

# Valhalla Wilderness Society

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## UPDATE ON IMPLEMENTATION OF BC MOUNTAIN CARIBOU RECOVERY PLAN

On October 16, 2007 the BC Government announced its new plan to save the mountain caribou. The Valhalla Wilderness Society was not part of this agreement, had nothing to do with setting its terms, and is strongly opposed to it. An implementation process was set up to determine how the new habitat protection will be distributed. It is now being carried out by five Habitat Teams in eight planning units. VWS has been added to the consultation list. Our aim is to monitor and provide input on location of the new protected habitat. By participating in this way, VWS in no way means to lend our support to the overall plan.

### **Review of basic elements of the plan**

- 380,000 hectares of new habitat protection.
- Of that 380,000 hectares, only 77,000 hectares (20% of the new protection) can come from the Timber Harvesting Land Base (THLB).
- The THLB contains most of the low- and mid-elevation forest on gentle to moderate slopes needed by mountain caribou in early winter and spring. It contains most of the cedar-hemlock component of the mountain caribou's habitat.
- Notwithstanding the protection of 77,000 ha of Timber Harvesting Land Base, the new protection cannot reduce the allowable annual cut for five years.
- The new protection is *not* "protected areas" as we commonly use the words, but "retention zones." It is not fully protected from mining and roads. Any beetle infestation in pine forest can be logged, though there is no ecological excuse for this and the dead pine will support large quantities of caribou lichens. In some cases the new protection will not be identified as to location – the logging company will decide that as it goes along. And it is not necessarily permanent protection. If the caribou disappear because too little habitat was protected, the government could just revoke the protection and log these areas at the expense of innumerable other old-growth species being sent to extinction.
- The government claimed that 95% of high suitability late and early winter habitat would be protected.

### **Overview of the Implementation Process**

This update is largely based on the reports on the Habitat Teams. It is important to note that these reports are *drafts* and have a long way to go before they are accepted by government. Contrary to

earlier claims that the forest industry agreed with the plan, in the Kootenays the plans, weak as they are, the planning teams' proposals are being by the logging companies, the Ministry of Forests and BC Timber Sales — the government fighting its own plan agreement!

This report focuses solely on the Timber Harvesting Land Base (THLB) protection because we have no definitive information on the planning of the remaining 303,000 hectares of new protection in the Non-THLB (inoperable forest.) It is important to remember that the Non-THLB (high elevation, steep slopes, poor quality forest) is also used by mountain caribou and will have new protection too. But the critical point is that logging is the chief cause of mountain caribou decline, and the THLB is where almost all of the logging takes place.

From the beginning, the claim that 95% of high suitability winter and early winter habitat would be protected was patently impossible given the terms cited above. The implementation process has confirmed that. The language is being changed as the process goes along. Now the story is that 95% of high suitability winter habitat *within the government's "caribou lines"* will be protected. These lines define only part of mountain caribou habitat. Some of the Habitat Teams acknowledge in their reports that this goal cannot be met with the small allowance of new protection they were given.

Two of the eight planning units, the Cariboo-Chilcotin and the Central Selkirk, received slightly over 60% of the new THLB protection. This concentration of protection is good for those areas and they are very important areas. But it also means that the other six planning units, covering a vast area of mountain caribou range, have received a negligible amount of new protection for low- and mid-elevation habitat.

Planning Team	Planning Unit	#caribou in 2006	#caribou in 20 years	Hectares of THLB protected
Kootenay	South Selkirks 1A	37	91	3,803
	South Purcells 1B	20	159	5,984
	Central Selkirk 2B	94	227	19,985
Revelstoke-Shuswap	3A			10,000
Wells Gray-Thompson	4A	274	326	6,000
Prince George	5A			6,132
	6			0
Cariboo-Chilcotin	5B		381	25,000

For size comparison, Stanley Park in Vancouver is 400 hectares. Valhalla Provincial Park, a medium-sized wilderness park, 50,000 hectares. The figures shown here will usually not be protected in one lump of land.

Of the two planning units receiving the most THLB protection, protection comes nowhere near close to 95% of the high suitability habitat. For instance, in the Cariboo Chilcotin we have 25,000 hectares of new THLB protection, but nearly 22,000 hectares will continue to be logged

by conventional means, and a little over 12,000 would be in modified harvest zones, subject to ongoing fragmentation.

Only one planning unit, the Cariboo-Chilcotin, proposes significant protection of low- and mid-elevation forest because it has the highest allocation of THLB and because the logging companies will be logging pine forests infested with Mountain Pine Beetle in the next five years. Thus significant THLB protection can occur without reducing the allowable annual cut for that period.

In the Central Selkirk planning unit, the requirement not to reduce the cut will force part of the THLB budget to be spent in inoperable forest, but the first draft of the plan was so poor it was impossible for the Valhalla plan reviewer to determine the exact boundaries of the protection. However, it was possible to see that remaining intact areas would be subject to more logging, while protection in some cases was located in extremely fragmented areas not used by caribou.

The Habitat Teams in every unit but the Central Selkirk have done the best they could with what they have been given to protect. Their main problem is the insufficiency of the amount. The Central Selkirk mapping is being redone.

In the South Selkirks the government is proposing to increase the number of caribou by two and a half times over the next 20 years, based on new protection of 3,803 hectares of THLB — an amount that the Habitat Team acknowledges is not much more than existing protection under the Higher Level Plan.

In the South Purcells, the government is proposing to give us seven times more caribou in 20 years, although the Habitat Team acknowledges there is not much more THLB protection than in the existing plan. These proposals rest upon slaughtering predators.

## Details

### **Cariboo-Chilcotin**

The Habitat Team's report acknowledges that ongoing logging of nearly 22,000 hectares of caribou habitat by conventional methods "will carry with it some risk to caribou." VWS has praised this proposal by Ministry of Forests planners only in the sense that the team has done something near the best they could do with what they were given. The fact that logging will be concentrated in the beetle-killed pine forests in the next five years makes this the only planning unit where substantial new protection of low- and mid-elevation forest can take place without reducing the AAC or threatening mills in the short term. Unfortunately, the dead pine forest grows high quantities of caribou lichens and caribou do use these forests at times.

The Habitat Team has laudably taken in a substantial amount of low- and mid-elevation forest with proposed protection of the Penfold Valley, and areas around the head of the northern arm of Quesnel Lake and contiguous to Caribou Mountains Park. These areas contain very rich Inland Temperate Rainforest. The new protection is 100% retention and has been proposed in a manner to maintain large, intact areas. This new forest retention extends the protection of several large parks, helping to make this proposal the most ecologically sound one in the process.

### **Central Selkirks**

This planning unit is behind the others in finalizing its proposal because the first mapping exercise identified only 60% of the Timber Harvesting Land Base protection assigned to this herd. To make the figures come out to the projected 227 mountain caribou in 20 years using so little habitat protection, the mapping assumed a caribou density that was double what most other planning units were using. We understand that the mapping will be redone and will include the whole 20,000 hectares of THLB protection assigned to this unit.

The mapping was unclear and difficult to understand, so much so that it is impossible to say with any certainty what it protects. However, it appeared that most of the new protection in the initial draft was located at high elevation and/or above the operability line. Some of it was in areas not used by mountain caribou, and is in isolated islands, whereas some areas where mountain caribou are frequently located were not given protection.

It is unclear whether the protection being identified in the Central Selkirks is always 100% retention. Some of it may turn out to be “modified harvest zones.” Our questions on this point have not been answered, since the planners don’t seem to know.

At this point, a large part of the protection is “aspatial”. This means that its exact location will not be identified — the logging company will decide that as it goes along, which is obviously no protection at all. However, members of the Habitat Team and the Ministry of Environment are trying to get more protection spatialized.

### **Prince George Planning Unit**

The Habitat Team’s report says that approximately 40% of the total remaining population of Mountain Caribou are within the Omineca Region, predominantly in the Prince George Forest District. This region was to have a high degree of protection for mountain caribou and other wildlife under its Land Use Plan. Perhaps this is why this planning unit received only 6,132 hectares of new protection under the mountain caribou plan. However, protection under the Land Use Plan has been on the record for about four years, and has never been formally approved. It appears it is being counted as part of the total existing mountain caribou protection.

Protection of Interior Cedar-Hemlock, which was supposed to be extensive, is actually very poor. This planning unit has some of the most extensive old-growth Inland Rainforest in the province. Yet only 780 out of 16,806 hectares of wet, cedar-leading ICH, older than 250 years, is in parks. There is a partitioned cut for cedar-hemlock that would allow logging of 100,000 cubic metres (about 330 hectares) every year for 50 years. The only thing keeping this from proceeding is that the logging company holding the permit has been in a state of bankruptcy.

While scientists say that mountain caribou do not use the ICH very much in this region, there is a disparity between what government scientists report and what residents observe. Certainly the mountain caribou use the ICH for travel; but according to Dr. Rick Zammuto:

“Warm days seem to send the caribou into ICH at low elevations where they take advantage of the tons of blown down lichens caused by oceanic warm fronts and Chinook winds. Blow down of even one large cedar top has fed herds for a few days. Additionally, the ICH forest floor is covered with tons of lichens as the warmth also melts the ICH snowpack.

In short, it seems physical forces of melting soft snow forces Mountain Caribou down to where they have a high food source being exposed from melting shallow snow. We expect the soft melting snow depletes access to arboreal lichens at higher elevations during windy warm spells.”

### **South Selkirks**

Only 3,803 hectares of Timber Harvesting Land Base have been allocated to the dwindling South Selkirk herd, and that’s only if it doesn’t have unacceptably high impacts to mill viability. This is an area equivalent to about 10 Stanley Parks. This must be a severe disappointment to US biologists and environmentally-concerned citizens who have been trying to work with BC for years to protect the cross-boundary herd that goes into northern Idaho.

The first mapping of habitat identified 10,000 hectares of Timber Harvesting Base. To cut it down to the allotted 3,803 hectares, the planning team eliminated some areas; other areas were downgraded parts from 100% retention (core habitat) to 50% (supporting habitat) or 20% (connectivity). In the report for this herd, the Habitat Team states:

“It was evident at the outset that the THLB cap would not allow inclusion of habitat management zone much beyond those areas identified under the (Kootenay Boundary Higher Level Plan.)”

Existing protection under the Higher Level Plan had reduced the herd down to 37 animals, the scientists admit that the new protection does not allow for much more Timber Harvesting Land Base to be protected, yet the government says it is going to give us 91 animals. The report for this area states:

“Collectively, these changes will result in additional risk to caribou due to the loss of foraging habitat, downgraded linkages and decreased ability to accommodate changes caused by wildfire. Most importantly, the changes will result in an increased predation risk due to the greater amount of early-seral forest and greater juxtaposition of old and young stands. The extent to which this risk is manifested will depend on the success of the predator-prey management regime.”

The only way such a goal could be met would be by mass extermination of predators. Scientists have pointed out to Valhalla plan reviewers that if the killing misses even one cougar, that cougar can wipe out a major part of the herd.

### **South Purcells**

The government proposes to increase the herd from 20 animals to 159 based upon protecting 5,984 hectares THLB, without having impacts to mill viability. Again the science team’s acknowledges that this is not much more than existing protection, yet the government proposes to give us seven times more caribou in 20 years than we have now.

The initial planning exercise contained 10,000 hectares of THLB in Kootenay Lake Forest District. By excluding parts and downgrading other parts from 100% protection to 50% or 20%, this was pared down to the THLB cap of 5,984 hectares. This is another planning unit that portends heavy and prolonged extermination of predators.

## **Revelstoke-Shuswap**

This Revelstoke area has the worst record on mountain caribou protection of all the areas with major mountain caribou herds. Parks in the area are mostly rock and ice. In 1994 when other areas were receiving new parks through the CORE process, people from Revelstoke opposed a park in that area. Subsequently, the Revelstoke area withdrew altogether from the CORE process, saying it would do its own plan. The result was that almost all of the forest was left open for logging, leading to its now heavy fragmentation.

A report by Valdal, et al., stated that 34,000 hectares of new habitat protection were needed for Assisted Long Term Sustaining of the mountain caribou population; only 10,000 hectares was granted. 2,600 of that went to increase forest retention in modified harvest zones in the Shuswap region from 30-40%. The planning report acknowledges that the goal of protecting 95% of high suitability winter habitat cannot be met. Ungulate Winter Range for other species will be removed to provide mountain caribou protection. The Valhalla Wilderness Society at this time lacks sufficient information on this area. The maps look as if the Habitat Team has done the best job it could, but there are no large intact areas available.

## **Thompson-Wells Gray**

VWS at present has insufficient information on this.

## **Documents Reviewed**

“Mountain Caribou Implementation Plan, Terms of Reference: Habitat,” Species at Risk Coordination Office, [http://ilmbwww.gov.bc.ca/sarco/mc/habitat\\_tor.html](http://ilmbwww.gov.bc.ca/sarco/mc/habitat_tor.html).

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Kootenay Local Habitat Team, “Draft Progress Report for Planning Units 1A, 1B and 2B, Dec. 07, 2007.

Integrated Land Management Bureau, “Preliminary Report on the Allocation of Incremental Habitat in the Revelstoke/Shuswap (3-A) Caribou Planning Unit, Dec. 17, 2007.

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