

Backgrounder

Wolf Cull and Caribou Recovery in British Columbia

(BC Nature – Background Information for Letters of Support)



Issue Summary

The Province of British Columbia uses predator reduction as one tool within its caribou recovery program. The province applies predator reduction in selected caribou ranges where predation has been identified as a barrier to recovery. The program primarily targets wolves through aerial shooting from helicopters.

Stakeholder organizations report that the Province is considering a further five-year continuation of the wolf reduction program for 2026–2031. If approved, the continuation would allow predator reduction to continue in selected caribou ranges under provincial wolf reduction procedures.

In 2024–25, predator reduction was applied to 15 of the 54 identified woodland caribou populations in British Columbia. During that season, 351 wolves were lethally removed through aerial shooting, 15 wolves were live-captured and translocated to Colorado, and six cougars were removed through ground-based hunting. The reported cost for the 2024–25 season was approximately \$1.5 million.

The province's wolf reduction procedure identifies a management objective of reducing wolf density to fewer than three wolves per 1,000 km² within selected caribou herd areas. The program is intended to support caribou populations while other recovery measures, including habitat protection and restoration, are implemented.

Species at Risk Context

- **Status:** Woodland caribou in B.C. are divided into 54 subpopulations/herds. Boreal caribou are listed as threatened under the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA) and are provincially red-listed. Southern Mountain caribou are listed as threatened under SARA and are provincially red-listed. Northern Mountain caribou are listed as special concern under SARA and are provincially blue-listed.
- **Species:** Woodland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*). Relevant B.C. ecotypes include Boreal, Northern Mountain, and Southern Mountain caribou.
- **Habitat:** Caribou depend on large, relatively undisturbed landscapes for food, calving, migration, predator avoidance, and shelter. Southern Mountain caribou use mountainous terrain, mature/high-elevation forests, subalpine and alpine habitats, and, in some herds, low-elevation forests. Boreal caribou use peatlands and open old forests.
- **Primary Threats:** Habitat loss, habitat fragmentation and alteration, displacement from recreation, predation, human-caused mortality such as vehicle collisions, and broader pressures including climate change. B.C. identifies habitat fragmentation and loss from cutblocks, roads, and seismic lines, together with resulting increases in prey and predator populations, as main factors associated with caribou decline.
- **Significance of Area:** B.C. supports all three provincial woodland caribou ecotypes and contains the world's southernmost caribou population. The issue is provincial in scope because the 2026 wolf reduction procedure applies to all woodland caribou ecotypes and herds in B.C.

Geographic Context

- **Location:** Caribou herds occur across B.C.: Boreal caribou in the northeast, Northern Mountain caribou in north-central and northwestern B.C., and Southern Mountain caribou through central/eastern/southern mountain regions. Predator reduction in 2024-25 was applied to 15 of B.C.'s 54 identified woodland caribou populations.
- **Ecosystem:** Boreal forest, peatland, subalpine, alpine, mature coniferous forest, and interior wet-belt ecosystems, depending on ecotype and herd.
- **Habitat:** B.C. identifies caribou habitat as both core habitat - areas needed to support self-sustaining subpopulations - and matrix habitat, which may connect or influence core areas. Altered matrix habitat can increase other ungulates and associated predators, creating unsustainable predation pressure on caribou.
- **Protection Gap:** Habitat protection, restoration, and management are not interchangeable. B.C. states that restoration and management cannot replace habitat protection, and that if habitat loss or fragmentation is the primary factor in a herd's decline, population recovery actions alone cannot lead to long-term recovery.

Cultural Context (First Peoples Impact)

Caribou recovery in British Columbia intersects with Aboriginal and Treaty rights, Indigenous knowledge, traditional harvesting, and community-based stewardship. The Government of British Columbia has formal



obligations to consult First Nations that may be affected by caribou recovery actions, including wolf reduction activities.

In 2020, British Columbia, Canada, West Moberly First Nations, and Saulteau First Nations signed the Partnership Agreement for the Conservation of the Central Group of Southern Mountain Caribou. The agreement identifies a shared recovery objective of stabilizing and growing the Central Group of Southern Mountain Caribou to self-sustaining levels that can support traditional Aboriginal harvesting activities, consistent with existing Aboriginal and Treaty rights.

First Nations perspectives on caribou recovery and predator reduction may differ by Nation, territory, herd, and local circumstance. Caribou recovery decisions may affect Indigenous rights, land use, cultural practices, stewardship priorities, and relationships with wildlife species, including both caribou and wolves.

Ecological Context

Caribou historically reduced predation risk by living at low densities across large, relatively undisturbed landscapes and by spacing themselves away from areas with higher densities of other prey species and predators. This ecological separation is central to caribou survival. When mature and old forest habitat is logged, fragmented, or converted to younger forest, that separation is weakened.

Human land use has changed predator-prey dynamics in many caribou ranges. Young forests and disturbed areas can provide better forage for moose, deer, and elk, which can support higher wolf populations. Roads, seismic lines, pipelines, cutblocks, and winter recreation trails can also make it easier for wolves to travel through caribou habitat. As a result, caribou can become more exposed to predation in landscapes that no longer provide the same refuge they historically depended on.

In this context, wolves are not the root cause of caribou decline. Wolves are responding to landscapes that have been altered by human activity. Killing wolves may temporarily reduce predation pressure on some caribou herds, but it does not restore old forest, remove linear disturbance, reduce industrial access, or rebuild the ecological separation caribou need to persist over the long term.

Caribou recovery should not be reduced to killing one native species in an attempt to save another. Both caribou and wolves are part of functioning ecosystems. Both have ecological value. A recovery approach that repeatedly kills wolves while the underlying habitat problem remains unresolved risks turning predator removal into a long-term maintenance program rather than true ecosystem recovery.

The central ecological concern is that wolf killing may hold an altered system in place instead of addressing the human-caused conditions that made caribou more vulnerable. Long-term caribou recovery depends on protecting and restoring habitat, reducing fragmentation, managing access, and rebuilding the landscape conditions that allow caribou, wolves, and other wildlife to coexist without continual lethal intervention.

Conservation Significance



Caribou recovery is a significant conservation issue in British Columbia because woodland caribou populations are listed under the federal Species at Risk Act and require management actions to address declining populations. The federal recovery goal for Southern Mountain Caribou is to achieve self-sustaining populations within their current distribution, where possible. In areas with high levels of disturbance, recovery is expected to take decades. | [Source](#)

The conservation issue is not limited to caribou predation by wolves. Provincial and federal sources identify habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, habitat alteration, recreational disturbance, human-caused mortality, and predation as factors affecting caribou decline. British Columbia's predator management materials identify habitat loss as the underlying cause of mountain caribou population declines, with high predator populations and unsustainable predation rates described as secondary contributors. | [Source](#)

Habitat protection and restoration are identified by the Province as essential for long-term caribou recovery. However, mature and old forests take decades to regrow, and disturbed landscapes can continue to affect predator-prey dynamics during that period. Predator reduction may reduce immediate predation pressure on selected caribou herds, but it does not restore mature forest habitat, remove linear disturbance, reduce industrial access, or rebuild the landscape conditions that support self-sustaining caribou populations. | [Source](#)

This creates a conservation challenge: short-term population management is being used in landscapes where the long-term recovery requirement is habitat protection and restoration. The significance of the issue is therefore ecological as well as species-specific. Caribou and wolves are both native wildlife species with ecological roles, and long-term caribou recovery depends on restoring habitat conditions and predator-prey dynamics rather than relying indefinitely on repeated lethal predator reduction. | [Source](#)

Scientific Context:

- **Provincial rationale:** B.C. defines predator reduction as targeted removal of localized predator populations, such as wolves, to aid caribou recovery when predation is identified as a barrier to recovery.
- **2026 procedure:** B.C.'s Wolf Reduction Procedure became effective March 10, 2026. It applies to all ecotypes and all herds of woodland caribou in B.C., and it identifies aerial shooting as the main wolf reduction method. It sets an objective of reducing wolves to fewer than 3 wolves per 1,000 square kilometres within identified caribou herd boundaries.
- **Provincial caveat:** The same 2026 procedure states that long-term caribou recovery depends on addressing habitat conditions and that predator reduction cannot be a long-term solution for caribou recovery.
- **Latest official provincial summary found:** In winter 2024-25, aerial-based wolf reduction was applied to 15 of 54 woodland caribou populations in B.C. A total of 351 wolves were lethally removed by aerial shooting, 15 wolves were live-captured and translocated to Colorado, and six cougars were removed by ground-based hunting, at a reported cost of approximately \$1.5 million.
- **Evidence of short-term benefit:** Peer-reviewed and provincial sources report that wolf reduction can increase survival, calf recruitment, or population growth in some caribou herds. A 2024 Ecological

Applications study reported that wolf reductions alone increased southern mountain caribou population growth rate by about 11%, and that recovery actions had increased abundance by 52% relative to a simulated no-intervention scenario as of 2023.

- **Critical limitation:** Evidence of short-term demographic benefit does not resolve the ethical or long-term ecological question. B.C. also states that habitat recovery actions are necessary and that population actions cannot achieve long-term recovery if habitat loss and fragmentation remain the primary drivers.
- **Stakeholder concerns:** The Fur-Bearers and Raincoast argue the proposed 2026-2031 extension should not be approved as drafted because it continues predator killing without adequately demonstrating habitat protection, full transparency, independent humaneness/ecological review, and clear limits or exit criteria.
- **Public interest:** B.C.'s 2021 predator-reduction engagement reported that 98% of respondents considered caribou recovery important, while 59% opposed predator reduction and 37% supported it.
- **Non-lethal and less-lethal recovery tools to assess:** enforceable habitat protection, functional and ecological restoration of linear disturbances, road and access management, recreation restrictions in sensitive ranges, caribou translocation/augmentation where appropriate, supplemental feeding in specific circumstances, conservation breeding, and maternal penning. Note: maternal penning is non-lethal to predators but involves capturing and penning pregnant caribou, so it should be evaluated carefully and not assumed to be acceptable in all circumstances.

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