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CARIBOU PRESERVATION

Anxiety because of an apparent decline of the barren-ground caribou of the Central Arctic mainland arose prior to the Second World War but formal government concern for the situation was not expressed until 1947. In that year the Eleventh Conference of Dominion and Provincial Wildlife Officers passed a resolution recommending a co-operative investigation of barren-ground caribou with a view to joint action to implement necessary conservation measures. The Canadian Wildlife Service was given the job of planning and co-ordinating the work. It also assumed the major share of the costs.

Extensive study of the caribou was undertaken in 1948 and 1949. Results indicated that the population in the Districts of Mackenzie and Keewatin totalled about 670,000 animals, a serious drop from the estimated two to three million at the turn of the century. In 1955 the most intensive barren-ground caribou survey ever carried out revealed that about 270,000 caribou existed and today it is believed that there are only about 200,000 of those animals. Many different phases of the problem have received study since 1948, phases such as breeding biology, mortality causes, behaviour, migrations, food habits and winter range conditions. The most intensive investigation was carried out between April, 1957, and August, 1958, as a co-operative venture of federal, provincial and territorial government agencies and many important conclusions resulted.

It was found that a number of factors contributed to the decline in caribou numbers, some being of more significance than others. In the latter category were disease and parasites. No evidence has yet come to light to indicate that either caused the deaths of more than a small number of caribou. Accidents, such as drowning, play a minor but continuous role in caribou mortality. Loss of calves at or shortly after birth because of bad weather also occurred. In some years the production of calves has been unusually low and it is known that wolves kill caribou regularly. Extensive forest fire on the ranges where caribou spend the winter has destroyed thousands of food-producing acres. The most important, immediate, single factor contributing to the decline, however, was the excessive human kill. In a number of years the kill of caribou by humans alone exceeded the number of caribou born and surviving the first year of life. When losses by other means, such as accidents, weather and predation were added to the human kill, the net deficit was obvious.

Before Indian and Eskimo hunters acquired rifles, the caribou kill was probably less than the calf crop even in years with poor calf survival. The greater mobility of hunters brought about by the increase in dog teams and the introduction of highly efficient firearms increased total kill beyond the capacity of the herds to withstand it.

The problem of preserving the barren-ground caribou as a valuable northern resource, worth at least \$10,000,000, is extremely complex. The biological side is relatively easy to deal with and a number of important steps have been taken to reduce the kill and the wastage of meat. Current regulations restrict hunting almost entirely to Indians and Eskimos, protect females and young, and prohibit the feeding of good caribou meat to dogs and other forms of wastage. An intensive wolf control program between 1953 and 1959 destroyed nearly 7,000 wolves which were in barren-ground caribou country. Forest fire protection in winter range areas has been recommended. But it is the human side of the equation of the caribou and man relationship which is the difficult nut to crack. How can the objective of increasing the low numbers of caribou to a satisfactory level for heavy utilization be achieved when a substantial segment of the human population depends upon the same caribou for existence? Many factors are involved, the right of Treaty Indians in the provinces to hunt without restriction on unoccupied Crown lands, the need to develop a conservation ethic in caribou hunters and the need to provide alternate resources, either by wages or by other means so that living standards will at least be maintained while the pressure on caribou is being relieved.

The government of the three prairie provinces, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and the Federal Government, are studying ways to overcome the complex social problems

for their solution is vital to the survival of caribou as an economic resource. The Administrative Committee for Caribou Preservation, the senior intergovernmental caribou committee, has undertaken to develop the objectives and methods required.

The Canadian Wildlife Service, the federal agency responsible for wildlife research in the Northwest Territories, is continuing its studies of caribou, emphasizing range and food relationships, nutritional physiology and assessments of distribution and hunter mortality. An intensive study of one herd is planned to enable the Service to present specific management recommendations which will complement recommendations for ameliorating the social problems of caribou-dependent people. It is hoped that an intensive, co-ordinated approach to the problem will produce more caribou for northern people and at the same time overcome at least some of the concomitant social conditions.