

For immediate release

Province fails to protect threatened caribou

Groups alarmed by new exemption under the Endangered Species Act

Toronto, January 25, 2011 – Leading conservation organizations are concerned that the McGuinty government has placed woodland caribou and its own North American-leading species legislation at risk by exempting a swath of industries from accountability under Ontario’s *Endangered Species Act (ESA)*.

The proposed exemption to the ESA announced yesterday will grant industries like forestry, mining and hydro full access to most of woodland caribou habitat despite the fact that the threatened species was listed as a “fast-track” species for habitat protection when the ESA was enacted in 2007.

The Province missed its original deadline (June 2008) to enact a habitat regulation for woodland caribou. Yesterday (more than two years later), the government announced it is asking the public to comment on a proposed approach that includes a broad exemption for industries operating in caribou habitat.

“Allowing industry full access to most of Ontario’s remaining woodland caribou habitat represents an abysmal failure to implement the *Endangered Species Act* as it was intended,” says Anne Bell, Ontario Nature’s Senior Director of Conservation and Education.

“Rather than shielding industry, the government should be providing the leadership necessary to save species and spur a vibrant economic future in the north,” said Rachel Plotkin, Policy Analyst for the David Suzuki Foundation. “Last year’s historic conservation agreement in the Boreal Forest (www.canadianborealforestagreement.com) demonstrated that even traditional adversaries like environmentalists and logging companies can find common ground and chart an extraordinary new path.”

“Logging, roads and mining throughout the southern boreal forest have squeezed caribou out of its habitat,” says Anna Baggio, Director, Conservation Land Use Planning with CPAWS Wildlands League. “Now pressure is mounting in the northern reaches of its habitat as well, where rampant exploration activities outpace progress on land use planning. How will the caribou survive that?”

“The ESA is excellent legislation with broad public support in both northern and southern Ontario,” adds Justin Duncan of Ecojustice. “Government should spend public resources on implementing the ESA to protect species and using the tools contained in the Act to assist with industry compliance rather than work for years to create massive exemptions.”

In Ontario and nationally, boreal caribou are classified as threatened with extinction. Ontario’s caribou have lost 50% of their historic range since 1880 – a staggering 35,000 square kilometres per decade. If this rate of loss continues, scientists predict the iconic caribou is at risk of disappearing from Ontario by the end of the century.

“How can the ESA possibly be upheld if industry isn’t required to comply with this vital piece of legislation when it comes to caribou habitat? This will set a dangerous precedent for the future of Ontario’s threatened species,” states Amber Ellis, Executive Director of Earthroots.

-30 -

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Backgrounder and Quick Facts

- Woodland caribou are designated as “threatened” and are protected under Ontario’s Endangered Species Act and Canada’s Species at Risk Act.
- Woodland caribou live in conifer-dominated boreal forests across Canada; all caribou in Ontario are considered “woodland caribou.”
- The home range for caribou is typically 200 to 4,000 square kilometres.
- In Ontario, caribou range once extended as far south as Algonquin Provincial Park. Since the late 1800s, half of this range has been eradicated by logging, mining and other industrial activities.
- Caribou are highly sensitive to impacts on their populations. They breed at a later age than do moose or deer, have only one young per year and are very vulnerable to predators.
- Approximately 5,000 caribou are left in Ontario.
- Ontario’s caribou have been declining in population by about 11% annually.

Conservation needs:

- Caribou need large tracts of habitat, up to 10,000 square kilometres (to accommodate fire and other large scale disturbances in the boreal forest).
- Scientists believe that caribou use older, conifer-dominated forests as a way to avoid predators (following disturbances, wolves follow moose and deer into the younger, regenerating forests, where these species find plenty of browse vegetation such as willow, aspen and other shrubs).
- Forests must be managed so that development will not have a significant impact on woodland caribou. Most of the forests where caribou still persist in the southern boreal have reached or have nearly reached the disturbance thresholds as defined by wildlife researchers.