

Public Recreation Decision Framework

February 7, 2008

Introduction

The terms of reference for the public snowmobiling component of the Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan state that the Backcountry Recreation Manager will make final recommendations as to whether areas will remain open or closed to public snowmobiling, as well as what conditions will apply to areas that remain open. The terms of reference also state that a formal decision framework will be created in order to bring structure and discipline to the decision making process. This appendix describes the public recreation decision framework.

Background

As a brief background, in 2005, a fourteen member independent mountain caribou science team was convened by the Species at Risk Coordination Office (SaRCO) to identify potential management activities that would either maintain or recover mountain caribou populations throughout their range. The Draft Mountain Caribou Recovery Strategy was developed and released in November 2006, supporting a comprehensive period of public and First Nations communication and consultation. This input was collated to inform the development of an implementation plan for mountain caribou recovery. In October 2007, the provincial government announced its support for the Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan.

The goal of the Province's Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan is to; "*Halt the decline of mountain caribou within seven years for each Planning Unit and recover mountain caribou to 1995 population levels (2500 animals) across the mountain caribou range within 20 years in those Planning Units with greater than 10 animals.*"

The public recreation management area supports the implementation component of the Mountain Caribou Recovery Plan by managing the human footprint associated with public snowmobiling in the mountain caribou habitat.

Winter backcountry recreation has the potential to displace mountain caribou from their preferred early and late winter habitat. These activities need to be managed in order to secure effective habitat for mountain caribou. The Recovery Implementation Plan commits government to work with users to manage their activities in a manner that minimizes the disturbance to, and avoids the displacement of mountain caribou. Where activities result in unacceptable displacement of mountain caribou, areas will be closed to those activities. Consultations with users are currently underway and many areas have already been closed through legal designations or voluntary agreements and implementation of operational guidelines.

Snowmobile clubs will be given the opportunity to work with government staff to develop Stewardship Management Agreements (SMA) for each of their riding areas, where they overlap with the proposed science team closures. The following decision flow framework has been developed to determine whether the SMA will likely contribute to meeting the mountain caribou

population targets for recovery. If it is determined that the risk is too great then the area will be legally closed.

1.0 Planning Team Process

Generally, if proposed science team closure areas align with the areas proposed for protection of habitat then these areas will be closed to snowmobiling. These areas will be closed to ensure that protected habitat can be used by mountain caribou without risk of future displacement due to snowmobiling activities.

The local recreation planning teams will be responsible for providing information, from their discussions with clubs, to support the Public Recreation Decision Framework.

Science team proposed closures are supported by rationale. The rationale includes the value of the habitat, the use by caribou and any evidence of displacement of caribou as well as whether there is a high risk of future displacement of caribou. This feeds into the risk assessment.

If there is no SMA in place, then the level of snowmobiling is reviewed in the context of a combination of snowmobiling frequency and intensity. This factor also feeds into the risk assessment. Approved SMAs will be respected and subject to the adaptive management process to determine if additional future actions are needed to support mountain caribou recovery efforts.

Likelihood of effectiveness of SMA will be determined by three factors; the ability of the club to execute the SMA, the accessibility of the area, and the likelihood of general compliance with the SMA. This also feeds into the risk assessment.

2.0 Backcountry Recreation Manager Risk Assessment

The risk level comprises the likelihood of displacement of mountain caribou, the level of snowmobiling and the likelihood of having an effective SMA. Likelihood is the chance that the risk will occur. The Backcountry Recreation Manager will be reviewing areas, within the provincial scope, to determine the management risk associated to each area.

For the context of this process the likelihood of displacement means the likelihood of future displacement of mountain caribou. However, this does not imply that caribou may not have already been displaced from an area. Likelihood of displacement is ranked as high or low; high is that it is very likely that caribou will be displaced in the future, and low is that it is not as likely that caribou will be displaced in the future.

The level of snowmobiling is a combination of snowmobiling frequency and intensity (i.e. number of snowmobile users per hectare). The level of snowmobiling is either high or low; high is when there is high frequency and high density or low frequency and high density (i.e. a number of key weekends when there are a large number of riders), low is when there is low frequency and low density or low is when there is high frequency but low density (i.e. a very small number of riders going into a large area on a regular basis).

As stated above, the likelihood of effectiveness of SMA will be determined by three factors; the ability of the club to execute the SMA, the accessibility of the area, and the likelihood of general compliance with the SMA. The ability of the club to execute the SMA is how likely is the club to meet the objectives of a proposed agreement, which could include the ability of the club to educate, and inform about the SMA. The accessibility of the area is determined by how close is the area to main roads, the existence of parking, and the number of points of access to the area. The likelihood of general compliance with the SMA is related to compliance by the club members and non-club members (i.e., are there large numbers of non-resident snowmobile users that frequent the area?).

Generally, the higher the risk the more likely an area will be proposed for legal closure.

3.0 Backcountry Recreation Manager Recommendation

The Backcountry Recreation Manager will be receiving reports from each of the public recreation planning teams (Prince George, Cariboo Chilcotin, Revelstoke-Shuswap, Wells Gray - Thompson, West Kootenays, and East Kootenays) that will outline their feedback, and draft SMAs. Together with the recommendations from the planning teams the Backcountry recreation manager will be considering the following principles, which are intended to create a fair and just process.

PRINCIPLES:

Literature based: There is supporting scientific literature cited.

Data driven: There are quantified data results.

Expert calibrated: There are qualified individuals, with experience in mountain caribou management/recovery, supporting the science.

Peer reviewed: There have been both scientific peer review and community consultation/discussions regarding the social implications.

Legally defensible: The proposed closure meets the criteria of the enabling legislation (Wildlife Act, Forest & Range Practices Act, etc.).

Opportunities based: There have been efforts by the local recreation teams to find snowmobiling opportunities, while working toward the primary project objective of recovering mountain caribou.

Infrastructure investment considered: There may be constructed infrastructure by clubs that would be lost if area were closed.

Alignment with habitat closures: The proposed closure coincides with the proposed protected habitat.

The Backcountry Recreation Manager will develop recommendations with rationale for his decision. These recommendations will be put out to First Nations, the science team and stakeholders for review and comment. Those comments will be included in the recommendations the Backcountry Recreation Manager puts forward to the Director's committee.

4.0 Directors and Statutory Decision Makers

The Directors will review the Backcountry Recreation Manager's recommendations to accept or reject the recommendations. If accepted, the areas that have been proposed for closure will be forwarded to the appropriate statutory decision maker for legal designation. For SMA's that are accepted by the Directors committee, these will be forwarded to Ministry of Environment for sign off.

5.0 Adaptive Management

The recovery goal for the Mountain Caribou Recovery Implementation Plan is to be realized through the following six recovery objectives:

- 1. Protect 95% of high suitability winter mountain caribou habitat;*
- 2. Ensure the effectiveness of protected habitat by managing the human footprint;*
- 3. Manage predator populations where they are preventing the recovery of mountain caribou populations;*
- 4. Manage the primary prey of caribou predators to better reflect historic conditions;*
- 5. Augment critically endangered herds that are feasible to recover; and,*
- 6. Support adaptive management and research to increase the probability of successful recovery.*

The purpose of adaptive management is to monitor the above management actions to ensure that they contribute to mountain caribou recovery. Should adaptive management demonstrate that management actions are insufficient to meet the population target, management actions will be revisited.

The adaptive management terms of reference are currently being developed and will lay out the process of how the monitoring and evaluation will occur.