Protest calls for protection

Vocal opposition grows over government's position on caribou calving grounds

by Michele LeTourneau Northern News Services

The fate of caribou in the territory is inspiring people to speak out against the top politicians who represent them.

Across the Kivalliq region and on the Internet, petitions are circulating in opposition to the Government of Nunavut's (GN) recent surprise decision to oppose prohibitions on sensitive caribou habitat. The GN now suggests a caseby-case decision-making process, rather than comprehensive prohibitions.

Alex Ishalook, chairperson of the Arviat Hunters and Trappers Organization, spoke with Nunavut News/North March 21.

"At first the GN was on our side with the protection of calving grounds and post-calving grounds just north of Arviat. A few weeks ago, our board was very shocked they might support mining companies in the sensitive areas," said Ishalook.

The board decided to do something – a petition, collecting names."

HTOs in the other Kivalliq communities are also collecting names. The plan is to present these to the territorial government and the Nunavut Planning Commission.

Ishalook says elders are insistent that calving grounds must be kept clean even when caribou are not present. Caribou calving takes place roughly from mid-May into June, sometimes later. In the legislative assembly, Iqaluit-Sinai MLA Paul Okalik said, according to the latest plans, calving grounds make up a scant six per cent of Nunavut's land mass.

'They must be kept clean even of potential cabins, even just from camping, even including the water crossing. When we use rocks, when we use tents, we do not camp around water crossings," said Ishalook.

Caribou are sensitive and easily disturbed, he says. For example, on their legs they have scent glands.

"The first caribou leaves a scent for the back caribou who are following the leaders. If you disturb them, they will go off, further out, and all the caribou behind them will do the same and follow their scent."

Ishalook hosted community radio call-in shows in September, when elders and residents had the opportunity to express themselves.

"Local people don't understand why mining companies would want to work in the zone where it's very sensitive," he said.

'The mining would only last a few years and the disturbance of the caribou will last hundreds of years. And the Qamanirjuaq herd is the last strongest herd."

Discord among representative bodies

The hunters and trappers organizations, regional wildlife board, and the Nunavut Wild-

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Alex Ishalook, left, chairperson of the Arviat Hunters and Trappers Organization, and manager Hilda Panigoniak show a petition the organization started in mid-March calling for an "immediate moratorium of any mining activity in and around the Kivalliq region's caribou calving grounds."

Kitikmeot Inuit Association president and to Premier Peter Taptuna, the MLA for Kugluktuk, chairperson Larry Adjun couldn't be clearer. The e-mail is dated Feb. 19, two weeks before the GN informed the Nunavut Planning Commission of the cabinet-driven position change.

"It is not in the interest of the Kugluktuk HTO to give a letter of support to the GN DOE (Department of Environment) recommendation to have a 'prohibitive approach on activities' imposed on the Bathurst caribou calving grounds. Our recommendation as stated earlier was 'seasonal/restrictive season' during peak/ post caribou calving to help with the declining Bathurst caribou population from our side of the NWT/Nunavut border," wrote Adjun.

Adjun outlines in the e-mail Kugluktuk's long history of being "pro-active with mineral activities" dating back to the early 1940s.

The Kugluktuk HTO's position is not unlike the position the regional Inuit associations have taken. In the Kivalliq, for instance, the Kivalliq Inuit Association, while insisting on protection, nevertheless splits hairs on technicalities.

'We have suggested this (protection) occur with a combination of full protection (Protected Area status) within portions of the core calving grounds (which we term core calving areas), and mobile protection measures (termed life Management Board have all come out decry- mobile caribou conservation measures) applied ing the government's position reversal, with one to within 25 km of the mapped core areas. notable exception - the Kugluktuk Hunters These mobile measures would allow case-byand Trappers Organization. In an e-mail to the case examination and regulation of potential

exploration to ensure caribou are not disturbed when most sensitive to disturbance." wrote president David Ningeongan in a letter dated March 11 and widely distributed, including to the Nunavut Planning Commission, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) and wildlife management

The Kitikmeot Inuit Association also weighed in, in a letter to Taptuna dated March 15, also widely distributed.

"The Government of Nunavut's current position on restriction rather than prohibitions on caribou habitat is more closely aligned with the perspectives of the Kitikmeot Inuit Association," wrote president Stanley Anablak.

"In a submission to the Nunavut Planning Commission in June 2015, the Kitikmeot Inuit Association supported the implementation of mobile protection measures."

E-mails to Baffin organizations and NTI remained unanswered by press time. However, NTI has requested further consultation on the draft Nunavut Land Use Plan.

Technical meeting

The Nunavut Land Use Plan is being developed through an exhaustive consultation process. It's currently in draft form and is unlikely to be finalized in the near future. This plan will ultimately direct the way forward. It was within the context of a three-day technical meeting about caribou protections, in anticipation of a public hearing now planned for March 2017, that Nunavummiut heard about the GN's reversal.

Okalik confronted Taptuna in the legislative assembly the week the news came out, accusing the premier of scare tactics and, later, of backroom deals.

'We had no idea how this came about," Okalik told Nunavut News/North March 22.

'There was no discussion in the house. No discussion with members impacted on concerns they may have, and no announcement from a minister or the premier on the decision. Normally, a government announces their decisions as ministers and they are held accountable for their decision. And they explain the details of their decision.

"None of that happened."

Pointedly, Okalik says, "All that came was a poor assistant deputy minister attending a planning commission meeting and announcing this change."

Further, Okalik notes that although the Kivalliq region seems to be at the forefront of protests, "it's something that concerns not just the Kivalliq but all of us. Such an important matter for the territory, where caribou are in decline, is something that warrants some discussion. It never happened. I think there's a disconnect."

Addressing the mining industry's position, the NWT and Nunavut Chamber of Mines released a statement March 23.

'We recognize that mining projects in Nunavut will likely interact with caribou, however Northerners should know that for many years now, industry has been subject to stringent Northern regulatory processes designed to ensure that there are no significant adverse environmental effects on caribou. These can include reducing or modifying activities at important times such as the calving season," stated president Gary Vivian.

"No definitive link has been established between the current decline in caribou populations across the North and exploration or min-

The Chamber of Mines agrees with the new

In all cases, those in the opposite camp who do support prohibitive measures for protected areas also support development. However, they draw a boundary around the most sensitive places where caribou are at their most vulnerable - calving grounds, post-calving grounds and water crossings.

Ishalook compares the calving grounds to modern-day human hospitals.

'Calving grounds are their hospitals. It's where they go and give birth. Same thing. Us humans we go to the south to have a baby. If mining goes invading the hospital, where would you go? Where would we go if we needed to go to a clean environment? Same thing with caribou, they need to go to a clean environment.

'And in the calving grounds, there are very special plants and habitat. That's why they produce good milk. It's special, very special habitat. That's why caribou go up in that area."

omments added to petition on caribou

Hilu Tagoona of Baker Lake has started an online petition at change.org opposing the Government of Nunavut's position of case-by-case decision-making for exploration and mining in sensitive caribou habitats.

Tagoona is one of the main forces behind Nunavummiut Makitagunarningit, which has long opposed uranium mining and the proposed Kiggavik project, located near her home community and between the Qamanirjuaq and Beverly calving grounds,

"We, the undersigned, believe this was an irresponsible decision. We do not support exploration and mining on caribou calving grounds. We are concerned it will negatively

affect the sensitive caribou population. We ask the government of Nunavut to listen to the people they represent and support the prohibition of mineral exploration and mining on caribou calving grounds," states the petition which was signed by 417 people by March 25.

Those signing have the option of leaving a

'Together with Mitch Campbell (GN caribou biologist), I led the development of the previous GN position protecting core calving grounds," wrote Justin Buller of Iqaluit. "We successfully argued that development of non-renewable resources should not come at the expense of an existing, highly valued, renewable resource.

"The previous GN position was not against

mining or industrial development – it limited it where the viability of caribou herds would be negatively affected. The surreptitious reversal of this landmark decision to protect caribou, just because the premier doesn't like it, is not only irresponsible, it's dishonest and reprehen-

Two Cambridge Bay residents left comments.

"Inuit have always had respect for the lands and animals, Shame, shame for abandoning these values for short-term benefits," wrote Jason Tologanak.

"Caribou numbers are at an all-time low. The calving areas are extremely important for caribou health and survival. The species is

especially sensitive and vulnerable right now. Our neighbours to the south in the NWT are making sacrifices and are making caribou protection plans so future generations can have caribou and maintain a traditional lifestyle," wrote Jaida Ohokannoak of Cambridge Bay. "Our government is not considering that and is only focused on economic development. Land use planning also needs to ensure these areas are protected."

Dozens of comments came from all over Nunavut. Inuit living in southern Canada also spoke out in support of rigorous protections, as well as aboriginal people who depend on caribou whose calving grounds are in Nunavut.

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