

Telkwa Caribou Recovery Area VRAMG – Conservation Group

Winter Recreation Proposal – January 22, 2016

Snowmobile activity

There was a time when Voluntary Recreation Access Management Group (VRAMG) delegates thought that snowmobiling could co-exist with a healthy and growing Telkwa caribou herd. That dream ended with a recent caribou monitoring flight. The monitoring flight by local Fish and Wildlife staff on Tuesday February 24, 2015 found snowmobile tracks across the entire Telkwa Range including areas seldom or never used for winter motorized recreation in past years.

For the first time in more than 16 years, extensive snowmobile tracks were found in the Core Area, a key wintering locale for caribou. By travelling into the Core Area, snowmobilers showed a total disregard for caribou and for voluntary recreation access restrictions agreed upon by the community and designed to protect the Telkwa herd.

Extensive snowmobile tracks were also reported in the western portion of the Telkwa Caribou Recovery Area north of the Eagle Peak and Starr Creek areas. Caribou were in the area at the time and local Wildlife staff called a temporary closure of the area to snowmobiles on February 27, 2015. Snowmobile tracks from the Grizzly Plateau extended north close to Mt Forester. Snowmobile tracks were also seen on Glacis Mountain and in the Goathorn Meadows, an important source of arboreal lichens for caribou in the past.

“The geographic extent of recreational use in the recovery area raises questions about the effectiveness of the voluntary closure” – Conrad Thiessen, biologist, Fish and Wildlife Branch

Breakdown

The recent upsurge in snowmobile use in all sectors of the Telkwa Caribou Recovery Area shows a complete breakdown of the voluntary recreation access agreements between local Fish and Wildlife staff and the two local snowmobile clubs. Recent snowmobile traffic shows the clubs no longer have control or influence over the numerous snowmobilers who do not belong to a local club and who venture into the Core Recovery Area and across the entire Telkwa Range.

Letter of Agreement of March 2003

The Houston and Smithers snowmobile clubs agreed to the following provision in 2003: “The club is committed to addressing the access/caribou concerns and is willing to make reasonable effort to ensure that the caribou receive the protection they require. The club further acknowledges that legislated closures will be necessary as a final option if the voluntary restrictions can not be made to work.”

Precedents for Closure in BC

Scientists have decided that snowmobiles are displacing caribou in the Rocky Mountains extending from north of Prince George south to the USA border.

“ We recommend that snowmobile activity be restricted from all or most high quality mountain caribou habitat as part of the recovery planning process” (*Displacement of Mountain Caribou From Winter Habitat by Snowmobiles*, 2006, Dale Seip, BC Forest Service)

Over one million hectares of caribou habitat in the BC portion of the Rocky Mountains are now closed to snowmobile use by regulation. Enforcement is being conducted by provincial Conservation officers and other peace officers.

Policy Priorities

In the caribou recovery process, provincial policy requires that displacement of caribou by recreation be addressed first. After that, other solutions may be employed for the problem of predation or weakening of the herd by genetic drift and inbreeding depression. Closure to snowmobile use is merely the first step in a long recovery process for the Telkwa caribou herd. A closure of the Telkwa Caribou Recovery Area to snowmobile use allows Fish and Wildlife staff to assess other variables that affect the caribou such as predation, weather, feed, etc. without worrying about the frequent and erratic displacement of caribou by snowmobiles.

This is the time to give 100% support to caribou recovery. Trade-offs and accommodating user groups will only compromise the caribou.

Proposal:

We propose a closure of all winter motorized under the Wildlife Act and all winter non-motorized recreation for the entire Telkwa Caribou Recovery Area, with the exception of a portion of the Grizzly Plateau south of the latitude of 54 degrees, 24 minutes, 04.47 minutes North, for a term of three years commencing immediately. At the end of the term, the closure shall be reviewed and lifted or renewed as necessary.