

Brief communication

## The Caribou Québec Corporation: one step toward caribou conservation

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The Québec and Labrador Peninsula is home to two large migratory caribou herds, which recently have totalled close to 1.1 million. This said, one out of every three North American caribou lives in this area. These caribou inhabit the northern part of the Peninsula, regularly crossing the tree line. The George River herd (GRH), the largest herd in the world in the early 1990s, is the most known and spends its year in north-eastern Québec and Northern Labrador. The Leaf River herd (LRH), which only lives in Northern Québec is relatively large too, with several hundred thousand head. We know very little about the smaller Torngat Mountains herd, which is thought to be of the mountain ecotype, such as those found in western North America. South of these migratory caribou herd, we find smaller, isolated herds in the boreal forest, between 50°N and 54°N. An example of this is the Lac Joseph herd, currently reduced to a few thousand head. Located east of Fermont and south of Churchill Falls, this small herd is faced with increasing human activity, as the area becomes more accessible and supports major projects in hydroelectric development and military training.

The caribou of Northern Québec and Labrador are of great cultural value to the Inuit, Cree, Naskapi and Innu peoples and allow them to practice a traditional way of life. In addition, caribou are at the base of an important industry in Québec: that of sports hunting, which brings in about \$30 000 000 to \$50 000 000 annually to the regional economy namely in local communities such as Kuujjuaq, Schefferville, and Radisson.

After two decades of abundance, many people worry about the future of our caribou herds as native elders remember major historical fluctuations. Their lives having been painfully marked by famine when the herds disappeared in the early 1900s, many are cautious as to what the future will hold. There are disturbing signs suggesting the beginning of another decline in caribou numbers. This decline would no doubt jeopardize the native way of life and culture. The uncertain future of the caribou in Québec has led to the project to create a non-profit organization called Caribou Québec, with the following objectives:

- Promote the wildlife resources of Northern Québec particularly caribou, both within Quebec and abroad, while at the same time developing tourism in all its forms;
- Educate the public about caribou and Northern Québec;
- Encourage involvement and promote training of native people in projects related to caribou and northern wildlife;
- Encourage the involvement of native people in caribou related projects by transferring the necessary expertise to local organizations.

The operation of Caribou Québec will be based on the general principle that the resource users (native and non-native people and communities, outfitters, sport hunters, commercial users, etc.) in collaboration with related government organizations, participate actively in conservation and management projects. During the last decade in North America, it has been

observed that wildlife management is rapidly evolving, especially in the arctic. Through different ways, caribou users, mainly native people are being included in the management process. Everywhere, initiatives are out together where natives and the governments are exploring new avenues of co-management. The Beverly-Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board; the Porcupine Caribou Management Board; the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board; the Borderlands Ecological Knowledge Society, are just a few models of which Caribou Québec could draw interesting elements.

For its very first year of operation, Caribou Québec has worked under a temporary council composed of three (3) outfitters of the Kuujjuaq, Lac Pau and Schefferville regions. Outfitters had expressed their concerns for the fate of the caribou for many years and their involvement has led to the creation of Caribou Québec to actively participate in research efforts in the summer 2001.

One of the major objectives of the corporation was to sponsor a study on the physical condition of the caribou of the GRH and the LRH. The corporation also joined in with the Québec wildlife agency, Société de la faune et des parcs du Québec, and the Newfoundland and Labrador Government to help on the caribou census of the GRH and LRH in the summer of 2001.

Caribou Québec is presently working on an educational program for school groups, in order to help the public discover the Northern Québec region and its treasures. The proceeds of this program will be entirely distributed in future research projects. The corporation finally plans to put together its first administration council to reflect the Northern Québec reality, by involving major stakeholders such as outfitters, natives, scientific and research professionals, as well as caribou users. All this with the hopes that caribou research will become a common and unifying goal.