How the deep-snow caribou's plunge towards extinction reveals Canada's conservation hypocrisy

Canada is dangerously close to annihilating an iconic animal found nowhere else in the world – the deep-snow caribou of south-eastern British Columbia (BC), emblem of mountain fastness. At issue is the ongoing loss of old-growth forests to industrial logging.

Seven years ago, a distinguished group of Canadian caribou researchers (Festa-Bianchet *et al.*, 2011: 419) warned that these caribou "are at imminent risk of extirpation." The authors stated that existing government policies had not sufficiently addressed the impacts of industrial activities. "Therefore, the decline", they predicted, "will continue with local extirpations and further range contraction towards the north" (Festa-Bianchet *et al.*, 2011: 429).

That prediction is now playing out under the BC government's 2007 mountain caribou recovery plan, which permitted no significant reduction in the rate of cutting forests (Ministry of Environment Lands and Parks, 2007). In fact, the loss of old forests has subsequently increased in some areas. Nor did the plan create a single fully and permanently protected area of a size relevant to caribou.

The outcome? Deep-snow caribou are down from about 1900 animals in 2007 (Hatter, 2006) to an estimated 1356 in 2014 (Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, 2014). With further losses since then, six of the remaining fourteen subpopulations (herds) now number fewer than 30 individuals.

We affluent westerners have long lectured citizens in other parts of the world on the need to protect endangered species. With missionary zeal we have urged poor native villagers not to kill rhinos or elephants for income or food. We have promoted wildlife-based tourism to compensate them, instigated national parks and anti-poaching measures, and restricted imports of endangered animals and their parts.

When it comes to protecting the deep-snow caribou, however, Canada and BC sing a very different tune. For decades the BC government simply ignored scientific evidence that excessive clear-cut logging was the ultimate cause of their decline; but once it was confirmed that loss of old-growth forest increases rates of predation, the government retreated behind the excuse that predators are to blame. Wolves in particular are now paying for this charade with their lives.

Many less industrialized countries have mobilized teams of rangers who risk their lives every day facing poachers armed with military weapons. Over the last ten years, more than 1000 rangers have been killed on patrols (Willmore, 2017); yet more come forward to carry on. In shameful contrast, the BC government's mountain caribou recovery plan asked virtually nothing of Canadians: no reduction in heli-skiing permits; only partial closures of critical habitat to winter recreation; and "no net loss" to logging companies.

Deep-snow caribou are genetically distinct and behaviourally unique. By any definition, their forced march towards oblivion qualifies as part of the sixth mass extinction on Earth – a phenomenon often said to pose a major threat to human survival. In this sense, protecting these uniquely Canadian caribou is Canada's responsibility to all humanity.

Are we ready for, or can we even grasp, the damage done when one of the world's wealthiest nations knowingly annihilates an iconic animal and, in the same gesture, walks away from its global responsibility to biodiversity?

Anne Sherrod and Trevor Goward

About the authors

Anne is a long-time a writer for the Valhalla Wilderness Society, which is based in Nelson, BC, Canada. She is a recipient of the Glen Davis Conservation Leadership Prize, which is awarded by WWF and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.

Trevor is a concerned ecological citizen who makes his home in south-central BC, Canada.

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It's time to call out Canada's conservation hypocrisy. Send emails to John Horgan, BC's Premier (premier@gov.bc.ca), and Catherine McKenna, Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change (ec.ministre-minister.ec@canada.ca). Tell them that deep-snow caribou urgently need legislated protection consistent with their long-term habitat requirements and that the only means by which this may still be achieved is by connecting and expanding core protected areas. ■

A deep-snow caribou (Steve Forrest; CC BY 2.0; https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

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