

Yukon Seeks Help For Salmon, Caribou

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MIGRATING CARIBOU: Yukoners hope the Obama-Harper meeting will renew the two governments' attention on conserving the Porcupine caribou herd and Yukon River salmon. (photos.com)

In Canada's distant north, dwindling salmon stocks and threatened Caribou are major concerns and Yukoners are hoping these issues will come up when President Barack Obama meets with Prime Minister Stephen Harper on Thursday.

Conservation of the Porcupine caribou herd has been a subject of a decades-long intense debate in the U.S. and is linked to the controversy over oil development on the northeastern Alaskan coast.

The decline of Yukon River salmon runs is also a major concern, causing hardship for Yukon First Nations and others who rely on the fish for their food and livelihood.

The issues relate to two Canada-U.S. conservation treaties, one signed in 1987

covering the caribou, and the other signed in 2002 covering the salmon.

Yukon Premier Dennis Fentie has urged Mr. Harper to raise the subject with Mr. Obama to ensure that both countries "are being very vigilant in making sure that all terms and conditions of those agreements are being met by both parties."

The Yukon River Salmon Agreement obliges Canada and the U.S. to coordinate management and conservation of the salmon that mostly spawn in Canadian waters but are fished by both countries.

Yukon First Nations have the right to subsistence harvest under their land claim agreements, but as good stewards of the land and wildlife they have voluntarily cut back on their harvest, Mr. Fentie said.

Chief Joe Linklater of the community of Old Crow said there are multiple reasons contributing to the salmon's rapid decline, one being climate change.

There's also overfishing in the ocean, invasive species, and bears and other predators prowling the long river system that stretches from the Bering Sea off Alaska's west coast to the spawning grounds inland in and near Canada.

"We want to deal with this from a holistic basis because we don't think there's just one thing that's causing it. We need to look at the science and that will help to inform our decision making," Mr. Linklater said, adding that the issue requires an international response.

One concrete measure is to address the by-catch of Yukon River salmon by the large U.S. pollock-fishing fleet in the Bering Sea and North Pacific, said Yukon M.P. Larry Bagnell.

“They’re allowed so many salmon they catch by accident. I’d like them to reduce the amounts they’re allowed to catch in that by-catch.”

As for the caribou, most of the herd’s Canadian habitat is protected from development, including the areas encompassed by Ivvavik National Park and Vuntut National Park in northwestern Yukon.

Caribou Habitat Caught in Energy Debate

However, a key U.S. habitat area of the herd is unprotected.

The estimated 129,000- to 180,000-strong migrating herd ranges across northeastern Alaska, northern Yukon, and the Mackenzie River delta in the Northwest Territories (NWT).

Much of the herd’s Alaskan habitat lies in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), a nearly 20-million-acre area in Alaska’s northeastern corner bordering Yukon. The refuge, created in 1960, was expanded in 1980 under the Alaska National Interest Conservation Lands Act.

The refuge is mostly designated as wilderness. However, Section 1002 of the act specifically sets aside a 1.5-million-acre area for possible oil and gas development.

This area, known as the “1002 lands,” is also the important coastal plains where the Porcupine herd gives birth to most of its calves each summer, and where it grazes before migrating to its wintering grounds, mostly in Canada. The flat, open landscape makes it easier to watch for predators, and the Arctic Ocean breeze offers protection from mosquitoes.

Geologists, however, believe this area holds large oil reserves, and the oil industry and Alaskan politicians want to drill to search for oil. Proponents say this is an issue of “national security” necessary as part of the effort to alleviate American reliance on foreign oil.

Meanwhile, Alaskan residents receive dividends from the Alaska Permanent Fund that’s tied to oil revenues, and for them new oil development means higher annual dividends.

Those who oppose drilling in the ANWR say the estimated amount of new oil would do little to increase the U.S. supply. Moreover, conservation and alternative technologies have reduced the country’s projected need for imported oil over the next decades.

Republican Alaska State Representative Charisse Millett introduced a resolution last week urging the U.S. Congress not to pass any legislation designating the 1002 lands as a “wilderness” zone, which would block oil and gas development.

But Mr. Obama opposes drilling in the region.

Mr. Harper agrees. Mr. Fentie said the Prime Minister recently corresponded with him “clearly articulating Canada’s position of protection and/or no drilling of the ANWR.”

Development in the coastal plain, along with infrastructure such as roads and pipelines would not only disrupt the calving grounds of the Porcupine herd and endanger its migration routes, but also threaten other wildlife, say the opponents of drilling.

The area is home to wolves, wolverines, polar bear, grizzlies, and other wildlife, and about 140 species of migratory birds.

Mr. Bagnell is hoping the U.S. president will permanently protect the ANWR and the 1002 lands by declaring the area as “wilderness.”

Protecting Culture, Human Rights

Chief Linklater shares this hope. Decline in the Arctic herd would significantly affect the Aboriginal people who have depended on the Porcupine caribou for food, clothing, and crafts for thousands of years, he said.

“Our concern is that [our community] is becoming less healthy because we’re losing these stocks and our ability to live traditionally, which is hunting, fishing, and trapping.”

Of the 300 people in Old Crow, about 280 are Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation. They are part of the over 7,000 members of the Gwitchin Nation who live in Alaska, Yukon, and NWT. The Gwitchin culture centres on the Porcupine caribou, so named because the herd crosses the Porcupine River during its fall and spring migrations.

“When we start to lose our culture, it changes the outlook for our young people. That causes stress on the community and has a social impact. Their future then is uncertain,” Chief Linklater said.

Ultimately, the U.S. Congress must decide whether to permanently protect the ANWR as wilderness or allow drilling to proceed.

Chief Linklater and Darius Elias, Member of the Legislative Assembly representing Old Crow, will travel to Washington next month to lobby U.S. senators and representatives. A Yukon delegation has been making the trip for over 20 years to get support for making ANWR a permanently protected refuge.

“We have a North American heritage where we have large protected areas and it’s just becoming diminished all the time,” said Chief Linklater.

The Gwitchin also view this as a human rights issue. “We should have the right to be able to live our traditional lifestyle like we always have, and hunt and eat our traditional food,” he said.

“In general, the beauty of the area, the vastness and amazing environmental significance it has should be of concern to people.”

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