

The calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou herd are within Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

MANAGING THE HERD

Northerners' connection to the Porcupine Caribou

By Kelly Milner | Photos by Peter Mather

"Did you see the caribou?" It's the first thing people ask each other as they step off the plane at the Old Crow airport on a May afternoon. Many of those arriving in the small northern community have come for Caribou Days, an annual festival celebrating the return of the Porcupine Caribou herd. The herd has not passed by Old Crow in almost a year, but on cue, a group of caribou showed up days before the festival and they're grazing on the mountain just outside town.

"Caribou Days is something we do every year at this time to appreciate the caribou for coming back," Joe Tetlich explains. "They always seem to know when to show up. So far the caribou haven't let us down."

Tetlich has been the chair of the Porcupine Caribou Management Board (PCMB) for 20 years. The board was established in 1985 and is made up of representatives from federal, territorial, First Nations, and Inuvialuit governments working to ensure cooperative and sustainable management of the herd.

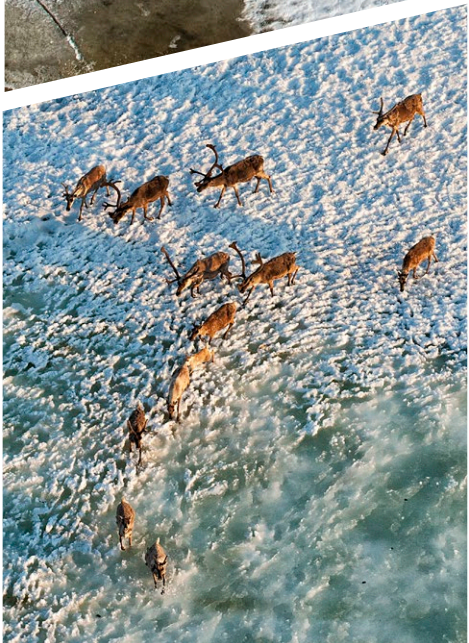
The Porcupine Caribou herd is one of the largest migratory, barren-ground caribou herds in North America and an important part of the Western

Arctic's ecology. It has one of the longest migrations of any land mammal in the world, travelling almost 2,500 kilometres each year between the northern Alaska coast to its wintering grounds in the mountains of the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

For people who live within the herd's range, caribou are more than a source of food. They're also central to their culture and identity. When other northern caribou herds were in decline in the late 1990s, the PCMB decided to be proactive and help ensure the Porcupine herd did not suffer a similar fate. With climate and other environmental factors out of their control, the board turned to one thing they could influence—hunting—and began developing a harvest management plan.

Getting various governments and communities to agree to a harvest management plan was not easy, Tetlich admits. "Nothing like this had been developed before, and we knew that if we were going to do it, we had to do it right. It took many years, many trips to the communities, and many meetings with leaders from the parties to come up with something we were all comfortable with."

To complicate matters, the board didn't know what was happening with the herd's population. Biologists



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conducted a census in 2001 that showed the herd had dropped to roughly 120,000 animals from a peak of about 180,000 in 1989. However, for the next eight years, weather and other factors foiled additional census attempts. During that time there was no way of knowing what was happening with the herd, but based on what they were seeing with other caribou populations, biologists and managers feared the number could be dropping.

In March 2010, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Gwich'in Tribal Council, Inuvialuit Game Council, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Vuntut Gwitchin, and the Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Canadian governments signed the *Harvest Management Plan for the Porcupine Caribou Herd in Canada*. The plan establishes four harvest "zones"—green, yellow, orange, and red—and outlines management actions based on different population levels. If the herd is in the green zone (population over 115,000), it means everything is satisfactory—there is no limit on aboriginal harvest and licensed hunters can take two bulls. Once the herd drops below 115,000 animals, the harvest becomes more restrictive for both aboriginal and licensed hunters. If the herd reaches the red zone (less than 45,000 animals), all hunting is shut down. An implementation plan was also created to ensure a coordinated approach to management activities.

In 2009, just as the plan was being finalized, a successful census was carried out for the herd. It showed that instead of declining, the Porcupine herd had actually increased to almost 170,000 caribou. Today, the herd's size is estimated to be almost 200,000 animals.

Even with so many caribou in the herd, there has not been an increase in the number of animals harvested. That's because for the past five years the herd's migration patterns have changed, the reasons for which is anyone's guess.

"We are in the green zone, but the caribou are not coming into Canada like they used to," Tetlich says, shaking his head. "It's been hard for our communities that rely on the herd."

In the meantime, he points out that staying focused on rolling out the plan despite low harvest numbers is giving everyone time to figure out how harvest management will actually work, and harvest reporting is one of the biggest challenges.

"It's hard because the communities think the information is going to be used against them, and it is totally the opposite," Tetlich says.

In order to understand how the herd responds to harvest pressure, managers need to know how many animals are being taken and what that means to the population over time.

"In order for us to understand what the herd is doing—how it is increasing or decreasing in relation to harvest—we need to know the complete picture," explains Mike Sutor, North Yukon's regional biologist with the territorial government. "When we get to times when there are challenging decisions to be made, we need to be able to look back on all the information we have collected over time to inform what is coming. If we don't understand in good times what harvest does to the herd, it's difficult to understand what might happen in bad times because there might be other factors—things happening on the landscape or in the environment—that could be at play."

The *Harvest Management Plan* document also sets a framework to develop agreements between First Nations on how to allocate harvest among communities if the herd ever drops to lower numbers. By knowing how many caribou are harvested in each community when times are good, managers can use those numbers as a baseline and figure out how many caribou each community should get if they need to share the harvest.

Getting people used to reporting their harvest will take time, explains David Frost, a natural resources manager for the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation. "In Old Crow, we are just getting used to sharing harvest data and what it actually gets used for. It is not just interrogating people or telling them they are harvesting too much. We are actually using the harvest data to help us figure out what we might need to do in the future."

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Stephen Charlie, an Inuvik-based superintendent for the Government of Northwest Territories' Environment and Natural Resources Department, agrees. "I think you are starting to see a change in reporting. Even people who didn't want to before, now they are starting to understand why it is important and are doing it."

Sutor admits it's not perfect. "But we are getting harvest data, and that is a huge first step. We are figuring out what is working and not working, and all that is positive because that means we are all making progress."

Tetlichi says seeing how people are now tackling the challenges around harvest management is inspiring. "The *Harvest Management Plan* is something people are proud of because they were part of it. It wasn't just something [the PCMB] just thought of out of the blue. They helped make it happen. It gives them a sense of ownership, and they want to see it work."

"When I first started back in 1995, all the herds were thriving and we were just talking about aboriginal rights," he explains. "Now, 20 years later, after so many other caribou herds have declined, people are saying they have aboriginal rights, but with those rights comes responsibilities. Now they are saying, 'I have a privilege. It's not just a right. Because if all the caribou are gone, my rights don't mean anything.' And that's a big thing. If we aren't responsible today, all these kids running around won't have the opportunity to enjoy what we have. We can't take it for granted." **Y**





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