

Barren-ground caribou management in the Sahtu Region: Bridging traditional knowledge and science

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The title of this symposium poses a question that until recently was very simple to answer in the Northwest Territories. In pre-colonial times, indigenous people used their stories and experience to maintain respectful relations with caribou so that they would continue to return as a food source every year. There were stories prohibiting the kind of control over caribou implied by the term “management.” Along with the arrival of the Federal and Territorial governments, scientists came to play an important role in establishing the core knowledge base for caribou conservation. Now following the land claims, the creation of co-management boards, and the establishment of traditional knowledge policies, decision-makers are required to draw upon both science and traditional knowledge. The Sahtu Renewable Resources Board initiated our first caribou traditional knowledge study in 2004, and established our traditional knowledge policy in 2008. However, we are finding that combining the two is not as simple as we had expected. There is a strong will to find a way to bridge Dene/Métis and scientific perspectives in a number of areas where we are finding differences. Dene/Métis harvesters and elders are aware that conditions for caribou stewardship are not the same as they once were. Climate has changed, habitat has changed, and our societies have changed. In this changing context, is traditional knowledge still relevant in the Sahtu Region? If so, how?

