

## **Summary of the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board's report, entitled "Reasons for Decisions Related to a Joint Proposal for the Management of the Kòk'èetì Ekwò (Bathurst Caribou) Herd"**

The Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board (WRRB) is responsible for wildlife management in Wek'èezhì and shares responsibility for managing and monitoring the *Kòk'èetì ekwò* (Bathurst caribou) herd. In November 2018, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR), Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) reported that, in their view, the *Kòk'èetì ekwò* herd had continued to decline significantly.

The *Kòk'èetì ekwò* herd is at its lowest recorded size, with GNWT and Tłıchų Government (TG) stating that "*the current small and declining number of mature caribou in the Bathurst herd is a critical conservation status*". The herd has declined from approximately 472,000 in 1986 to about 8,200 in 2018, based on the latest calving ground survey in June 2018. This is an unprecedented decline in herd size, approximately 98% over the last 32 years. While the small herd size is startling, the Board is more alarmed by the accelerated rate of decline of 29% per year since 2015 and what the future holds for the *Kòk'èetì ekwò* herd.

In January 2019, the TG and GNWT submitted the *Joint Proposal on Management Actions for the Bathurst Ƨekwò (Barren-ground caribou) Herd 2019-2021* to the Board, outlining proposed management actions for the *Kòk'èetì ekwò* herd in Wek'èezhì. The management actions proposed by TG and GNWT in the Joint Proposal were grouped under the five categories: harvest, predators, habitat and land use, and education as well as research and monitoring. More specifically, TG and ENR proposed continuing a herd-wide total allowable harvest of zero for the *Kòk'èetì ekwò* herd. Following an initial assessment of the management proposal, the Board determined that a Level 2 review was appropriate, as per its Rule for Management Proposals. Therefore, the Board established a proceeding and an online public registry on February 4, 2019.

The WRRB concluded, based on current evidence and its decision made in 2016, that a serious conservation concern continues to exist for the *Kòk'èetì ekwò* herd and that additional management actions are vital for herd recovery. In making its decision about harvest limitations, the WRRB considered the risks to the herd from a recent high rate of decline, uncertainties about the underlying mechanisms for the decline and the importance of *Ƨekwò* (barren-ground caribou) for Tłıchų citizens to thrive – physically, spiritually, and culturally.

The WRRB determined that a TAH of zero shall be continued for all users of the *Kòk'èetì ekwò* herd within Wek'èezhì for the 2019/20 and 2020/21 harvest seasons.

As the Mobile Core Bathurst Caribou Conservation Area (MCBCCA) continues to be utilized to implement the zero TAH, the WRRB recommended that the effectiveness of the zone in achieving *Kòk'èetì ekwò* conservation goals be quantitatively assessed while considering both overlap with adjacent herds and inadvertent harvesting. As monitoring of the *Kòk'èetì ekwò*

harvest is crucial for management decisions, the Board recommended that TG hire additional community monitors.

The 2018 calving ground survey report made it clear that emigration has become a significant factor contributing to the decline of the Kòk'èetì ekwò herd. This information is new and adds a deeper level of uncertainty to the future of the herd. The WRRB recommended that TG and GNWT provide a plain language description of their positions regarding the implication of emigration on Kòk'èetì ekwò, and how it will influence adaptive management of the herd.

To improve our understanding of the role of predators on the decline of the Kòk'èetì ekwò herd, the WRRB recommended that TG and GNWT provide the WRRB with information on the sighting rates of predator and the criteria to be used in determining the targeted number of predators to be removed annually. Additionally, the WRRB is to be provided with the criteria for *Dìga* (wolf) removal based on (i) *dìga* sightings during Kòk'èetì ekwò composition surveys and (ii) likely exposure of Kòk'èetì ekwò to *dìga* associated with neighbouring herds during the winter season.

The *Enhanced North Slave Dìga Harvest Incentive Program* is being used as a method of *dìga* removal on the winter range of Kòk'èetì and *Sahtì ekwò* (Bluenose-East caribou). To ensure that this program is contributing to conservation efforts of Kòk'èetì ekwò, the Board recommended that the location and number of *dìga* harvested are provided to the Board each year and that criteria are developed to measure the effectiveness of the program, based on scientific and traditional knowledge.

TG runs a *Community-based Harvest Training Program* and the WRRB recommended that the location and number of *dìga* harvested be provided to the Board as well as an assessment of how the training will contribute to future *dìga* harvesting and management. Additionally, the Board recommended that TG and GNWT coordinate the *Enhanced North Slave Dìga Harvest Incentive Program* and the *Community-based Dìga Harvest Training Program* to determine their role in removing the targeted number of *dìga*.

The WRRB is currently working on a *Sahcho* (grizzly bear) biological and management feasibility assessment. In order to improve efficiencies, the Board recommended that *Nògha* (wolverine) be included in this assessment.

The WRRB acknowledged that the range of the Kòk'èetì and *Sahtì ekwò* extends beyond *Wek'èezhì* and the Northwest Territories. However, there has been a lack of progress on the joint management of predators and land management across territorial borders. As such, the Board recommended that GNWT and TG develop a draft agreement and timelines to jointly manage the Kòk'èetì and *Sahtì ekwò* in cooperation with other co-managers.

Tìchq community members as well the general public should be made aware of the status of the *əkəwò* and should be made aware about efforts being made to halt their decline. The WRRB

recommended that the successes and challenges of TG's Ekwò Nàxoède K'è program be communicated to the Tłıchų communities and schools.

The decline of Kòk'èetì ekwò affects the well-being of Tłıchų citizens and the Board recommended that TG and GNWT discuss priorities and solutions for food security. The Board also recommended that TG and GNWT exchange information about ɤekwò regarding the reasons for the declines and the factors which continue to affect the declines.

Time is now of the essence for the management of Kòk'èetì ekwò and the Board supported the increase of population surveys to every two years but noted that efforts should be made to have them occur concurrently with neighbouring Sahtì ekwò and Beverly/Ahiak herds. The Board also supported the implementation of a pregnancy monitoring program utilizing fecal pellet collection.

The Board recommended the Tłıchų Research and Monitoring Program be implemented to ensure that both ɤekwò and ɤekwò habitat monitoring and realistic harvesting numbers are recorded in a culturally appropriate manner while feeding into adaptive management. The Board recommended that the Ekwò Nàxoède K'è collect on-the-ground climate change observations to be incorporated into an adaptive management framework.

The Board recommended that TG and GNWT collaborate with the WRRB to develop a herd-specific adaptive management framework with thresholds linked to specific management actions.

With the Kòk'èetì ekwò herd in a critical state, there is an urgent need to implement effective management actions to halt the decline as soon as possible. The Board's decisions in this report have been structured to have the least impact on ɤekwò users and the greatest benefit to ɤekwò that we can provide at this time.

*“... a way of life, in relation to the caribou is described in the Tłıchų Agreement, which is 12.1.1, which encompasses our livelihood and we try to capture that in our agreement to ensure that we always have a connection to the caribou, the activity around the caribou and the ceremonial games that happen around the -- the caribou and the travel. Everything that we -- that we had was in relation to the caribou”.*

~ Dr. John B. Zoe, 2019

Users, managers and governments must act now, in whatever way possible, to protect the herd and its habitat so that future recovery may be possible. The need is urgent. The Kòk'èetì ekwò herd has declined to the point where some cows, possibly to have the best chance to raise their calves, have emigrated to a neighboring herd's calving ground. These changes increase uncertainty for co-managers and governments. A collaborative and adaptive management is essential to ensure a future for Kòk'èetì ekwò.