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SUBMISSION TO THE NUNAVUT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT BOARD

FOR

Information: X

Decision: X

Issue: Dolphin-Union caribou mortalities during collaring research

Background:

Inuit livelihood is deeply connected to and inseparable from the livelihood of caribou. Inuit in the Kitikmeot region have depended on and continue to rely on Dolphin-Union (DU) caribou for sustenance, learning and practicing Inuit Qaujimaqatunngit (IQ) and traditional knowledge, and sense of well-being and community. The Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) for DU caribou has deeply impacted opportunities for Inuit to continue to cultivate and maintain these relationships. Inuit populations in the north are continuing to grow and community members are facing significantly reduced access to caribou hunting.

The Ekaluktutiak Hunters and Trappers Organization (EHTO) understands that the Government of Nunavut Department of Environment (GN DOE) conducts scientific research to generate information on caribou population trends and make recommendations for TAH, as well as other management plans. For DU caribou, GN DOE completed abundance surveys in 2018 and 2020, and collaring took place in 2021. GN DOE is currently completing another abundance survey and EHTO was recently informed of their plans to deploy 35 more collars in March 2024. EHTO continues to receive and review map locations of already-collared DU caribou (with a 4 week delay) from GN DOE.

Specific to DU collaring, EHTO is concerned about the following:

- Four mortalities (out of 36 collared individuals) occurred during collar deployment in 2021 that resulted in a reduction of 4 tags from the closest community (Kugluktuk). These unexpected mortalities occurred due to physical and physiological injuries (GN DOE, 2021). EHTO understands that GN DOE staff devoted their best efforts to avoid these events by following Standard Operating Procedures (Northwest Territories Environment and Natural Resources Wildlife Care Committee, 2011) and animal care protocols (CARMA 2008; TAEM 1996) via GN DOE and Government of Northwest Territories [GNWT] permits and frequent communications with GNWT veterinarian staff. However, even with these efforts, unexpected mortalities did and can occur.*
- Mortalities also occurred during collar deployment prior to 2021, but these were fewer instances over time (2 mortalities out of 94 collars deployed from 2015 to 2018; GN DOE, 2018; GN DOE, personal communication). There was no TAH for DU caribou at that time.*
- Although meat from the 2021 collaring mortalities was distributed to the local community, lost hunting opportunities for each household are invaluable and irreplaceable. On hunting trips, Inuit hunters not only learn from and practice hunting, they also learn and continue to practice traveling on the land, survival and safety skills, properly butchering and sharing meat, and updating their experience and knowledge of all wildlife. This IQ and traditional knowledge is shared with other community members, especially young ones that get to travel with older hunters.*
- EHTO was not informed that caribou mortalities that occur during research would be considered part of the TAH. EHTO became aware of this response after the research mortality events in 2021 had occurred. In addition, HTOs were not consulted on the amount of compensation that could be provided for a caribou mortality during research.*
- Kugluktuk Angoniatit Association (KAA; Hunters and Trappers Organization [HTO]) was informed of the 2021 mortality events in real-time. This was possible because of local participant observers who took part in the field work. Local observers properly and promptly butchered the animal and brought all parts of the animal and meat back to the community without wastage. GN DOE staff in the field also provided immediate updates through telephone and met in-person with KAA upon return from the field. Standard Operating Procedures and research protocols do not guarantee these circumstances and efforts will occur with all projects.*

- The TAH for DU caribou that was initially set in 2018 did not take into account caribou mortalities that could occur during research. Tag deductions that account for GN DOE research mortalities are perceived as taking hunting opportunities away from Inuit.
- Any mortality that occurs during collaring research is not considered acceptable by EHTO. DU caribou population pressures, risks, and threats have been and continue to be acknowledged by co-management partners. This is reflected in their establishment and maintenance of a TAH. DU caribou is also currently assessed as Endangered by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada under the Species at Risk Act.
- Collar deployment involves pursuit by aircraft, capture by net gunning, and physical immobilization and handling to collect biological samples from reproducing females (Northwest Territories Environment and Natural Resources Wildlife Care Committee, 2011). These activities add remarkable pressure on a small population of caribou. Perception of predation risk can also affect reproduction in female animals, and is potentially heightened by repeat capture and handling (Cattet, 2018).
- The large population of Cambridge Bay relies heavily only on DU herds for caribou harvesting, under EHTO tag allocations (currently 50 per year). Community members occasionally harvest Beverly caribou.
- There is a lack of transparency in how collaring data could or would be used by GN DOE outside of a proposed research project, for example, in land use planning or Nunavut Impact Review Board processes under the Nunavut Planning and Project Assessment Act.

In addition, EHTO notes the following proactive efforts as they pertain to DU caribou:

- Kitikmeot communities are part of a User-to-User DU caribou group with the Inuvialuit Settlement Region as an interjurisdictional effort to continue monitoring DU population and distribution changes. This group is also a forum for exchanging traditional knowledge across the whole DU caribou range.
- EHTO acknowledges that collaring can provide important information on caribou distribution and guide abundance surveys. However, Inuit hunters are also already aware of this information through their shared IQ and traditional knowledge; GN DOE uses this information to design their abundance surveys. EHTO is particularly aware of how collaring information is comparable to Inuit knowledge when reviewing GN DOE collaring maps.
- EHTO is not in support of collaring research that affects Inuit harvesting. Collars that were previously deployed are still providing locational data. EHTO encourages the inclusion of and support for IQ, traditional knowledge, and Inuit hunters as alternatives to investing in collaring research. These alternatives should be considered especially in the years where DU caribou herds are in low numbers and already facing multiple disturbances. Any further reductions in Inuit harvesting opportunities limits Inuit ability to practice and build DU caribou traditional knowledge, although this knowledge can be gathered indirectly during other traditional harvesting and land use activities.

Consultation:

The below consultation record does not include all communications. This record is not meant to be exhaustive but instead, highlights key points that are relevant for this submission.

- On 16 September 2021, GN DOE provided information to KAA, EHTO, KRWB, Kitikmeot Inuit Association, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., and Nunavut Wildlife Management Board representatives on DU collaring fieldwork that occurred in spring 2021. This in-person consultation took place in Kugluktuk. Discussions included the 4 mortality events and how GN DOE and KAA responded to them. It was noted by KRWB and KAA staff that no monetary compensation was offered or provided.
- On 10 November 2022, GN DOE indicated their intent (via email) to deploy 35 collars in spring 2023. GN DOE indicated this number was based on the vulnerable stage of the herd. GN DOE also proposed that collaring occur closer to Cambridge Bay since GNWT was also proposing to deploy collars in their jurisdiction on Victoria Island.
- On 9 December 2022, GN DOE provided draft research proposals (via email) indicating their intent for DU deployment to occur in April 2023. At this time, GN DOE indicated that letters of support were needed.
- On 30 August 2023, GN DOE hosted a meeting with EHTO and KRWB staff (via remote videoconferencing) that KAA was unable to attend. During this meeting, GN DOE initiated a discussion on how to approach DU caribou mortalities, and suggested options for EHTO and KRWB. EHTO voiced their concerns about mortalities occurring during collaring research, which are indicated in this submission. GN DOE proposed acceptable mortality rates and thresholds, where once a threshold is reached, research would no longer proceed and any remaining collars would be deployed the following year.

- *EHTO had a discussion on 31 August 2023 and did not want to support GN DOE on DU caribou collaring until the mortality issue is resolved. EHTO does not want to see their membership lose any DU tags.*
- *On 6 September 2023, GN DOE indicated to KRWB, EHTO, and KAA (via email) that “the GN supports the following two options for an NWMB submission: 1) keeping 4 additional tags in reserve for collar mortalities, or 2) seek approval from NWMB that any mortality from collaring will not be removed from the TAH.” GN DOE also recommended that the submission be made by HTOs and KRWB because of the lost opportunities for hunting when a mortality occurs, and that submissions should be made by the organizations requesting the change.*
- *On 20 September 2023, EHTO executives met with a KRWB staff member (via Microsoft Teams) to initiate a draft submission to NWMB.*
- *On 11 October 2023, EHTO executives met with a KRWB staff member (via Microsoft Teams) to discuss, review, and finalize a submission to NWMB.*
- *On 18 October 2023, GN DOE indicated (via email) that it is their “recommendation that animal mortalities during collaring operations not come of the TAH.” They also indicated that this recommendation would not create a conservation concern because collaring mortalities are usually a very low number.*

Recommendations:

- Inuit view animals not only as meat, but also opportunities and relationships that need to be respected, cultivated, and maintained over time. Co-management partners must keep this in mind when using tags to represent animals.
- A mortality that occurs during DU caribou research should not be considered part of a TAH. Animal mortalities during research should be considered rare events. A DU caribou mortality that occurs during research is an unintended event rather than a harvest.
- For every DU caribou mortality that does occur during a GN DOE research project, the animal must be promptly butchered by a local Inuit research participant and the meat must be brought back to the nearest HTO. GN DOE must also provide monetary compensation to the nearest HTO to acknowledge (rather than substitute) the lost hunting opportunity when a mortality occurs. This compensation should occur regardless of whether the mortality is counted as part of a TAH. The value of caribou is priceless and the appropriate amount of compensation needs to be determined in collaboration with the HTO.
- *For all mortalities, animals must be biologically sampled and, if possible, autopsied to confirm causes of death. Local observers are also knowledgeable about and able to verify causes of death.*
- IQ can inform the design of research projects to minimize mortality risk. EHTO can be consulted for their knowledge of when and where collars could be deployed to reduce mortality risk (e.g., at water crossings).
- DU caribou collaring research should not proceed without the explicit support of local HTOs, and the inclusion of at least 2 local participant observers recruited by the HTO for fieldwork. HTOs and their recruited observers should have the authority to pause or cancel research activities if they observe mortality risks, unusual mortality events, and/or research conditions that violate the conditions of their research support (e.g., as indicated via letters of support).
- During fieldwork, GN DOE must provide daily updates to local HTOs.
- All GN DOE staff and their contractors that conduct wildlife research should be mentally and physically capable, take their work seriously, and respect Inuit, wildlife and the land that they need to work with.
- When requesting Letters of Support, GN DOE should be requesting support not only for research activities but also when, where, and how collaring data will be used, shared, and published, for example, in collaboration with land use projects and proponents. GN DOE should also disclose what kinds of information might be collected from captured caribou when they are being collared (e.g., how long caribou are restrained for). HTOs cannot make informed decisions on whether or not to support research when they do not know all of the risks and how the resulting data might be used.
- Inuit hunters and elders collectively share and hold information on current caribou population distributions and trends. There is a need to improve support for and reliance on research that documents IQ and traditional knowledge in a way that is led, analyzed, and shared directly by HTOs or RWOs, in support of their responsibilities under the Nunavut Agreement. Most IQ research involves information that is extracted and reinterpreted by non-Inuit organizations to meet non-Inuit management objectives and priorities. Published IQ research also has a tendency to replace community consultations. When this happens, important aspects of IQ on how and when to use community-sourced information is lost.

- GN DOE must provide all wildlife handling and sampling protocols and research permits associated with a research project to the local HTOs and KRWB that they are requesting support from. For DU caribou, this includes permits that are acquired in the Northwest Territories and under the Species at Risk Act.

References:

CARMA. 2008. Rangifer Health and Body Condition Monitoring: Monitoring Protocols Level 2. CircumArctic Rangifer Monitoring and Assessment Network. 54 p.

GN DOE. 2021. Dolphin and Union caribou 2021 collaring, Kugluktuk — August 24–26. Field Report. Prepared by: A. Roberto-Charron.

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Northwest Territories Environment and Natural Resources Wildlife Care Committee. 2011. Standard Operating Procedure. Capture, Handling & Release of Caribou. Version 2. Prepared by M. Cattet.

TAEM. 1996. 1995/1996 Year One Progress Report. Development and Application of Animal Borne GPS Technology on Woodland Caribou. A report of the Research and Development Committee of Manitoba Hydro.

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