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Press Release

We've stopped shooting grizzly bears...now what about the wolves?

BC Nature, which represents more than 6,100 naturalists in 53 clubs all over British Columbia, applauds the provincial government's decision to halt the hunting of grizzly bears. However, another such management challenge concerns us as well: the current killing of grey wolves as a way to rescue southern BC mountain caribou herds that are close to extirpation.

The wolf cull program initiated by the previous provincial government attempts to halt the decline of mountain caribou herds in southern British Columbia by eliminating one of its predators. We recognize the delicate balance involved when ethics and wildlife management science interface, and the pressures upon those who make the decisions about how best to conserve and preserve our fellow BC inhabitants. However, no scientific evidence supports the efficacy of this cruel and inhumane experiment, where conservation officers snare and trap wolves, and shoot them from helicopters.

The caribou populations are certainly threatened, but the scientific and experiential evidence from other jurisdictions does not support the removal of wolves in an effort to rectify earlier mismanagement decisions and halt their demise; and from a moral point of view, it is reprehensible. Essential caribou habitat has been destroyed and degraded by years of industrial clear-cut logging. Gone are the large tracts of the essential lichen-clad old growth forests and subalpine sanctuaries necessary for supporting large, healthy populations of

caribou. The loss of contiguous habitat eliminates the connectivity needed for the interbreeding of caribou herds, and essential for their long-term genetic health. Instead, small populations of caribou, permanently separated from one another in the remaining small pockets of suitable habitat, face a high risk of extirpation.

In addition, thousands of kilometers of logging roads provide human access to the remaining caribou habitats. The invasion of all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles, heli-skiing operations, and snow cats cause stress and expose secure retreats. These roads also facilitate access by predators, including wolves.

In ranges like the south Selkirks the wolf eradication program continues in an effort to halt what would appear to be an inevitable result. These herds have slipped well below the critical threshold for survival, and have entered the extinction vortex, where their reduced genetic diversity compromises the lives of individuals. Where only a handful of caribou remain in marginal habitat, the impacts of predation can be considerable. The government would have to kill every wolf in thousands of square kilometres of range in an effort to prolong the life of these threatened herds for a few more years, in fragmented habitat that will not recover for a hundred years or more.

And when the killing ceases, wolf populations and predation rates will most likely recover. According to the government's 2014 wolf management policy,

“Attempts to control wolves to reduce predation risks on caribou have been a provincial priority since 2001. Wolf densities have been reduced; however, at this time, a correlation between reduced wolf densities and caribou recovery cannot be substantiated.”

In other words, the current 5-year program becomes a senseless exercise that will not return caribou to viable former numbers. The killing continues in an attempt to justify this biologically unsubstantiated experiment, when realistically, the days of these remnant caribou are numbered. From the standpoint of conservation biology, no justification exists for the wolf-killing program aimed at restoring caribou herd viability.

And what of the domino effect of top-predator removal? The recent restoration of an enhanced, healthy Yellowstone ecosystem with the reintroduction of wolves underscores the importance of apex predators. What apparently unconsidered consequences would wolf removal in southern BC precipitate?

We also have strong ethical concerns. A broad sector of the conservation community, backed by a petition representing substantial support from the public, is united in condemning the senseless slaughter of these remarkable social animals. It is intolerable to allow wolves to suffer a slow painful death from wounds inflicted by snipers in helicopters, to track radio collared wolves called “Judas” wolves to their pack mates where they can all be gunned down, to allow strangulation by snare and sanction the excruciating agony wolves endure in the jaws of a trap. The wolf cull must be stopped.

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