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What the swift collapse of some Labrador caribou can tell us about endangered species



Lessons to be learned about endangered species from what happened near Rigolet

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George River Caribou run outside Nain late last year. (Submitted by Brandon Pardy)

Everyone in Rigolet knew the caribou were out there on George's Island, and they knew what was going to happen.

The group of 40 or 50 animals from the Mealy Mountain herd trekked out over the ice some time in the early 2000s. They were first surveyed in 2005.

It was a golden opportunity: the Mealy Mountain herd was declared a threatened species in 2002, and they had no natural predators on George's Island.



George's Island is roughly 70 kilometres outside the Inuit community of Rigolet. Duck hunters reported seeing caribou there in the early 2000s. They were first surveyed in 2005. (CBC)

Researchers were thrilled to collar a handful of animals. It was a chance to study the creatures in depth: a naturally occurring microcosm safe from the perils on mainland Labrador.

But the scientists shared a common worry with the people of Rigolet. They knew the population would explode, and soon there were 300 animals out there on that tiny island. Again, the caribou were in trouble.

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Danny Michelin, who was the *angajukKâk*, or mayor, of Rigolet from 2006 to 2010, said the community pleaded with federal bureaucrats to sanction a controlled hunt.

"The indigenous people knew that if you leave 300 caribou out on an island," Michelin said, "they're not going to survive."



Tony Chubbs is still, technically, a member of the Labrador Woodland Caribou Recovery Team. The group hasn't met since 2011. (Jacob Barker/CBC)

Tony Chubbs knew it, too.

Chubbs was a member of the Labrador Woodland Caribou Recovery Team, organized by the provincial government. He still is — technically — but the team hasn't met since 2011.

"The island was very sparsely vegetated so it was only so long that they were going to live before something drastic happened," Chubbs said.

He, too, lobbied for a hunt.

"We would have learned a lot more information about the herd, and the beneficiaries in the area could have satisfied their ceremonial and subsistence needs," Chubbs said.

"Everybody would have been win-win."

By June 2010, Chubbs removed the last collar from a caribou corpse. The George's Island population had starved to death.

Too slow to sanction

To hear Chubbs and Michelin tell it, Ottawa's slow-moving bureaucracy couldn't decide whether to sanction a hunt, so the herd collapsed.

To hear the provincial minister of fisheries and land resources tell it, the death of the George's Island caribou is a cautionary tale about species-at-risk legislation.

Gerry Byrne has been hammering this point for weeks now. It explains why he's not adding other Labrador caribou herds, like the once-mighty George River herd, to the [endangered species list](#).

"It would produce an additional layer of bureaucracy, which may not necessarily assist in the herd recovery," Byrne said.



Fisheries and Land Resources Minister Gerry Byrne says the total collapse of the George's Island population is a cautionary tale. (Mark Quinn/ CBC)

"It's a great example of why Indigenous experience, knowledge and wisdom has to be central to a co-management process and the federal and provincial governments should pay heed to that."

But while criticizing the federal government for its red tape, Byrne is also asking for something from Environment Minister Catherine McKenna.

"I've asked her if she would bring forward federal government resources: money, capacity for increased engagement and consultations," Byrne said.

"It costs money to monitor these herds. It costs money to research what the trends are. So here's a role for the federal government now to play given

the fact they've expressed such strong interest and concern about the herds."

Strategy shortfalls

The provincial Progressive Conservatives accuse Byrne of shirking his responsibility to make decisions based on science.

In a statement released Thursday, wildlife critic Jim Lester said Byrne "refuses to make definitive statements about relying on scientific, evidence-based management standards to shape the policies that will protect the caribou herds from collapse."

Lester criticized Byrne for not listing more herds as endangered, but Chubbs, the scientist who's been working for more than two decades to protect the threatened herds, said listing is not a panacea.

A designation must be followed up, Chubbs said, with meaningful research, the likes of which hasn't been done by the recovery team since 2011.

The group has a mandate and responsibility to update that plan every five years, which it has not done, he said.

- [Cooperation — not conflict — needed to manage declining Labrador caribou, minister says](#)

Not only is Chubbs a scientist, he's also an avid hunter who harvested caribou back in their heyday — the 1980s and 1990s, when the George River herd was nearly a million strong.

The George River caribou herd has about 9,000 animals left, according to the latest survey. (CBC)

A provincial government ban implemented in 2013 was [originally conceived](#) as a five-year moratorium, but there are no plans to rescind it.

Hunters his age, Chubbs said, "are in the realization that they're probably not going to hunt another George River caribou in their lifetime, if even their children or grandchildren do."

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