



SUBMISSION TO THE

Nunavut Wildlife Management Board

Information: X

Decision:

Issue: Starvation die-off of caribou on Prince Charles Island

Background:

Prince Charles Island is a large, mostly flat island in Foxe Basin, where a large proportion of Baffin Island caribou have been seen on recent surveys. In 2014, an aerial survey of the Baffin Island caribou range estimated there were 4,652 caribou on Baffin Island (3,462-6,250 95% CI). Of this, 1,603 (1,158-2,220 95% CI) were estimated on Prince Charles Island. The most recent survey work, spring composition surveys in April 2016, did not indicate large numbers of dead caribou, and biologists did not have difficulty locating groups of caribou.

In July 2016, a Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) crew looking at sites for bird research on Prince Charles Island reported approximately 30 caribou carcasses on the northeast part of the island. A local observer from Cape Dorset was present on the crew. The CWS crew also reported seeing some live caribou, fewer than 20, during their time on the island. The Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB) submitted a letter to the Department of Environment regarding a management and research proposal for the Prince Charles Island Caribou from the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board (QWB). The minister of Environment replied with a letter to the NWMB acknowledging the proposal and outlining what actions the Department of Environment was able to address at the present time and within current departmental priorities and budgets.

Current Status:

Two Department of Environment biologists visited the esker ridge, where the caribou carcasses had been found by Canadian Wildlife Service field staff. A total of 47 carcasses were found and 18 of them were sampled. Biologists collected hind legs, skin, blood, tissue, fecal pellets, photographs, and noted the location, sex, age, and condition of the carcasses. There was minimal scavenging and many carcasses were in a position as if bedded, while others were on their sides as if they had fallen over from a standing position. Carcasses were in an advanced state of decay so samples of internal organs could not be obtained.

Samples were sent to the Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative for analysis. The results confirm extremely low fat reserves on the caribou sampled, indicating emaciation and

starvation as the main cause of death. A spring storm preventing access to forage is the most likely cause of the die-off.

Weather-related die-offs such as this are a natural and not uncommon occurrence, especially amongst island-living caribou, when forage becomes inaccessible under hard packed snow or ground-fast ice.

Recommendation: *N/A*

Next Steps:

- An aerial survey of Prince Charles Island will be undertaken in Spring 2017 to re-assess the population of caribou on Prince Charles Island, and its revised proportional contribution to the Baffin Island caribou population.