

WRITTEN SUBMISSION

RE: Joint Proposal on Caribou Management Actions in Wek'eezhii
To: Wek'eezhii Renewable Resource Board
By: Robert Turner/David Livingstone

INTRODUCTION:

My name is Bob Turner. I am an aboriginal harvester and a member of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. I have harvested fish and wildlife for most of my life in the Wek'eezhii area, part of the larger area I and others know as the North Slave Region. I was President of the Yellowknife Hunters & Trappers for approximately ten years and Lands & Resource Manager for the North Slave Metis Alliance for about seven years. I chaired the Environmental Monitoring Advisory Board (EMAB) for the Diavik Diamond Mine for approximately three years. I helped develop the Bathurst Caribou Management Plan. I also participated in three environmental assessments for diamond mines in the North Slave Region. Protection of water quality and ensuring the well-being of the Bathurst caribou herd were without exception the two most important concerns raised during each assessment.

I've seen and heard a lot related to the pressures on the caribou.

The environmental assessments for the diamond mines, my term as Chairman of EMAB and my other activities enabled me to participate in many meetings and workshops in all the communities in the North Slave Region, the Kitikmeot Region and Lutselk'e. Elders in every community have voiced their concerns over the years about the negative impacts industrial and other developments and activities have on the caribou. The elders shared their observations of the declining health, size and numbers of the Bathurst caribou herd. Various causes were attributed to the decline – climate change, the effects of mineral exploration and development, the outfitters hunt of prime bulls, over-harvesting, mismanagement, disrespect and wastage among them. Likely it is a combination of factors.

No matter what the cause or combination of causes, the fact is that the herd is in serious decline and needs our help if it is to survive. I see no value in debating either point. And the Bathurst caribou herd is not alone. Most other herds in the NWT and elsewhere in Canada and Alaska are also in decline. In some cases the decline has levelled off, in part though effective action taken by management authorities. We need to do the same here.

There is little to be gained in finger-pointing about who is to blame for the situation we find ourselves facing. In fact, we are all to blame and we are all responsible for what has

happened. The only group that doesn't share the blame is the herd itself – and the herd isn't able to speak for itself. That's our job and our responsibility.

Through inaction, through disinterest, through self-interest none of us have taken the necessary steps or shown the necessary leadership to manage our own activities, our own behaviour, so that the Bathurst herd can recover. We all want this to happen, I believe, but we have been largely paralyzed through indecision and in-fighting. We need to take swift, firm and clear action now if we truly want to see the herd return to its previous numbers, if we want our kids and their kids to see the Bathurst herd hundreds of thousands strong again.

I have some observations and some recommendations that I would like all parties, and particularly the Board, to consider carefully.

First, there is no point in debating the numbers put forward by ENR. ENR may be out by a few thousand caribou, a few percent. It may have underestimated herd numbers by ten thousand. That really doesn't matter much at this point. The herd has declined drastically from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands and we need to take decisive action to halt the decline and enable the herd to recover.

Second, all parties share responsibility for the decline in one way or another and all parties share the responsibility for ensuring that recovery can occur. There is no one party that does not share the responsibility and there is no one party that carries the entire burden. We are all accountable here. And this is not about aboriginal rights. No one disputes the aboriginal right to harvest caribou. Instead, this is about conservation and the obligation we all have to ensure that the herd recovers.

So, what do we do? Well, I think we should eliminate the harvest of the Bathurst herd entirely, for a year or two or three. No outfitter hunt, no resident hunt, no community hunt of the Bathurst herd. How we ensure that a moratorium is effective will obviously be tricky and difficult and even painful. But it must be done. In establishing a no-hunting zone for Bathurst caribou, ENR has offered to help with community hunts of adjacent caribou herds and has made bison hunting more accessible. Hunting adjacent caribou herds may be helpful in the short term but those herds are also in trouble. And bison are not a substitute for caribou in the long run. Hunting of adjacent caribou herds will also inevitably result in some incidental take of Bathurst caribou. A no-hunting zone may be a band aid solution for now but I doubt it is a solution for the longer term.

Whether or not a no-hunting zone remains in place, we'll need annual monitoring of the Bathurst herd and adjacent herds to ensure that we aren't making a bad situation worse and that the herds can sustain even a reduced hunt. We'll need fierce enforcement of the rules, including a moratorium. We'll need to set priorities for whatever very limited harvest of caribou may be allowed, when it is allowed. And if some limited harvest is permitted then, initially at least, that amount must be below the sustainable level if the herd is to recover.

If some harvest is allowed, the indigenous aboriginal people most in need, those most reliant on caribou for subsistence, those least able to substitute other meat and fish for caribou must have priority. But we need to remember that we have gone without caribou before. Communities have seen caribou come and go. We lived on moose and fish and birds and rabbits and other animals when we couldn't get caribou. We can do that again. Not having caribou for a relatively short term doesn't mean our cultures will die. But the loss of an entire herd could.

We need real leadership – from the Board, from the territorial government, from the aboriginal governments, from individuals – to ensure that we focus on the real issues. This is not about aboriginal rights. We all recognize the right to hunt, trap and fish – but that right is not unrestricted and it does not come without responsibility. This is about conservation. This is about ensuring the Bathurst caribou herd recovers from this extreme low and becomes strong and plentiful again. This is about adapting to the situation and helping the caribou, just as the caribou have helped us in the past. The caribou are our responsibility. They are there to support us and we are here to support them.

My name is David Livingstone. Every September for over 20 years I've gone caribou hunting on the tundra north of Yellowknife. A group of us fly north in a Twin Otter on floats, set down in a likely spot usually well beyond the tree line, almost always a site with an esker entering into a lake, a nice sandy beach and some shelter for our tents. We unload the plane and watch it depart, and we listen to the silence and look around for sites to set up the wall tent and our personal tents and then we settle in. Over the coming week or ten days we hunt and fish and pick berries, we hike and explore the area (whether we've been there before or not, and I've been to several places more than once, other places just once) and watch the northern lights and the stars and snow fall and the winds blow, the tundra turn from green to orange and yellow and red to brown, the morning frost on the dwarf birch and the crowberry patches. We watch the geese and swans fly south, the ground squirrels capture the last of the warm sunshine and those last bites of fresh vegetation before they call it a season. We work hard and we relax, we chat and read and reminisce and joke and play and tell stories and tease and, well, we just enjoy being there. And we harvest a few caribou, usually one or perhaps two per family. We do it respectfully and gratefully and have never underestimated how lucky we are.

It's a magical time and an incredibly important one for all of us, residents mostly, adults and kids (my youngest son was five months old on his first hunt) and occasionally friends and family from the south who join us for the adventure. And it is a truly rare and remarkable experience, to be on the tundra seeing and feeling and hearing all these things.

The 2009 fall hunt may well have been the last for me and my friends for some time. And much as I regret that, it's OK. The Bathurst herd, which we have hunted for all those years, is in serious decline. ENR biologists and wildlife managers estimate that the

Bathurst herd has declined from a high of perhaps 450,000 animals to its current estimated population of about 32,000. I've seen the number of tags issued per resident hunter decline from 5 apiece to 2 and now likely to 0. And I've seen first hand the decline in the herd itself. When I first hunted caribou in the late 1980s it was pretty easy to find the caribou we needed and still have plenty of time to relax and fish and enjoy all the other pleasures associated with being on the tundra, far from civilization, among good, good friends. Recently though, our success plummeted. Three years ago, only one of us was able to get a caribou. Two years ago we saw none at all, not one, over 8 days – something I've never experienced before. Last fall we were on the tundra again and did manage to find caribou and harvest 1 or 2 apiece. I would note that this was before the population numbers were released and well before the ban was put in place.

I believe, without question, that steps need to be taken, urgently and firmly, to enable the herd to recover. Among those steps is the elimination of the privilege we've enjoyed all these years – the end of the resident hunt for Bathurst caribou until numbers recover. And we're not alone, as the other herds in the NWT are all in serious decline and hunting has been curtailed accordingly. And hunting barren ground caribou is a privilege for resident hunters like myself, unlike the right that caribou harvesting is for aboriginal peoples.

My friends and I recognize that for us it is a privilege to hunt caribou and that for aboriginal people it is a right. But that right does not come unencumbered. With rights come responsibilities. We are comfortable with the withdrawal of our privilege, much as we deeply regret it. But we are comfortable only if others share the burden. By ENR's estimate, the resident hunt accounts for only a few hundred caribou. Others take far more. And if the herd population is indeed only 32,000 or so (and I have no reason to doubt ENR's figures), it cannot possibly sustain an annual harvest of perhaps 5,000 or 6000 animals, ENR's estimate of the annual Aboriginal harvest. Something has to give and it is either that we all give up our privilege and our rights, temporarily we fervently hope, to harvest from the Bathurst herd, or we give up the Bathurst herd.

It's that simple.

Finally, some additional recommendations in the context of Bathurst caribou herd recovery:

- As the population recovers, an allowable harvest should be introduced carefully and in stages and only following thorough consultation with the indigenous aboriginal residents of the North Slave region;
- If it is determined that a harvest is sustainable then the first step could be a total allowable harvest of 5 caribou per aboriginal harvester with a possession limit of 2 caribou at any one time;
- When it is determined by ENR in consultation with the indigenous aboriginal residents of the North Slave region that the Bathurst herd has reached a level

where it can sustain further harvesting, a total allowable harvest of 1 caribou per resident hunter could be introduced;

- Finally, consideration could be given to limited resumption of the commercial outfitter hunt, but only after very thorough consultation with the indigenous aboriginal residents of the North Slave Region.