

Summary of the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board's report, entitled "Report on a Public Hearing Held by the Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board 9-11 April 2019 Behchokò, NT & Reasons for Decisions Related to a Joint Proposal for the Management of the Sahtì Ekwò (Bluenose-East 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 *Sahtì Ekwò* (Bluenose-East 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 Sahtì ekwò herd had continued to decline significantly. The Sahtì ekwò herd declined at approximately 21% per year from 103,000 in 2010 to about 19,300 in 2018.

A June 2018 calving ground photographic survey of the Sahtì ekwò herd, conducted by the GNWT, resulted in a total estimate of 11,675 breeding cows (95% CI = 9971 – 13,670), which indicated that abundance of breeding females had decreased by about 32.9 % since the June 2015 estimate of 17,396 (95% CI = 12,780-22,012). The total population estimate fell from 38,592 (95% CI = 33,859-43,325) in 2015 to an estimate of 19,294 (95% CI = 16,527- 22,524) in 2018 – a nearly 50% decline in three years.

In January 2019, the Tłchq Government (TG) and GNWT submitted the *Joint Proposal on Management Actions for the Bluenose-East ?ekwò (Barren-ground caribou) Herd 2019-2021* to the Board, outlining proposed management actions for the Sahtì 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 implementing a herd-wide total allowable harvest of 300 bulls only for the Sahtì ekwò herd. The WRRB determined that any specific numerical restriction of a harvest or a component of harvest constitutes a total allowable harvest (TAH). A proposal for a TAH requires a public hearing under Section 12.3.10 of the Tłchq Agreement. The WRRB held a public hearing in Behchokò, NT on April 9-11, 2019.

The severity of the decline of the Sahtì ekwò herd was highlighted during the public hearing by Chief Clifford Daniels from Behchokò:

"The decline of the herd is a serious situation. You will hear about the impacts of the herd on our well-being, our way of life, and land-based economy" and "This decline has separated us from the caribou. We want to be part of the caribou again".

As such, the WRRB concluded, based on all available Indigenous and scientific evidence, that a serious conservation concern exists for the Sahtì 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 ?ekwò (barren-ground caribou) for Tłchq citizens to thrive – physically, spiritually, and culturally.

The WRRB determined that a TAH of 193 bulls only shall be implemented for all users of the Sahtì ekwò herd within Wek'èezhìi for the 2019/20 and 2020/21 harvest seasons. Further, the Board determined that the proportional allocation of the TAH of the Sahtì ekwò herd for the 2019/20 and 2020/21 harvest seasons shall be as follows: Tìchq Citizens – 39.29%, and Members of an Indigenous people who traditionally harvest Sahtì ekwò (including Nunavut) – 60.71%.

As monitoring of the Sahtì ekwò harvest is crucial for management decisions, the Board recommended that TG and ENR revise their approach to harvest monitoring for the 2019/20 and 2020/21 harvest seasons, including collecting demographic and health information and hiring additional community monitors.

The WRRB recommended that GNWT provide harvest information from its Enhanced North Slave *Dìga* (wolf) Harvest Incentive Program to allow the Board to determine the success of the program. Further, the Board recommended that GNWT and TG develop a framework to evaluate the effectiveness of the Enhanced North Slave *Dìga* Harvest Incentive Program in achieving əkəwò conservation goals. The WRRB also recommended that GNWT and TG monitor *Nògha* (wolverine) populations in Wek'èezhìi and work cooperatively with the Government of Nunavut to protect the calving grounds of the Sahtì ekwò from predators.

The WRRB recommended that high priority habitat for protection of the Sahtì ekwò herd should be identified and legal protection measures should be implemented. In the interim, Mobile Caribou Conservation Measures should be implemented. Additionally, the Board recommended that TG and GNWT encourage Tìchq citizens to harvest alternative country foods.

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. The WRRB also recommended the following monitoring actions for the Sahtì ekwò herd: conduct population surveys every two years; implement pregnancy monitoring through fecal pellet collection in the winter months; cease annual reconnaissance surveys; and increase the number of collars from 50 to 70. Furthermore, the Board recommended that a detail rationale for the collar increase be provided.

The WRRB recommended that TG's Ekwò Nàxoède K'è program should be expanded to the post-calving and summer ranges of Sahtì ekwò to collect on-the-ground climate change observations. Finally, the Board recommended the Tìchq Research and Monitoring Program should be implemented to ensure that both əkəwò and əkəwò habitat monitoring and realistic harvesting numbers are recorded in a culturally appropriate manner.

With the Sahtì ekwò herd in a critical state, there is a real sense of urgency to implement effective management actions to halt the decline as soon as possible. The decisions have been structured to have the least impact on əkəwò users and the greatest benefit to əkəwò that we can provide at this time.

“The process today is to try and put forth the best available information on the actions that will lead us into stabilization and recovery of the numbers that have dropped very visibly in the last number of years, but it's not a new story, but an ongoing story but with authorities that will make determinations on what we will do to -- to accommodate a recovery.”

~ Dr. John B. Zoe

Users and managers must be willing to act now, in whatever ways possible, to protect the herd so future recovery may be possible.

“And one (1) thing we know is that despite all the years of having no say, we know that people survive because they never let the caribou go. They always hang on to it. Like Archie saying, we'll never let it go, because if we let it go, then -- then that's the way it goes, because by not letting it go, we need to strengthen our relationship to the animals by doing things in the traditional way.”

~Dr. John B. Zoe