# Bathurst and Bluenose East Caribou Technical Workshop October 22-23, 2014

#### Northern United Place, Yellowknife

# "putting caribou first"

#### 1.0 Background

On August 27, 2014 leaders from across the Northwest Territories met in Yellowknife at the request of the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, Government of the Northwest Territories to discuss recent survey results for the Bathurst and Bluenose East caribou herds. The two herds appear to be in serious decline based on new survey results. The leadership meeting concluded with two key findings:

- There is a clear consensus that there has been and continues to be a significant decline
  in the Bathurst and Bluenose-East caribou herds. The causes of the declines are unclear.
  Harvest restrictions on the Bathurst herd have slowed its decline but now it appears to be
  declining further.
- There is hesitation about further harvest restrictions without knowing with any certainty the real cause of the decline. There is desire for co-management which should also include industry and Nunavut (or others who contribute to the decline).

One outcome of the meeting was agreement to create a technical working group for the two herds. The technical working group is charged with reducing uncertainties regarding the causes behind the herd declines and developing a corresponding plan of action.

The technical working group met in Yellowknife on October 9-10, 2014 and then again on October 22-23, 2014. The central objective of the first meeting was to develop a draft action plan for consideration by the respective leadership prior to the second meeting. The results of the October 9-10, 2014 meeting are set out in a separate report. Common ground was reached on a number of points. These include:

- recognition that both herds are in serious decline and the situation is most concerning for the Bathurst herd;
- support for continued and perhaps increased limitations on the harvest of the Bathurst herd and cautious support for limitations on the harvest of the Bluenose East herd;
- recognition that the current harvest of cows is a significant problem and needs to be reduced to acceptable levels. The 80/20 bull to cow ratio was generally accepted, with an emphasis on harvesting young bulls;
- recognition that while reductions in predator numbers may be helpful, all factors related to a wolf control program must be considered carefully and discussed broadly before a decision to proceed is taken;
- while there is support in general for harvest limits, that support is conditional on other steps being taken, particularly by industry and governments. Almost all will require additional resources;
- community buy-in is essential and may require community management of tags.
   Mandatory reporting of harvest may be acceptable if that reporting is done

- through the communities or renewable resource boards, rather than directly to government;
- Government of Nunavut and Nunavut agencies (including the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board) need to be part of the solution. More complete participation and engagement by Nunavut agencies is needed for meaningful progress in a number of areas;
- harvesting alternate species (with possible government support), encouraging trade and barter of alternate country foods, the prohibition of the sale of caribou meat, avoidance of any wastage and increased enforcement were all seen as necessary components of an overall action plan.

The October 22-23, 2014 meeting focused on refining the list of possible actions and agreeing upon a "package" of recommended actions and their implementation.

#### 2.0 Context for the October 22-23, 2014 Meeting

Areas of broad consensus that underpinned the October 22-23, 2014 meeting stemmed from earlier meetings and discussions and included the following:

- while the herds are clearly in trouble (numbers are low and the trend is down), the situation is particularly critical for the Bathurst herd;
- in both cases, the downward trend is a result of "natural" factors (e.g., weather, predation), induced factors (e.g., harvesting, possible increased energetic costs related to avoidance of industrial developments including roads) and cumulative effects;
- while the herds are experiencing similar trends, the pressures on the herds are not the same and nor will be the action plans although there are common pressures and there will be common actions;
- harvesting limits on their own will not arrest the current declines. Additional action is needed, perhaps including predator control and limits to industrial growth:
- strong action is required now by all parties to the full extent of their mandates and abilities, and all parties need to be fully engaged in developing and implementing comprehensive solutions in the short, medium and long terms;
- the leadership of all organizations needs to be more fully engaged in finding and implementing solutions, and supporting the actions once they are put into motion:
- support (ownership) by communities for the action plans is crucial to the success of the action plans;
- the important work (and lessons learned) of the Porcupine Caribou Management Board, the ACCWM and the Bathurst planning process need to be incorporated in the action plans that are developed for the Bathurst and Bluenose East herds. These initiatives have resulted in broad frameworks for herd stewardship. Short term actions should be consistent with these frameworks.

The October 9-10, 2014 workshop identified a number of challenges which also formed part of the context for the October 22-23, 2014 meeting. Among these challenges are:

- the need for more effective engagement with Nunavut government officials, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, regional management boards and communities regarding harvesting limits and possible predator control on the calving grounds;
- the need for better and more current information regarding summer forage;
- the need for more frequent aerial surveys and better ground-truthing of those surveys with community-based monitoring efforts;
- the need for more collars (particularly on the Bathurst herd) to better track caribou movements and survival;
- the need for more complete harvest data collection by all harvesters and the provision of that data to the responsible authorities, notably wildlife management boards;
- the need for more effective leadership and better education regarding current caribou issues and respectful harvesting;
- the need for simple and clear models to demonstrate the results on herd survival of changing harvest patterns, predator controls and other factors;
- the need for more effective control and reduction of the harvest of Bathurst caribou in zone R/BC/01;
- the need for careful consideration and application of possible constraints on the Bluenose East harvest;
- the need to reduce the harvest of cows and a focus on harvesting of younger bulls instead:
- the need to improve the understanding of the effects of predation and possible predator controls before additional measures aside from enhancing current incentive programs are implemented;
- the need to enhance community engagement in caribou stewardship measures including harvest reporting, monitoring, enforcement and planning.

This report summarizes the key results of the October 22-23, 2014 meeting which included a separate Aboriginal caucus on the morning of October 22. The key results of the meeting are set out below. While there was general support for most of the actions listed therein, there was no formal "show of hands" at the meeting. Participants will take the results back to their leadership for further discussion prior to the scheduled leadership meeting in early November.

#### 3.0 October 22-23 Meeting Overview

# 3.1 Aboriginal Caucus

The October 22-23, 2014 meeting began with an Aboriginal caucus. Caucus attendees included representatives all Aboriginal organizations which participated in the October 9-10 meeting. Some were unable to participate in person because of weather-induced travel disruptions but they were able to join in by teleconference. Representatives of the wildlife management boards were invited to attend as observers, as were Darlene Mandeville (note-keeper) and David Livingstone (facilitator for the balance of the meeting). Discussions during the Aboriginal caucus were broad-ranging and very constructive. Lutsel K'e tabled its direction from Council, Déline representatives tabled a preliminary discussion document entitled "Living by Caribou Law" which outlined the context and process by which it would take decisions regarding caribou stewardship and others presented their thoughts, concerns and priorities with regard to the challenge of

returning the Bathurst and Bluenose–East herds to good health. Discussions focused on predator (particularly wolf) controls, bull/cow harvesting, total harvest, assisted hunts and harvest of alternate species, land management including land withdrawals, winter road effects, and education and outreach programs. They also recognized the important work done by the ACCWM, the Tlîchô Government-ENR joint proposal and the work of the Porcupine Caribou Management Board. Key results of the caucus discussions included the following:

- Wolves: participants recognize and respect the role of wolves in the ecosystem
  and their respective cultures. They agreed that further study is required to
  determine the effect of a large harvest of wolves on the ecosystem, they did not
  support a large government-run wolf cull (e.g., airborne targeting of wolves) and
  that in the short term, they support increased incentives for hunters and trappers
  to take more wolves.
- Caribou Harvest: participants recognize the dire situation of the Bathurst herd and the decline in Bluenose-East numbers. While there are challenges and subject to certain conditions, participants are prepared to consider additional constraints on harvesting including reduced harvest levels for both herds, avoidance of meat wastage, reducing the number of cows being taken and focusing more on younger bulls, assisted hunts for alternate species and for caribou in areas where herds are healthier, better monitoring and reporting of harvests, and a stronger role for communities in harvest management.
- Collars: while participants recognize the importance of collars in monitoring the movements and health of the herds and some support more collars, there is resistance on the part of others to increasing the number of collars on the Bathurst herd and little support for increasing the number of collars on the Bluenose-East herd. The resistance stems from concerns that collaring is too intrusive and disrespectful and that the benefits do not outweigh the costs.
- **Education:** participants agreed on the importance and urgency of better education for all parties regarding the state of the herds, proper harvesting techniques, respect for caribou and the need to re-learn traditional practices, leadership engagement.
- Winter roads: participants agreed that winter roads continue to adversely impact caribou in several ways including noise and movement disturbance, increased access for hunters, and enabling overharvesting through the use of large trucks to transport meat. Increased monitoring and enforcement are priorities and the prohibition of the use of trucks to support harvesting was strongly supported.
- Community-based Monitoring: participants strongly supported enhanced capacity for communities to engage in monitoring, whether it be on the winter roads, in conjunction with collar studies, in supporting assisted hunts, or as apart of community education programs.
- Nunavut engagement: participants would welcome and encourage stronger engagement by Nunavut agencies and communities and consider that engagement to be essential in returning the herds to health, particularly important the Bathurst herd.
- **Fire management:** participants supported increased vegetation mapping on both the winter and summer ranges, recognizing that industry and government have the lead role here, with the support of communities. With regard to fire

management, participants strongly support increased efforts by ENR to fight fires on priority caribou range including key corridors.

Finally, all participants recognized that each and all have important roles to play, collectively and individually, in returning the two herds to health and that in doing so all will have to make sacrifices. The caucus adjourned shortly after noon on October 22.

# 3.2 Caribou Technical Working Group Meeting

The technical working group reconvened at 1pm on October 22. The list of participants is appended.

This afternoon began with an overview of the proposed agenda for the balance of the meeting through Thursday afternoon. The agenda included a review of the caucus results, discussion among participants of the overview, presentations by participants of the results of their respective engagement with their leadership, presentations by ENR to follow up on requests from the October 9-10, 2014 meeting and the results of a recent fall composition survey, discussion of specific recommended actions, by theme and by herd, i.e., harvest, collars, predator control, fire management, vegetation mapping, industrial disturbance, insect disturbance, the role of Nunavut, and finally, wrap up discussions and adjournment. The focus on the discussions would be on framing the details of an action plan that would be brought participants to their respective leadership for further review prior to the November leadership meeting. To the degree possible, consensus would be sought on key decisions but it was recognized that not all participants had decision-making authority.

The balance of the day and the subsequent discussions on Thursday, October 23 largely followed the above general approach. Following is a very brief summary of some of the key points raised during the discussion. Detailed notes prepared by Darlene Mandeville are available in a separate report.

• Harvest: with respect to the Bathurst herd, Tlichô representatives indicated that the Tlîchô Grand Chief had agreed to eliminate entirely the Tlichô harvest of the Bathurst herd for a period of time, subject to further discussions on the latter and other aspects of caribou stewardship, notably predator control. Sahtu representatives concurred with the Tlîchô decision and indicated they would voluntarily stop harvesting in the Hottah Lake area to reduce pressure on both the Bathurst and Bluenose-East herds. Yellowknives Dene First Nation, North Slave Metis Alliance and Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation representatives indicated that they did not necessarily object to eliminating Bathurst caribou harvest but were not in a position to decide on behalf of their respective leadership and that in any case, such a decision would necessarily form part of a larger package. NWT Metis Nation representatives concurred with eliminating the harvest entirely and offered their assistance in assisting the Tlichô to harvest caribou from areas to the east where the herds remain relatively healthy. Nunavut representatives indicated that they fully understood the situation of the Bathurst herd and were undertaking internal discussions to address the situation, but did not commit to reducing their harvest. All parties acknowledged and thanked the Tlîchô representatives for the very difficult decision their leadership has taken and committed to support them in developing an overall package of measures that would address their concerns, including forming a working group to further define that package.

With respect to the Bluenose East herd, there was no consensus with regard to reduced harvest levels although all parties recognized that the status quo was not acceptable. As noted, Sahtu representatives committed to voluntarily eliminating their harvest in the Hottah lake area and to other conservation measures, including consideration of the closure of Zone R/BC/01. However, the Bluenose-East herd is subject to the plan prepared by the ACCWM and there are no short term measures contemplated through that process that would address harvesting this winter or next spring.

- Collars: participants generally recognize the importance of collars in tracking the movements of the herds and their health, but some continue to be very concerned about the impact of collars on the health of individual animals and on the herd as a result of disturbances related to collaring. There are strong cultural objections to collaring because of the handling of the animals it requires, and some scepticism as to the actual scientific benefit of collaring. Steps to reduce concerns would include further efforts at educating communities about collaring and its benefits, application of best available technologies including using the smallest and least intrusive collars possible, investigating and applying alternate methods of tracking caribou including enhanced community-based monitoring and other technologies such as DNA analysis, and replacing collaring entirely as soon as viable alternatives can be found. All participants agreed that at best, collaring is a "necessary evil". There was no consensus on increasing the number of collars on Bathurst caribou despite the agreement of the Tlichô Government and ENR to do so, and no agreement to increase the number of collars on the Bluenose-East herd.
- Predator control: discussion focussed primarily on wolf control. There was strong consensus that a government-sponsored cull would not be supported and in any case additional harvesting of wolves (other than through an increase in the current incentives program, including an increase to \$800 per wolf harvested, not including fur sale proceeds) required considerably more research and a clear demonstration that it would be effective in achieving a significant reduction in caribou predation. All participants supported encouraging experienced trappers and hunters to increase their harvests through appropriate incentives. All NWT and Nunavut participants endorsed this approach, and some argued very strongly for immediate action to reduce wolf numbers through focussed hunting efforts.

Participants also discussed the impact bears may be having on caribou numbers and while some felt the impact might be significant there was little evidence presented to support this perception. There was no consensus with regard to a focused bear control program, particularly given the "species of concern" status of tundra grizzly bears and related challenges.

Fire management and vegetation mapping: there was strong consensus that the protection of important caribou habitat (including key migration corridors and important winter range) is a priority. Increased emphasis on fighting fires in those areas should be a clear priority for ENR. Participants agreed that more engagement by communities in mapping important habitat would be welcomed and that consideration should be given to striking a small working group to do so.

Participants recognized that budgets and resources are potential limiting factors in increasing the amount of fire fighting in important caribou habitat but that needs to be balanced against the need to return the herds to healthy status – and that requires both good winter range and adequate migratory corridors.

Participants also reached consensus that additional vegetation mapping on both winter and summer ranges would be very helpful, and not just in terms of winter range identification and protection. Improved mapping of the vegetation on the summer range could lead to better understanding of the implications of poor summer forage on herd health. There was agreement that vegetation mapping protocols should be developed so that the mining industry (including exploration companies), outfitters and communities can better participate in a regional sampling and monitoring program.

- Industrial disturbance, including winter roads: the representative from the GNWT's new Department of Lands provided an overview of its various legislative and policy tools, leading to a further discussion about options to mitigate the effects of winter roads on caribou harvest and herd health. Various options were suggested including blocking access to the roads once industrial traffic has ceased, cutting separate caribou trails parallel to road crossings on portages, adding operational terms and conditions to land use permits and leases, issuing NOTAMS to pilots to avoid low-level flights in important areas, better winter and summer road design to improve caribou crossings and presenting better information and possible solutions to environmental review boards and regulatory boards for their consideration during project reviews. While there was no consensus with respect to a discrete set of priority actions, there was consensus that every little bit helps and different tools need to be applied as appropriate.
- Insect harassment: several participants suggested that biological control measures need to be considered in reducing nose bot and warble fly infestations. Observations suggested that warble flies in particular are becoming more common. ENR undertook to look into this issue and to follow up with all parties. Enhanced monitoring to include insect pests is one avenue, as is additional research on biological controls. There was consensus among the group that these avenues are worth pursuing.
- Nunavut engagement: better engagement by Nunavut organizations and the Nunavut government in issues related to caribou stewardship, particularly with respect to the Bathurst herd, has been an ongoing concern among NWT organizations. The Nunavut delegation provided an overview of the various steps that are being taken in Nunavut to address those concerns, including the community and outfitter take of Bathurst caribou and concerns related to wolf predation. There was strong consensus among participants that this improved engagement is a good start and that communication ties and cooperation with regard to harvest management and predator control in particular needed to be strengthened. All parties present committed to do their part.

#### 4.0 Recommendations

In addition to the above findings, a list of undertakings was put forward and briefly discussed at the end of the October 22-23 meeting. The group agreed there are two different herds in different circumstances but management actions on one impact the other herd.

The following items are drawn from that list.

# 4.1 Actions applying to both herds

- immediately increase the wolf incentive program payment to \$800;
- reinstitute the carcass collection program with options for whole carcass (\$200 incentive) or just skull and information (\$50 incentive) to enable additional observations on the number of wolves seen in packs to be collected and recorded;
- form a working group (including hunters) to develop ideas about how to help harvesters increase wolf kills;
- GNWT to work with directly with Nunavut's Department of Environment to develop coordinated wolf control programs, informed by the working group and other parties;
- develop a method to immediately report and record wolf sightings\caribou sightings and interactions;
- support land use planning as a priority for the GNWT Lands Department and recommend consideration of an interim moratorium of development on the Bathurst range;
- GNWT to send a letter to the Nunavut Department of Environment and to the NWMB to consider the new information for both herds in the context of potential management actions and for land use planning in Nunavut;
- organize "sight in your rifle" events in each community with ENR support this winter and use the opportunity to provide information on the caribou situation;
- develop vegetation mapping protocols and partnership agreements to undertake mapping and ground-truthing including establishing and monitoring representative plots;
- undertake a literature review on the potential impacts of insects on caribou;
- ensure that the Bathurst range planning and cumulative effects management program reports on goals and efforts to date public before March 31, 2015.

#### 4.2 Actions applying to the Bluenose-East herd

- proceed though ACCWM process while implementing local actions (support bull only- take less)
- provide funding and ENR personnel support to groups for immediate development of communication tools to promote reducing Bluenose-East harvest, to promote preferential taking of bulls, elimination of wastage, avoidance of losses due to wounding, harvesting of alternative meat sources (e.g., muskox, moose) and to promote respect for caribou. Media include radio, newspapers, posters and other collaborative messaging approaches to target both local communities and the broader audience;
- legislated closure of winter truck hunting where possible and appropriate;

- additional funding support to ACCWM to develop an action plan for the Bluenose-East herd under the Management Plan;
- encourage the leadership to continue and increase meetings in the communities to encourage responsible harvesting practices;
- no more hauling caribou meat by plane in the winter or by trucks.

# 4.3 Actions applying to the Bathurst herd

- establish a working group to identify key caribou habitat for priority firefighting in 2015;
- leadership of all organizations to clearly support the decision to close harvesting of the Bathurst herd as part of an overall agreement to conserve both herds;
- implement a broad communications strategy (including winter road signage) upon closure;
- establish subzones in R/BC/01, S/BC/03 and U/BC/01 to halt caribou harvest when Bathurst caribou are outside Zone R/BC/02 and R/BC/02;
- immediately establish a working group to develop the rules for emergency closures of those areas:
- conduct further studies to determine the impacts of barren ground grizzly predation on caribou;
- continue and accelerate the long term planning process for the Bathurst herd and finalize terms of reference for a Bathurst caribou management board as soon as possible.

#### 5.0 Summary

The Minister of Environment and Natural Resources is hosting a leadership meeting in early November to discuss the above recommendations of the technical working group, and other considerations. The Minister is considering the imposition of interim legislated emergency measures to protect caribou of the Bathurst and Bluenose-East herds given their current declines, pending further steps by the responsible wildlife management boards. For the Bathurst herd that would mean immediate closure of zones R/BC/02 and R/BC/03. Participants at the October 9-10 and October 22-23, 2014 meetings understand the concerns related to herd health and are prepared to take significant steps – and make significant sacrifices – to ensure that the herds recover.

For example, a very significant outcome of the October 22-23, 2014 meeting was the agreement by the Tlîchô Government to suspend its harvest of Bathurst caribou subject to agreement on other elements of an overall caribou stewardship agreement. This is a very difficult decision that the Tlichô have taken and must be strongly supported by all parties if it is to receive community support – and without community support, the commitment will not succeed.

Participants of the two technical working group meetings groups have worked hard over the past month to reach agreement on a package of actions that would accompany the decision to eliminate the Bathurst harvest and to mitigate Bluenose-East harvest. There is no absolute consensus on the final package prepared by the group but the elements are there for one, if the leadership finds the necessary common ground and commitment – including financial commitments and harvest reduction commitments. An overall agreement is within reach if the parties continue to work together over the coming weeks and narrow their differences. Several technical working groups have been proposed and should be established as soon as possible to help in that process. The Aboriginal leadership should meet prior to the November meeting to resolve outstanding concerns among their respective organizations. The GNWT, led by ENR, should lead an exercise to better define the above actions including leads, partners, timeframes and costs.

Ultimately, this work is being done in the context of putting caribou first. The Bluenose-East and Bathurst herds are under particular stress at the moment – the Bathurst is clearly in a crisis situation – but with common commitment, sacrifice by all parties, a comprehensive agreement to move forward and action on the ground, the herds can be returned to health.

The caribou technical working group has accomplished much of its objectives. It is now up to the leadership to reach agreement on how we can move forward individually and collectively, to put caribou first and to ensure the herds' return to health. Failure to do so is both inexcusable and unthinkable, for us and for future generations.

#### Annex 1:

# List of Participants Bathurst and Bluenose East Caribou Technical Workshop October 22 – 23, 2014

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