



NACW at Thirty: A Work in Progress

The 15th North American Caribou Workshop (NACW) was held from 12-16 May 2014, in the traditional territories of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta'an Kwäch'an Council, in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada. This biennial meeting is the largest technical conference of its kind dealing specifically with caribou biology and management. The first NACW was held in Whitehorse over three decades ago in 1983, and 13 subsequent workshops have been held across North America until now. With nearly 400 delegates from Canada, the United States, Norway, and Greenland attending the 2014 conference, it is evident that this "North American" gathering has truly become an international event. Furthermore, delegates attending this 15th NACW represented federal, provincial, territorial, state and First Nation governments, academia, non-governmental organisations, co-management boards and councils, private consultants, and industry, creating a relatively unique conference setting bringing together a variety of perspectives and concerns. The breadth of the participants in terms of geography, expertise and affiliation resulted in a rich base of human capacity to discuss issues related to caribou conservation and management.

Given that it had been nearly three decades since the inception of this workshop, and with its return to the location of the first NACW, the organising committee felt it was a fitting opportunity to look back and assess what had been achieved with respect to caribou conservation and management. As such, the theme of the 15th NACW was "Caribou Conservation and Management: What's Working?" The opening session of the conference focussed on invited presentations explicitly addressing this question, and included topics on structured decision making, forest management, harvest monitoring, carnivore management, regional land use planning and management, and aboriginal perspectives on a long-term collaborative caribou recovery program in the southwest Yukon. We challenged our speakers to share what was working and why, and the information provided was valuable and timely, prompting many questions and discussion throughout the conference.

The organising committee received a strong response to our call for contributions, resulting in a final selection of over 70 presentations and 50 posters representing a broad range of topics including co-management, caribou habitat, predator-prey dynamics, population dynamics, status assessment, environmental impact assessment, land use planning, and monitoring. Related exchanges were lively, and often spilled into the breaks, which thanks to phenomenal spring weather, were held on the banks of the Yukon River. While no one was complaining about the warmth, it was a poignant reminder of the impacts of climate change on conditions facing caribou in the coming decades.

In addition to the main program, three pre-conference technical workshops were delivered on structured decision making, engaging local indigenous communities, and wildlife photography. As well, an evening event titled “A Celebration of Caribou” was hosted for the public and received very positive feedback. It included videos and stories and was an opportunity for people of all ages to learn more about caribou. These events highlight the increasing importance of social dimensions of caribou management on conservation outcomes.

It is traditional for contributors to NACW to have an opportunity to publish their work in proceedings from the conference. At one time, this captured much of the caribou research taking place. However, caribou have moved into the mainstream, with related theoretical and applied research appearing in a broad array of journals, testimony to the breadth and quality of work being conducted, as well as its sheer volume. The contributions profiled here highlight the diversity of approaches being applied to contemporary caribou conservation, including active habitat management (Stevenson & Coxson, Bentham & Coupal), legislative tools for protection (Ray *et al.*, Poole *et al.*), and application of new, and in some cases controversial, conceptual frameworks (Gonzales *et al.*, Robichaud & Knopff). These speak to the opportunities and challenges that managers face in finding workable solutions to sustaining caribou now and into the future.

On behalf of the 15th NACW organising committee we thank the sponsors, volunteers, and delegates for their shared commitments to the real Rangifer. We look forward to a continued tradition of inclusive and constructive dialogue and demonstration of innovative approaches to caribou conservation and management at future NACW meetings.

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