



### **Statement on Primary Prey Reduction to Benefit Caribou Populations in British Columbia**

Safari Club International (SCI) and Safari Club International Foundation (SCIF) are leaders in advocating for the freedom to hunt and science-based wildlife management. The two organizations have extensive background and expertise in natural resource policy and predator-prey issues across North America and around the world. SCI has two active local Chapters in British Columbia, the Hunters for BC and West Coast BC Chapters, representing many hunters, guides, outfitters and conservationists in the province. SCIF likewise has invested heavily in wildlife research across Western Canada importantly including support to grizzly bear population surveys in the South Rockies and Flathead areas of British Columbia. For more information on SCI and SCIF's leadership in this space, please refer to the SCI and SCIF Position on Predator Management.

Management of woodland caribou in BC and elsewhere in Canada is a complex and important issue facing a culturally iconic and economically important species. In the recent past, management strategies to promote stability and growth in woodland caribou populations have included direct wolf reduction through trapping and shooting, maternal penning of caribou to increase recruitment, and reductions in populations of other ungulate species to reduce predator abundance (e.g., primary prey reduction). Presently, there are increasing calls to reduce or eliminate wolf control in favor of other management strategies, especially primary prey reduction in BC. SCIF and SCI feel that any decisions about woodland caribou management must be science-based and consider multiple stakeholders.

We acknowledge that:

- Woodland caribou have undergone significant and long-term declines such that not only is the future of hunting woodland caribou threatened but also the persistence of this species in the wild is not assured.
- There is strong evidence that landscape scale changes in areas of BC occupied by woodland caribou and related to resource extraction (e.g., timber harvest, large scale hydro-electric reservoirs and oil and gas development) have contributed to these declines through a variety of mechanisms including habitat degradation and predation.
- Extensive study of caribou populations across Canada has, in some cases, shown that "predator-mediated apparent competition" is a significant factor in caribou declines. Specifically, habitat changes favor increases in abundance of certain ungulates, especially moose and white-tailed deer. Native predators, particularly wolves, have responded to this available prey by increasing in density. Although caribou are insufficiently abundant to serve as primary prey, increased predation on adults and calves has been observed in response to these changes. In many cases, these predation rates are sufficient to explain a significant portion of observed caribou declines. Critically, because caribou are scarce and serve only as secondary prey, the normal feedback mechanisms that operate to reduce predator abundance (e.g., reduced recruitment and survival due to scarce prey)

- do not operate in these systems and predator populations can remain high indefinitely as long as density of primary prey stays high.
- Past studies suggest that a strategy of primary prey reduction through increased recreational hunting may improve caribou survival and population growth rates under certain conditions but should be used in combination with established techniques such as direct predator control.
- Aside from those parts of the province impacted by industrial development, there is also strong evidence that caribou populations in many of BC's wilderness areas are currently experiencing significant declines with predation listed as the leading cause.

However:

- The efficacy of primary prey reduction to increase survivability is, as of yet, unproven and, therefore, reliance on this strategy could be a risk to caribou sustainability, especially in the absence of an aggressive predator control program. In particular, the large-scale study by Serrouya et al. (2017) in BC showed promising but not conclusive impacts on caribou population growth. Moose reduction appeared to benefit adult caribou survival, but not recruitment, and impacts on growth were variable. Small populations, which may be at the greatest risk of extirpation, continued to decline after implementation of primary prey reduction and even the best-case population only achieved stability.
- An extensive and long-term literature supports the effectiveness of wolf control in sustaining caribou populations. We feel that it is premature to end these programs and rely on primary prey reduction to sustain caribou. There are many factors, including multiple potential primary prey species (e.g., white-tailed deer and elk) that can sustain wolf density and alternative predators (e.g., bears and cougars) that affect caribou populations and mitigate the potential benefits of a single-species primary prey reduction. The risks of continued decline and local extirpation are high.
- Caribou are listed under the Species at Risk Act (SARA) and long-term conservation and eventual restoration of stable caribou populations are national and provincial priorities shared by hunters and other conservationists. However, long-term reductions in moose density can have significant impacts on the region, including loss of recreational opportunities for resident hunters, loss of income for the guiding and outfitting industries, and loss of subsistence hunting opportunities for First Nations that rely on moose as an important food source.

Therefore,

- Reliance on primary prey reduction in the form of increased moose harvest as the sole or primary management option for woodland caribou is unwise and places the remaining caribou herds at unacceptable risk.
- If primary prey reduction is implemented, it should be done judiciously and in combination with other management practices, including active wolf control as applied by provincial wildlife authorities in recent years. These management activities will likely need to be maintained for an extended time period, as recovery of mature boreal forest conditions that are most suitable for caribou will take several decades.
- The nontrivial impacts of moose reduction on important stakeholders in BC, including First Nations and guides and outfitters, should be acknowledged and these stakeholders should be included in decision-making about caribou management in BC.
- Predator management for the protection and conservation of caribou also needs to include controls for BC's other major predators (primarily cougar, grizzly bear and black bear).

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