



Tłıchǰ Government

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Leaving Ekwo Alone – for the Kokèti Ekwo (Bathurst caribou)

WRRB Question #3) Explain the importance of refugia for ɛkwǰ currently, from the perspective of the Tłıchǰ senior elders. The Board understands that senior elders have always said ɛkwǰ need to be left alone when the numbers are low and they retreat into an area of safety. How do the proposed management actions reflect this Tłıchǰ Knowledge?

The joint management proposal recommends actions on (1) harvest restrictions, (2) habitat stewardship, and (3) harvest of other wildlife species; management actions which incorporates Tłıchǰ elders' perspectives about leaving ekwo alone.

The concept of Centre of Habitation can be translated to ekwo use of a 'refugia', or core refuge area that ekwo use "when the numbers are low and they retreat into an area of safety". The Bathurst Caribou Range Plan (BCRP) defined The Centre of Habitation for the Kokèti herd as "*a core use or refuge area that includes important habitats and migration paths, which a caribou population occupies and uses when it is at low numbers in its natural cycle*". BCRP identified the Centre of Habitation using empirical data from collared caribou and Traditional Knowledge. In conjunction with the numerical decline, the Kokèti herd has contracted its range and in recent years the Kokèti ekwo tend to stay closer to its center of habitation on the barrenlands, between Contwoyto Lake, Lac de Gras, Point Lake, and into the treeline south of Wekweèti during winter months.

In conversation with Dr. John B. Zoe, the current core area that the herd use during recent years of low numbers was described as the "heart of the body". When population is low, the herd only use a core area, much similar to an ailing person whose blood only flow through its core parts of the body; the heart, lungs and brain. Similarly, the ekwo herd contract to its core refuge area of its range during low numbers. When numbers increase, the herd will start to use larger parts of its historic range, similarly to how blood start to flow to outer limbs, such as legs, feet, arms and hands – when a person becomes well.

1. Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) and Mobile Core Bathurst Caribou Conservation Area

To support recovery of the Kokèti ekwo and for ekwo to be left alone, the Tłıchǰ Government and GNWT recommend the Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) for the Kokèti herd remain at zero in the Northwest Territories, and that the Mobile Core Bathurst Caribou Conservation Area (MCBCCA) continue to be used as the means for managing and implementing the TAH of zero for the Kokèti ekwo. The implementation of the MCBCCA is based on locations of collared Kokèti caribou with a buffer of 20-60 km. The no-hunting zone aims to leave the ekwo alone within use area in winter, while facilitating the alternative harvest of other caribou herds (Beverly herd) outside of the no-hunting zone.

The GNWT continues regular aerial and ground-based surveillance of the MCBCCA through the fall and winter harvest seasons. ENR wildlife officers regularly conduct aerial and ground-based patrols to ensure compliance within the no-harvest zone. The Tłıchq Government had developed and implemented the Ekwò Harvest Monitoring Program to track caribou harvest by Tłıchq, share information and promote respectful hunting practices by Tłıchq harvesters that use the Tibbitt-Contwoyto winter road to hunt outside of the MCBCCA.

2. Implementation of the Kokèti Caribou Range Plans Recommendation

Accompanying habitat management strategies are needed for ekwò to be left alone, and maintain the land in a healthy condition so that habitat may continue to support survival and future growth of the herd over the long term. The Bathurst Caribou Range Plan (BCRP) guide range-wide habitat management, including cumulative effects of disturbance and land use. Progress has been made on implementing many of the BCRP recommendations and is summarized below.

Protection of Key Caribou Habitat

Currently, few areas of the Kokèti range are protected from industrial development yet TK emphasizes the negative impacts from industrial development on caribou. The Tłıchq Government and GNWT recognize the need for establishing conservation or protected areas for Kokèti ekwò in Wek'èezhii to manage potential disturbance and/or protect key habitat areas. The BCRP also acknowledges the importance of conservation as a habitat management tool (in combination with others) and recommends that a level of protection be implemented for priority ekwò no'oke – water crossings and tataa – land crossings on the Kokèti range.

The Tłıchq Government has conducted significant work with elders and harvesters to identify and select important seasonal habitat and key landscape features that are important to caribou and would benefit from conservation. GNWT hosted a series of workshops in 2021 that are ongoing in 2022 to support this collaborative work. With a focus on the core use area, and based on Tłıchq knowledge and other Indigenous TK sources, work will continue to identify and define important areas and critical habitat, for establishing interim or long-term protected areas under the Northwest Territories *Wildlife Act* or other appropriate pieces of legislation.

Mobile Caribou Conservation Measures

In addition to identifying fixed conservation areas, GNWT has developed a Framework document, Operational Guidance and conducted a desktop pilot exercise for the implementation of Mobile Caribou Conservation Measures within the Centre of Habitation. Mobile Measures are a flexible tool for reducing disturbance of caribou and allowing them to move through an area adjacent to small and medium sized exploration camps. GNWT is working with an industry partner to identify opportunities to test the on-site implementation of Mobiles Measures at an exploration camp in 2022.

Wildlife and Fuels Management

Fire in the forested, winter range of the Kokèti herd can impact herd movements and access to key wintering areas. The Tłıchq Government has worked with elders and harvesters to identify key unburned areas of winter habitat and provided them to the ENR Forest Management Division to be considered as values-at-risk in fire management decisions. As operations allow, these areas may be prioritized for actioning fires to help maintain winter habitat for the Kokèti herd.

3. Support for harvest of other wildlife and on-the-land activities

The Tłıchq Government and GNWT identifies that focusing harvesting on other species and other caribou herds will reduce pressure on the Kokèti and Sahti (Bluenose east) herds. The Tłıchq Government will continue working on developing programs that promote alternative harvest such as the Tłıchq Dqtaàts'eedı program where fish is provided to the community members. The Tłıchq Government has also provided fuel subsidies to assist people to go out moose hunting. These programs have provided Tłıchq citizens with other subsistent

sources to provide for their families in hopes of reducing caribou harvest. As reduced caribou harvesting have serious implications for Tłıchq and other Indigenous communities, and have negative impacts on the continuity of Tłıchq culture, language and way of life, the long-term aim of the Tłıchq Dq̄taàts'eedı program is the continuation of projects that teach TK of the land and caribou by bringing elders, youth and community members together on the land. Such activities are important for the practice of the hunting culture, and maintaining cultural identity and continuity as a hunting people, ultimately, to condition people with skills and knowledge of the land, for when caribou return.