

Twenty-five years of co-management of caribou in northern Québec

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Abstract: The Hunting Fishing and Trapping Co-ordinating Committee (HFTCC), created at the signature of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement has been meeting regularly since 1977. Early in the process, it became clear that the perception of the role and powers of the Committee were not commonly shared by the native and non-native members of the Committee. Nevertheless, the Committee has been used primarily as a consultative body for wildlife related issues. Of all the files on which the Committee worked, Caribou management, (including the development of outfitting and commercial hunting for this species) has been among one of the most discussed subjects during the meetings. An analysis of important decisions taken and of the process that led to them reveal that very rarely was the Committee able to formulate unanimous resolutions to the Governments concerning caribou management. In fact, only a few unanimous resolutions could be traced and many were ignored. This took place during a period of abundance and growth of the caribou herds. As a result, the Committee has gone through the cycle of growth of the George River Herd without a management plan, without a long term outfitting management plan and for the last 8 years, without a population estimate of the herds. This situation did not prevent the Committee from allocating quotas for a commercial hunt, open a winter sport hunt and to give permanent status to outfitting camps that were once established as mobile camps. It was hoped then that increased harvest would help maintain the population at carrying capacity. This short-term reaction however, never evolved into a more elaborate plan. Of course this must be looked at in the context of the HFTCC having a lot more to worry about than the Caribou. Although all members know of the population cycles of caribou, the decision process that must be triggered, should a crisis occur is not in place. This presently results into a polarization of concerned users (fall outfitters vs. winter outfitters, subsistence and sport hunters vs. commercial hunt, Outfitters Associations vs. HFTCC and eventually George River Herd users vs. Leaf River Herd users. The HFTCC may have to make difficult decisions during the coming years but did not gain much constructive experience through its first 25 years of existence. It is unfortunate that the authority of the Committee is binding the governments only in times of crisis when an upper limit of kill needs to be established. Because of the unpredictability of caribou herd numbers, the upper limit of kill should be established on a yearly basis. This would insure that the committee is fed information continuously in order to make informed decisions and would also re-establish the authority of the HFTCC over this resource.

Key words: Cree, Inuit, Naskapis, sport hunting, subsistence harvest.

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Introduction

The conclusions contained in this paper are those of the author and may not coincide with those of current or past members of the Hunting Fishing and Trapping Coordinating Committee. I base my opinions on my nine years of experience as an advisor to the Cree members of the said Committee.

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) was signed in 1975 and the Northeastern Québec Agreement in 1978. The territory covered by these comprehensive Agreements is approximate-

ly one million km² in Northern Québec. The Northern Québec Inuits, the James Bay Cree of Québec and the Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach are beneficiaries of these Agreements. Section 24 of the JBNQA established the Hunting Fishing and Trapping Regime, and section 24.4, the Hunting Fishing and Trapping Coordinating Committee (HFTCC), which is an expert body, composed of an equal number of Native and Government voting members. It is primarily a consultative body

to the governments of Québec and Canada and is intended to be the preferential and exclusive forum where the beneficiaries of the Agreements and the two governments may jointly formulate regulations and supervise the administration of the Hunting Fishing and Trapping Regime.

The Coordinating Committee enjoys the authority to establish the upper limit of kill for moose and caribou for Native and non-Natives and subject to the principle of conservation, such decision bind the responsible Minister of government who must make such regulations as are necessary to give effect thereto. This authority is unique among co-management boards in Canada.

Sport hunting for caribou in northern Québec is open since 1964. At first, there was only one hunting zone, which covered all the area north of the 50th parallel. In 1973, the zone was sub-divided into four zones. The main zones where sport hunting took place were zone 03 and 04. Zone 04 was for Québec residents exclusively whereas in zone 03 the use of an Outfitter was required for all sport hunters, except for residents of Shefferville and Fort Chimo.

Hunting pressure was controlled then through the number of hunting permits made available to the Outfitters. For instance, the number of permits available varied from 700 in 1975 to 1300 in 1979 in zone 03 (Mallory, 1980).

The HFTCC started meeting regularly in 1977. A difference in the perception of the role of the Committee was evident between the Native and Government parties. Native parties saw themselves as equal partner in the Management of wildlife resources whereas the Government representatives saw the committee role as advisory to the responsible governments. This has contributed to mutual frustrations and impatience on the part of the Québec Government party and the three Native parties (Juniper, 1994).

In this paper, I will examine the evolution of the regulatory changes, which influenced some aspects of the development of Caribou sport hunting and the role played by the HFTCC. This historical perspective is essential in order to better understand the context into which the Committee may have to make difficult decisions should the George River Herd decline to a level requesting restrictive measures.

Upper limit of Kill

In 1980, information indicating that the number of female caribou on calving grounds had declined and that the percentage of calf in the population was low was provided to the Committee. A discussion of

these results with the biologists of the government led the Committee to the conclusion that restrictive measures were necessary. The HFTCC adopted for the first time an upper limit of Kill of 3300 caribou for zone 23 and 24 (formerly 03 and 04). The resolution was put in application by issuing a limited number of hunting permits (4000). Quebec representatives on the Committee abstained from voting on the said resolution. It was the first time that the Committee made a decision that bound the responsible minister. It can be found in the Minutes of the meeting that Québec representatives wanted to control access to the territory through a restricted number of permits rather than reducing the harvest of caribou. Following that important decision, the Committee reviewed the upper limit of kill for caribou every year until 1987.

In 1981, as a result of a detailed analysis of population indicators demonstrating clearly that the caribou population was augmenting, the upper limit of kill was established at 5500 with most of the increase in zone 24. That time the Naskapi representative abstained from voting on the resolution arguing that it would be necessary to improve our understanding of the biology of the George River Herd prior to making such decision.

In 1982, the adoption of the upper limit of kill was heavily discussed because Native Parties were frustrated with the lack of progress made with the hiring of Native Game Wardens and because Québec was suggesting to increase the size of zone 24 and possibly the harvest. An upper limit of kill of 5500 was finally adopted, with the representative of Québec voting in favour, the Cree against and the Naskapi and Inuit abstaining. Later in that year, the Committee discussed for the first time the possibility of allowing two caribou per permit and the opening a winter hunt. It is clear from the Minutes that the members of the Committee shared the opinion that the herd was increasing and that sport hunting was not limiting this increase. An upper limit of kill of 2700 caribou for the winter hunt was established through a unanimous resolution and for the first time two caribous would be taken for each sport-hunting permit. The resolution also called for the drawing up of a management plan.

In 1983, the Minutes of the HFTCC indicate clearly that the members agreed that the herd could be exploited more intensively but argued about the lack of economic spin-off for the Natives. At the time, the procedure for the establishment of new outfitting operations was not finalized and the native promoters were limited to operations taking place in territories surrounding their communities. The proposal from Québec was to implement an earlier

hunting season (bow and arrow), to allow two caribou per permit for the fall hunt and to fix the upper limit of kill at 10 000. The HFTCC finally adopted a resolution fixing the upper limit of kill at 5500 and decided to adopt another resolution for the winter hunt. The total number allocated to sport hunting would not be higher than 10 000 animals. Québec representatives voted against this resolution. It was later reported to the HFTCC that the outfitters were not ready to augment the number of caribou to two per permit because of logistical problems such as air transport. The committee then adopted a resolution establishing the upper limit of kill for the winter hunt at 1500 animals. A second resolution rejecting the proposal to have two caribou per permit was adopted, with Québec representatives voting against.

In 1984, discussion went much easier. Even though Québec proposed to not establish an upper limit of kill, the HFTCC adopted a resolution establishing the upper limit of kill for the territory and for both fall and winter hunt to 7000 caribous. The date for the opening of the hunt in zone 23 was also changed to an earlier date.

In 1985, the HFTCC adopted again a resolution establishing the upper limit of kill at 7000 caribous. The Cree representatives abstained from voting on this resolution.

In 1986, Québec representatives were arguing that the establishment of an upper limit of kill for caribou was a useless administrative procedure, but the Native representatives insisted to establish the limit to 9000 animals on the basis that such an exercise aimed at protecting their priority of harvest on the Territory. Québec representatives abstained from voting on this resolution. This was the last time a resolution fixing the upper limit of kill was adopted.

For the 1987-88 season, it was agreed to not fix an upper limit of kill as in the past. First, the upper limit of kill would be based on biological data. This number would be established for a period of approximately 5 years but could be reviewed every year. The number would include subsistence hunting. This exercise would take place in the framework of the drawing up of a management plan for caribou. No upper limit of kill would be fixed for 1987-88. Such a number would only be established in 1988-89 and for a period of 5 years.

During that period the province authorized the use of mobile camps for outfitters. Although the sites used for mobile camps were to be allocated on a temporary basis, the 11 outfitters in operation were allocated a total of 83 sites and were able to increase instantaneously their lodging capacity without the administrative weight of the use of permanent sites.

It was hoped then that an increased harvest would contribute to maintain the herd at carrying capacity. Of course, it did not happen, and the outfitters soon requested that the sites become permanent sites. The status of these sites remains unclear today and could create problems should restrictive measures be necessary.

During the following year, the representatives of Québec tabled a document describing scenarios of harvest based on caribou populations of 300 000 or 600 000. The document concluded that it was "useless to plan for the long term" (...) it must be clear for every one involved that harvest needs to be readjusted frequently when new information becomes available. Discussions on this topic were postponed until a new survey was carried out. No other mentions in the minutes of the HFTCC appeared until 1998 when the big game working group was again mandated to draft a management plan. A majority of the meetings of this task force have been postponed, and as a result the HFTCC has yet to see the draft version of the plan.

The need for a management plan

As previously seen, the discussions that led to the establishment of an upper limit of kill between 1980 to 1987 were often influenced by other issues concerning caribou, such as the lack of a management plan, problems associated with Native participation to the outfitting industry and others.

In this section, the discussions relating to the need for a management plan are reviewed. At present, the HFTCC in the course of its work can refer to management plans for almost all game species such as moose, black bear, Atlantic salmon, and important species for subsistence such as beluga. Ironically, we have no management plan for the species that could be rated most important both for subsistence and the outfitting industry. Such a situation is not the result of an absence of funds or the lack of biological information. In fact, millions of dollars have been spent researching caribou biology and behaviour. Hydro Québec conducted a research programme to study the impacts of reservoir creation on the migration of caribou and the government of Canada spent important sums of money to monitor impacts caused by NATO low level flights in Labrador.

At the meeting of the HFTCC in 1980, a discussion on caribou management took place during which the Inuit party offered to assume part of the responsibility for caribou management provided they were given the necessary funds by the government. This discussion was continued during a second meeting. The Inuits argued then that their experi-

ence and their vested interest in the resource placed them in a privileged position to assume more responsibilities. The available funds should be allocated to them for that purpose. Of course the representative of the Québec government replied that they had no intention of sharing funds for the management of caribou nor did Québec intend to abdicate legal responsibility in the management of this species.

During the period from 1981 to 1987, four different censuses of the George River herd were conducted by the Québec and Newfoundland-Labrador governments, the results of which were confusing and hampered efforts to adopt a reliable population estimate for management purposes. Nevertheless, government managers were concerned with the large size of the herd in relation to its habitat, and recommended measures to stabilize its numbers (opening of a winter hunt and a bag limit of two).

The Inuits expressed concerns in adopting such liberal regulations in the absence of a management plan. When the resolution endorsing the opening of a winter hunt and the increased bag limit was adopted in 1983, it also called for the drawing up of a management plan which would allow more benefits for Native people. The approval by the Natives for liberal regulation was later suspended by way of another resolution however, which also requested the Committee's task force on Big game to draw up a management plan for the George River Herd. At the time, the task force was occupied with moose management and it was not until December 1986 that this body addressed caribou management, when the Government of Québec tabled a draft management plan. The government representatives assured Native parties of their guaranteed participation and added that because the minister himself had requested a management plan for caribou, the project automatically enjoyed the highest priority.

Further discussions on a Caribou management plan between Québec representatives and the Native parties continued sporadically including meetings with the Ministers responsible for Wildlife resources. However, a Québec government management plan for caribou has yet to be adopted. The native members on the HFTCC have shown much patience and persistence and went to the extent of supporting the organization of the 9th Conference in Kuujuaq in order to stimulate more interest from the governments. Hopefully these efforts will eventually pay off!

Winter hunt in the Cree Territory

The development of a winter sport hunt in the Cree territory (zone 22) was first proposed in 1984, but was rejected by the Cree representatives until other administrative issues would be solved. Before the opening of the winter hunt, the sport hunting industry of caribou was absent from the Cree territory.

In 1985, Québec tabled a preliminary draft document to modify the law and authorize winter caribou sport hunting for the Québec residents in the area of Radisson. The Native parties were strongly opposed to such a hunt and blamed the government representatives for not consulting the Committee appropriately. The government representatives decided to postpone the opening of the hunt.

Bilateral discussions between Québec and the Cree continued until July 1988, when a presentation was made to the Committee explaining the progress made so far in the discussions between Québec and the Cree.

During the next meeting, in October, a proposal by Québec was tabled for discussion. The parties were divided on the issue. The Inuit and Naskapi were opposed to open a hunt without the obligation to use the services of an outfitter. Moreover, they thought that no more caribou should be allocated for sport hunting until a census would be carried out. The Cree were not opposed to a winter sport hunt of caribou, but were worried that the proposed regulations were not adequate. More specifically, they were in disagreement with the size of the zone, they wanted to exclude the road from the hunting zone, more surveillance and a shorter season than what was proposed. Québec announced then that the opening of the season would be delayed for another year to continue discussions with the Cree. No changes were made to the proposed regulations however before the opening of the season in 1989-90. Dissatisfaction with this type of hunt was evident when Cree Trappers complained that they were being displaced from their trapline because of the danger caused by the hunt and the lack of surveillance.

In June 1990, the Québec representatives presented their analysis of this first year and proposed changes such as a shorter season and the inclusion of reserved territories in the zone so that a Cree outfitting industry could be developed in order to make the hunt more acceptable to the Cree. In 1992, a new zone exclusive to the outfitters was created which was a precedent for the Committee. This development of the winter hunt has been so successful since then, that in the recent years more caribou are taken from this zone than from zone 23 where the Fall sport hunt was first established. Cree owned outfitting camps are now well established in the area.

Discussion

The responsibility of the Coordinating Committee in the management of wildlife is evident. Since its establishment in 1975, the committee has attempted to fulfill its responsibility. Disagreements in the interpretation of the role and mandate of the Committee made this difficult during the early days of the Committee (Juniper, 1996). Tight schedules and crowded meeting agendas have resulted in discussion of important decisions being referred to working groups. Bi-lateral discussions between responsible governmental departments and the concerned native parties contributed to compromises, but never to unanimous decisions by the Committee. In fact, in the case of the development of the winter hunt along the Trans-Taiga road, these bi-lateral discussions have divided the Committee.

Twenty years after having mandated a working group to elaborate a management plan, the HFTCC still does not have any and must take case-by-case decisions. Since then, there have been numerous staff changes and native parties are gradually losing interest in the process.

In retrospective, it seems that as soon as the Committee loosened its hold on the caribou situation and stopped establishing the upper limit of kill in 1987, it lost control over its exploitation and regulation. Following that decision, the Committee started to act as if there were too many caribou and that intense exploitation was beneficial to the population. Only when the George River Herd showed signs of a decline did the Committee become interested again to develop a management plan.

For the committee to function efficiently it has to be fed information on a continuous basis and it must spend the necessary time analysing the said information. The review of the upper limit of kill, even though considered by government officials a heavy administrative exercise, should be done on an annual basis in order to insure that the global situation is taken into consideration.

In the absence of the Coordinating Committee involvement, outfitters, hunters and native organizations are trying to pressure the government and are therefore diminishing and weakening the status of the HFTCC. The authority of the HFTCC must be re-established for Native parties to fully participate and trust government management decisions.

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