



Dogs in caribou country

Community engagement summary

September 9th, Mt. Lorne Community Centre

Attendance: Heather Ashthorn, Lindsay Caskenette, Meghan Larivee, Lars Jessup, Don Toews, Al Foster, Brandy Mayes, Karlie Knight, Sonny Parker, Rob Cooke, Tamra Reynolds, Michelle Phillips, Katherine Scheck, Marcelle Fressineau, Blaine Walden, Mary Walden, Jennifer Staniforth, Jess Sellers, Martin Haefele, Syvanna Cook, Magnus Kaltenborn, Annette Belke, Maren Bradley, Mana Metzen, Manuela Larsen, Debbie Knight, Jocelyne (Sky High), Dennis Zimmermann, Thomas Jung, John Streicker, Amalie Janin

The response

We appreciate your willingness to share how you felt about our invitation to this meeting. We heard loud and clear that many felt unfairly singled out and blamed for harming caribou. Many feel that snowmobilers and ATV'ers have a much bigger impact and should be addressed. For many, the invitation was not received with its intended purpose.

While we do not intend to single dog people out in a blame laying way, we ARE singling dog people out to help us understand specifically how dogs and recreation with dogs is affecting caribou. We would not want snowmobilers to describe this relationship any more than snowmobilers want dog people to define their relationship with caribou. We feel you are the best people to help us with this work and do not want to proceed with research without your knowledge and input. We feel that if dog people are involved from the start, there will be greater interest and willingness to change behavior if needed.

We are clear that all who attended care about caribou and want to prevent conflict with them and other wildlife. Thank you for taking time away from your furry friends and other lives to talk with us.

The concerns

The C/TRRC and both First Nations present have expressed concerns that recreation with dogs may be leading to increased habitat fragmentation and stress response in caribou. When caribou are stressed they use much needed energy reserves which should be used for growth, development and reproduction. Concerns have been brought to all parties by local residents and beneficiaries about the impact of dog sports and other recreation on trapline activity as well. The RRC and First Nation governments are responsible for land use planning, which is underway for both First Nations. All parties are also involved with caribou population recovery efforts. An eventual return to both licensed and entitled caribou harvest is desired.

While much documentation exists to support, the concerns listed above are speculative concerns and all organizations wish to investigate further before drawing conclusions about what is affecting caribou. Regulating dog powered sports is not an interest of any group at this time and there are no mechanisms in Yukon legislation that would enable this. If change is needed, it will have to be of the self-regulation variety.

Habitat loss has long been understood to be a major contributor to woodland caribou population decline. It is possible that caribou avoid trails, so when more trails are built, they are squeezed into ever shrinking areas with low human use. Some mushers present reported seeing caribou frequently while others reported infrequent sightings. It is possible that some mushers (and people travelling by bike, foot etc.) are frequently seeing the same, small group of caribou. There is a group of caribou that stay on Mt. Lorne year round, typically avoiding the more residential areas. This does not mean that caribou will *always* avoid those areas. YG has searched by air for caribou in the Mt. Lorne area and only seen a few here and there. Caribou are easy to spot by aerial survey in the winter months. More information is needed on caribou avoidance behavior.

A small number of observations made during the course of research about the effects of snowmobile and ATV use on caribou led to questions about how caribou perceive dogs. Do they see a dog team in the same light as a pack of wolves, for example, and is a stress response signaled? The four woodland caribou herds in the Southern Lakes

region are still very much in population recovery and are dealing with habitat loss and possibly stress related to climate change (this is very speculative). Do they have any extra resources to deal with additional stressors? Is it important to tease out how different recreational activities contribute to stress for caribou? Would their populations recover better/faster/in a healthier way if human recreation wasn't placing stress on them?

Where is this conversation leading us?

Here are the possible actions discussed:

1. Trail signs to remind people to keep dogs leashed and to avoid sensitive and/or seasonal caribou habitat. Maren and Magnus may be interested in helping with this project. YG and WildWise have capacity to work on this as well.
2. Surveys and observations. Some mushers are willing to provide information about caribou locations and reactions to dogs to C/TFN and KDFN to help with land planning processes. Karlie Knight and Brandy Mayes have capacity within their departments to work on this concept. WildWise is interested in helping. Karlie, Brandy and Heather will meet soon to discuss. Lars Jessup and Tom Jung will be working on a survey for dog mushers and are interested in what promotes good behavior change. Expect to hear more from them as their research develops. COVID 19 has presented delays in research that was scheduled for last winter and it is unclear if it will pick up again this winter.
3. Mapping. YG is doing some research to determine if and to what extent caribou avoid areas that are used for human recreation. It is helpful for them to know what trails are being used currently and with what intensity. While the invitation to this meeting was extended to people who engage in dog powered sports in general, as well as people who travel with dogs in the backcountry (by foot, bike etc.), primarily mushers showed up. We need to do a better job of extending the invitation to other dog-accompanied recreationists in future. Many in the room expressed a willingness to share trail use information.
4. People need to know more about caribou. YG has put together a [story map for the Southern Lakes Caribou](#). This is a great resource which can be used and shared to help people understand what a woodland caribou is. WildWise is interested in hosting an event in the near future (COVID permitting) to 'showcase' woodland caribou. We will discuss this further with our co-presenters. We can also use our website (wildwise.ca) as a means of educating. [We have a page dedicated to this topic because it is one of our current projects](#). We will be loading more resources to that page soon and will consider resources that you send our way.
5. A focus group. Several participants suggested forming a focus group to work with the managers present. A focus group could help word survey questions to be appealing to the dog sport community and consider further actions.

What now?

We will follow up with all parties on the suggestions above. Expect to hear from us over the coming year as we develop a path forward. In the meantime, we welcome your comments, suggestions and questions. Thank you for being part of this conversation!

RESOURCES

Francis, S., and J. Nishi 2015. Range assessment as a cumulative effects management tool: Assessment of the Carcross Caribou Herd Range in Yukon. Prepared for Environment Yukon. Yukon Fish and Wildlife Branch Report MRC-15-01, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada.

Webster, L. 1997. The effects of human related harassment on caribou. Prepared for Jim Young, Senior Wildlife Biologist, Ministry of Environment, Williams Lake, B.C.