to the Parties.

While this meeting is one of the most important activities that the Board will undertake, there are a number of tasks related to the overall Harvest Management

Strategy that still need to be done in the near future.

For example, the Native User Agreements need to be drafted for both NWT and Yukon. These agreements will outline how a limited harvest, if and when one is implemented, will be allocated among users in each of the Territories.

Perhaps most importantly, the HMP calls for all Parties to collect caribou harvest data from their constituents, regardless of what the herd size is. Solid information on how many caribou are harvested will be a great help to the Board in assessing the effects of harvest on the herd and the effectiveness of various management actions.

Once the HMP Implementation Plan is finalized, it is expected that there will also be some new actions for various Parties to carry out.

While the Board was very relieved to hear that the Alaskan biologists were successful in getting a photocensus done this summer, the Board and Parties will still be very busy in the coming months. The Board recognizes that the biologists have not finalized the counting yet and appreciate that they released this very pertinent information for consideration at the upcoming Annual Harvest Meeting in Inuvik.

For more information, please visit PCMB's Web site at www.taiga.net/pcmb or contact Deana Lemke at (867) 633-4780, fax 393-3904 or e-mail pcmb@taiga.net



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