

WORKING TOGETHER:

Indigenous Involvement in Caribou Stewardship

A Discussion Paper drafted by the Indigenous Statement Working Group

In 2010, for the first time ever, Indigenous Peoples came together from many parts of Canada to participate in an Aboriginal Talking Circle at the 13th North American Caribou Workshop. It was an opportunity to meet one another, to share knowledge and observations, and to discuss concerns regarding caribou and our shared future.

Since that time we have seen considerable change in our relationships with Canada. There is growing awareness of how past policies and actions have impacted Indigenous Peoples, and encouraging steps towards reconciliation that include recognition of our distinct cultures and values. Important developments like Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Indigenous Circle of Experts are helping to create a new context in which the unique roles Indigenous Peoples play in conserving life on earth are being acknowledged and upheld.

At the same time, we are witnessing a worsening situation for caribou – an animal that defines our very lifeways and whose well-being and survival is intimately linked to our own. Since time immemorial we have sustained relationships with caribou, guided by our stories and traditions. Increasingly, living things like caribou and the lands and waters that sustain them are under threat. These problems were not created by Indigenous peoples, yet we are the ones most affected by them. Because of our deep connections with caribou, we see these as threats to our own languages, cultures, and ways of life. Still we are often excluded from important aspects of caribou conservation; our knowledge systems and ways of stewardship are not fully understood or accommodated, as management frameworks have not yet adapted to this new context. We have reached a critical point now and it is crucial that our voices be heard. It is time for us to shape the conservation dialogue. We are here to work in all levels of caribou stewardship – not only through contributing our knowledge, but as full partners. In order to develop a good collaborative relationship in caribou conservation, it is essential that the following points are understood:

RELATIONSHIPS WITH CARIBOU

For countless generations Indigenous Peoples have co-existed with caribou and sustained our relationships through a careful practice of respect and traditional life ways as defined by our stories. Caribou are central to our survival and well-being; our landscapes and languages, our cultures and economies are all shaped by caribou.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

Indigenous Peoples feel a deep-seated responsibility to ensure our lands and waters remain healthy and abundant for future generations. We inherited this land and will also pass it on. We are thankful that animals like caribou have been provided for us and have a responsibility to ensure their continued well-being in a manner that is respectful to our spiritual and cultural understandings. We acknowledge that caribou live according to their own free will, so our responsibility includes a need to look after their home so that they can continue to live freely. We have a further responsibility to ensure that our original stories and teachings are not left behind. This means that our duty as stewards encompasses not just the caribou, but extends to the ecosystem and to our cultures, languages and lifeways.

GOVERNANCE

Indigenous law stems from natural law. Our governance is rooted in our values, our understandings of higher universal principles, our observations and experiences. As a result, we do not see ourselves as separate from the natural world. Knowing we are intimately connected to all living beings and spirits requires us to live within the bounds created by the natural world.

For the last two hundred years, imported governance models based on others' values and understandings have been imposed on Indigenous Peoples in Canada. They have shaped policies, practices, institutions, and decisions to form a management culture that effectively excludes us and has failed us as much as it has caribou.

Collectively, we need to create more space for Indigenous-led stewardship. Adapting resource management frameworks in a way that better accommodates current understandings of Indigenous responsibilities, title, law, and knowledge systems will move caribou stewardship forward in a way that benefits us all.

GENDER ROLES

All Indigenous people have roles to play in caribou stewardship – women, men, and those who define their gender in a more fluid way – just as caribou herds are structured according to the roles of individual animals. We all depend upon each other. The skills involved in harvesting, preparing meat and hides, sharing, and feeding and clothing our families and communities are highly specialised. But these roles are also flexible, depending on circumstances and individual gifts or powers. Everyone in our communities should be respected for their contributions in maintaining practices and spirituality in relation to caribou.

YOUTH

Youth also have important roles to play as caribou stewards. We have listened to the stories from our Elders, we remain connected to our caribou cultures, and so we have a strong desire and inherent right to have a say in how our futures will take shape. We are excited about the possibility that Guardian programs could be a way of mobilizing youth; we want to be of service to our community and continue to build our abilities as leaders. We see potential when we come together and cooperate respectfully, but we need to act now. We need continued support and encouragement from our Elders to do this. Share your teachings. Help us to further our education, knowledge and skills.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Our knowledge and wisdom are embedded in the land and our stories are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. It is challenging for non-Indigenous people to understand these keys to our cultures. We are also learning, as we renew our traditional relationships to the land, the animals, and our ways of life. We invite others to accompany us, to learn from the land the way we do, and really listen to our stories, as they teach us not only about survival, but about how to understand ourselves and make good decisions as human beings. Together, we can gain wisdom as we learn to see through each other's eyes.

TIME FOR ACTION

We are past the time for talk and ready to work collectively to sustain this sacred relationship with caribou for future generations. We have developed eight *Calls to Action* that can guide each individual in ways to take responsibility within their personal and professional life to create the space that is needed.

Indigenous Calls to Action for Caribou

Draft for discussion - October 22, 2018

INDIGENOUS
TALKING CIRCLE



As Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians are coming to terms with the dark parts of our history and taking steps towards **DECOLONIZATION** and **RECONCILIATION**;

We recognize that our shared landscapes and waters are increasingly unhealthy and some of our most valued animal relations are **UNDER THREAT**;

We take this opportunity to provide principles and actions that will help create an **ETHICAL SPACE** for working together;

A way of **MOVING FORWARD** that will support, reinforce and celebrate the diversity we bring through our differing cultural practices, beliefs and knowledge systems;

And builds on the strengths of both Western and Indigenous Knowledge systems to find new **SOLUTIONS** for caribou;

In order to achieve better **RELATIONSHIPS** amongst and between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians that are based on a foundation of mutual **RESPECT**;

In the spirit of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and as a means of furthering and **MOVING BEYOND** those Recommendations, we call upon NACW participants and their affiliated organizations to take the following actions:

1. CONSERVATION

Support Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship initiatives in which Indigenous leaders, experts and community members have a defining role in protecting and conserving cultural keystone species like caribou, in ways that are based on the principles, values, laws, and protocols inherent in Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems.

2. CULTURE

Recognize and make room for the full expression of distinct cultural and socio-economic elements that characterize Indigenous Peoples' worldviews, including critical components such as deep spiritual connections to the land, a profound responsibility and respect towards animals like caribou, and all aspects of how we maintain our relationships with those animals, including harvesting.

3. WELL-BEING

Expand stewardship and conservation goals to include a more holistic definition of well-being that includes not just the health of caribou, but the health of our relationships with caribou, the land and each other. This encompasses our cultural, social, physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

4. GOVERNANCE

Uphold commitments to conservation in ways that elevate Indigenous rights, title and responsibilities and support cultural continuity on our lands and waters through acknowledging international agreements that are already in place, as well as embracing new initiatives that move a fuller understanding of Indigenous stewardship forward and are inclusive of all ages and genders.

5. ECONOMICS

Acknowledge, support and enable sustainable, mixed and/or land-based Indigenous economies and increasing stewardship opportunities so that our communities can renew and continue to uphold our relationships with each other, the land, animals like caribou, and our chosen ways of life.

6. EDUCATION

Assist in diversifying educational approaches and programs by supporting Indigenous language revitalization and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, and by promoting respect for and restoration of Indigenous Knowledge systems, including land-based learning and Indigenous languages.

7. RESEARCH

Respect Indigenous systems regarding appropriate behaviours in knowledge acquisition, through the use of non-invasive research and monitoring techniques, and provide technical and financial support for research questions that are prioritized by Indigenous Peoples.

8. COLLABORATION

Create partnerships with Indigenous People on a basis of mutual respect and equality that do not perpetuate the imposition of foreign models or perspectives onto us, our knowledge or belief systems.