

Project Profile

Project Name:	Caribou Traditional Knowledge Study
Project Number:	BCIP-2016-03
Proponent:	Blueberry River First Nation / The Firelight Group
Funding Envelope:	Boreal Caribou
Timeframe:	June 15, 2015 to July 31, 2016

Project objectives

The objectives of the project are:

- Through a combination of compiling information from previous studies, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews, collect BRFN traditional knowledge on preferred hunting locations and seasonal habitat use for caribou.
- Develop BRFN TK-based habitat supply model for boreal caribou.
- Over the longer term, use this information to develop TK-based boreal caribou to guide efforts to improve habitat conditions for caribou in BRFN traditional territory and create more certainty about where development can occur without jeopardizing traditional resources

Project description

The Blueberry River First Nation has developed a framework for a multi-year research program to understand, restore and protect critical caribou and moose habitat within BRFN territory. This study is year 1 of the multi-year research program and focuses on boreal caribou. The study will identify important areas to maintain and restore caribou habitat and movement corridors, based both on traditional knowledge of how these species used the landscape before disturbance, how they use it today with disturbance, and conventional ecological understandings of important habitat for boreal caribou. Importantly for the oil and gas industry, the project should give a better understanding of areas that may be considered for new development and areas that should be prioritized for conservation.

The project will take place from April 2015 – June 2016 in BRFN’s traditional territory, which falls under Treaty 8 and includes approximately 3.9 million hectares of boreal, SBS, sub-boreal spruce and Engelmann Spruce – Subalpine fir mixed forest and wetlands in British Columbia’s northeast, near the city of Fort St. John. The area has been heavily impacted by industrial development over the last several decades. Cumulative impacts to the area from oil and gas, forestry, hydroelectric projects, and other industrial developments, and existing significant effects to Aboriginal rights have been noted to several processes (e.g., Site C Joint Review Panel final report; North Montney pipeline project initial considerations). The Site C Joint Review Panel noted strong evidence of existing significant adverse effects in the area:

Ongoing development of the liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector promises even more disturbance across the territory, particularly in relation to the Montney play. Determining where disturbance can be more readily tolerated, and where habitat must be protected and restored, should be of critical interest to oil and gas industry proponents working in the area.

Project background

Over the last 20 years, intense oil and gas development in northeastern British Columbia along with other industrial processes has resulted in serious declines in caribou and moose populations within BRFN's traditional territory, and has limited the availability of moose and caribou for BRFN subsistence harvest in preferred hunting areas. This has impacted on members' ability to practice their Treaty-protected rights to hunt these animals. This research project will document BRFN traditional knowledge regarding habitat use and critical habitat areas for boreal caribou, and will form the basis of future plans for protecting and restoring habitat for this species where its range overlaps with BRFN's traditional territory.

A key issue with oil and gas development in northeastern BC is uncertainty about how proposed developments will impact First Nations' Treaty rights. BRFN are deeply concerned about existing impacts to rights and interests, and the threat that continued development in BRFN traditional territory poses for current and future BRFN generations for practicing BRFN rights and way of life into the future.

By conducting this research, BRFN will be able to provide industry and government with a much clearer picture of where critical caribou habitat areas are in relation to preferred hunting areas, which areas need to be restored to avoid or mitigate existing impacts to BRFN ability to maintain subsistence rights related to these animals, and where development may be more readily tolerated. Through this project, BRFN is willing to work with oil and gas proponents and the BC government to clearly identify BRFN priorities for areas that must be protected and restored to meet conservation targets for boreal caribou.

Project approach

The project will be carried out using the following approach:

- Assemble data from existing studies (traditional knowledge from TUS data; provincial/industrial data on boreal caribou in the Chinchaga Range).
- Compile TK baseline on boreal caribou.
- Conduct field work with BRFN knowledge holders. Field work will include site visits to high quality caribou habitat to identify key seasonal characteristics and movement corridors. Semi-structured interviews to be used to discuss key questions related to boreal caribou habitat use and impacts to habitat and populations.
- Use social science research methods and ecological modeling techniques to develop combined TK/ecology-based habitat supply model.
- Develop maps showing important boreal caribou habitat based on TK and HSM; priority areas for conservation or other management actions.

Project deliverables

The deliverables from this project include the following:

1. Final Report and map showing key caribou habitat based on traditional knowledge.
2. Habitat supply model for caribou within the study area.
3. Presentation to FLNRO, industry representatives.