



## SUBMISSION TO THE

## NUNAVUT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT BOARD

## FOR

Information: X

Decision:

**Issue: *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ) Study Results of the Southampton Island barren-ground caribou population**

### **Background**

- Southampton Island barren-ground caribou (*Rangifer tarandus groenlandicus*) are an ecologically and culturally significant sub-population that has experienced dramatic fluctuations since reintroduction, underscoring the need for careful, adaptive management.
- The island's small, relatively closed ecosystem requires balanced caribou numbers to prevent overpopulation, food shortages, and disease.
- The herd is non-migratory and was extirpated by the mid-1950s due to overharvest after European contact.
- Wolves, the primary predator, were extirpated in the 1930s, creating conditions for rapid herd growth and later vulnerability.
- At the request of Coral Harbour Inuit, 48 caribou were reintroduced from neighbouring Coats Island in 1967.
- The herd grew rapidly without predators, peaking near 30,000 animals in the late 1990s.
- The herd experienced a sharp decline in the 2000s driven by: disease (*Brucellosis*), severe winter weather (icing events limiting forage access), and high harvest pressure, including commercial harvest and later off-island meat sales via social media.
- Management actions including ending the commercial harvest and implementing a Total Allowable Harvest (TAH), led to herd stabilization at 12,000–13,000 animals from 2015–2023; aerial surveys confirm this trend with estimates of 12,054 (2019) and 12,651 (2023).
- On Southampton Island caribou remain the most commonly consumed country food. Healthy caribou directly support food security and well-being in Coral Harbour.
- Wildlife management is guided by the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board's mission of "*conserving wildlife through the application of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and scientific knowledge.*" This study contributes relevant and timely *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* to support adaptive caribou management, helping strengthen the

integration of Inuit knowledge alongside scientific evidence in decision-making processes.

### **Current Status**

- In May 2025, the Government of Nunavut's Department of Environment, Wildlife Research Division conducted a qualitative social science Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) study with Elders, members of the Aiviit Hunters and Trappers Organization (HTO), and other key knowledge holders to document observations of the Southampton Island barren-ground caribou herd. Fifteen interviews were conducted, including a group discussion with the Aiviit HTO Board and individual interviews with key knowledge holders (*Documenting Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) and Observations of the Southampton Island Barren-Ground Caribou Herd, 2025*).
- Participants shared ecological and cultural observations spanning many decades, covering Coral Harbour, all of Southampton Island, and neighbouring Coats and White Islands. IQ also includes stories, artifacts, and memories linking generations to the original Southampton Island caribou and occasional arrivals via ice bridges
- Tuktu (caribou) remain a main source of food and clothing and are essential to Inuit health and well-being. Elders emphasized that caribou connect past and present, carrying deep cultural meaning tied to identity, survival, and continuity. Sharing caribou meat across communities reflects Inuit values of care, reciprocity, and responsibility.
- Harvesters report that since the brucellosis outbreak of the 2010s, caribou numbers have been steadily increasing, with more animals observed near the community in recent years. Caribou are described as generally healthy and in good body condition, with sick animals rarely seen and animals remaining fat through fall and winter.
- High calf numbers and strong calf survival were frequently noted and attributed in part to responsible harvesting practices.
- Participants raised concerns about increasing numbers of wolves and wolverines, which may be making caribou more skittish. Winter rain and freezing events were also identified as a risk, as ice layers can block access to forage and occasionally lead to calf mortality.
- Knowledge holders emphasized the need to maintain balance in the island's relatively small and closed ecosystem, noting that both overpopulation and under-harvesting can increase risks of food shortages and disease.
- Most participants support continued careful monitoring of caribou numbers and balancing sustainable harvest with herd recovery. Some suggested increasing household tags from four to six in response to rising abundance. Participants emphasized the need for improved enforcement, monitoring, and more consistent application of existing legislation and permit requirements, particularly for off-island harvesting. Participants also expressed support for reviving organized sharing programs, while respecting sustainable harvest limits.

## **Consultations**

- ENV social scientist met with the Aiviit HTO and Coral Harbour community members from May 14–21, 2025. The infographic and report were shared on December 18, 2025, and on that same date the Aiviit HTO was informed that ENV would be submitting the report to the NWMB Regular Meeting 001-2026.

## **Recommendation**

- Based on information from the May 2023 aerial survey and information collected in the IQ report, the Department of Environment is not recommending any changes to the current management actions for Southampton Island barren-ground caribou population.