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Saturday, November 4, 2006

Snowmobiles threaten caribou in several ways

Re: No connection between caribou, snowmobilies (letter, Nov. 1).

Mr. Sexsmith claims that scientific evidence is on the side of the snowmobilers. I would like to review that evidence, and refer interested readers to the Recovery Implementation Plan for Threatened Woodland Caribou in the Hart and Cariboo Mountains Recovery Area, British Columbia, available on the web at <http://www.centralbccaribou.ca/crg>.

Mr. Sexsmith asserts that caribou feed in thick timber that is unsuitable for snowmobiles. There are times when caribou use closed-canopy forests. However, the scientific evidence – including data from the Hart Ranges – shows conclusively that from mid-January to mid-April most mountain caribou use gentle to moderate terrain in the subalpine parkland. There, clumps of trees that support abundant lichens for the caribou are widely spaced, providing ideal conditions for recreational snowmobiling.

There is evidence that heavy snowmobile use can lead to the displacement of caribou from their winter ranges. I am not aware of any evidence of direct mortality from this displacement, but scientists are concerned about several potential impacts. Avalanches are a significant source of mortality for caribou, and snowmobiling can displace caribou into steeper, more avalanche-prone terrain. If caribou are pushed into areas that provide less forage, or require more energy for movement through snow, or have more predators, their chances of survival may be reduced. As well, wolves are known to use snowmobile trails and other packed trails for access into areas of deep or soft snow.

It is correct, as Mr. Sexsmith says, that the Hart Range population appears to be increasing. However, the 60-per cent increase he reported is misleading because the 2006 survey covered more ground than the 2002 survey. The long-term trend for the portion of the Hart Range that has been surveyed consistently indicates population growth of about two per cent a year.

Of the 18 subpopulations of mountain caribou in B.C., the Hart Range subpopulation is the only one that has increased over the past 19 years. Of the others, two are stable, 13 have declined and two have disappeared altogether.

Mountain caribou are in trouble. However, we are fortunate to have near Prince George the largest and most viable of the subpopulations – the ones that are most likely to survive on into the future. If we want to keep them, we must be cautious about what we do in their habitat.

-- Susan Stevenson, R.P. Bio

Prince George