

A myopic view of success: Killing wolves is not the answer

By [Sadie Parr](#) | [Opinion](#) | June 28th 2024

[X](#) [in](#) [reddit](#) [whatsapp](#) [email](#)



Is saving the caribou worth the slaughter of thousands of wolves? Photo by Peter A. Dettling



Listen to article

A recent publication in the journal *Ecological Applications* by 34 authors provides a myopic view of success in the recovery efforts of an endangered species, and what defines “success.” Briefly, it describes that caribou numbers in western Canada are finally beginning to increase due to the slaying of thousands of wolves and suggests that this action must continue. There is grave danger in the “glossing over” of **important ethical concerns that verges on callousness**, in addition to a blatant disregard for ecological considerations that go unmentioned or are perhaps wilfully ignored.

I am not contesting the scientific rigour of the paper in question, but I *am* stating that **critical moral considerations**, as well as ecological concerns, have been disregarded, and that these are not inconsequential.

The article, and the media coverage it has gained, have serious “sins of omission” that should not be neglected by society at large. Specifically, I am referring to the inference of the “success” of caribou recovery due to the *en masse* killing of highly sentient beings, **most of which are wolves**. While the authors do mention that the practice of killing wolves is controversial and somewhat uncomfortable, they leave it at that and move on to describe the necessity to kill thousands more for decades to buy time for caribou habitat to recover.

While the authors point out that **caribou habitat continues to be disturbed**, destroyed and impoverished by ongoing industry, they state that a full recovery to suitable caribou habitat will take decades after it is initiated. However, for **deep-snow mountain caribou**, which rely on arboreal (tree) hair lichens that live in old growth forests of the Inland Temperate Rainforest (currently **threatened by ecological collapse**),

forest recovery of a clear-cut back to its former [caribou-supporting stage could take 120-150 years](#), although the system may *never* return to what it was.

Although the authors mention that climate change may present additive pressure to struggling caribou herds, biodiversity is also at risk and the precautionary principle would suggest “keeping every cog and wheel” to maximize ecological resiliency and species adaptations. Little mind is paid to the fact that the changing climate, which involves fires, floods, snow levels, and changes in forest composition (plant and animal), may well render the previous conditions as unrecoverable when it comes to suitable habitat, as we are on a fast track to becoming a vastly different planet.

I do not think that saving caribou is worth the slaughter of thousands of #wolves, writes @sadie_parr #PoisonFree

We can not, and will not, be returning to the previous state of the world in which caribou evolved, especially if we continue to [degrade](#) what remains. On top of continued resource extraction, there is ongoing motorized recreation in caribou habitat, such as heliskiing and snowmobiling, which are unmentioned in the paper, but also subject caribou to unfavourable health and reduced resiliency, as well as changes in predator-prey relations.

Despite decades of recommendations from scientists, [the provincial government continues to authorize the destruction of known high-value mountain caribou habitat](#), and a long-term plan to kill wolves to keep caribou on life-support is not justifiable.

Critically, there is little thought given to how killing wolves impacts other species or ecological processes they influence, aside from wolves' direct effects on the numbers of elk, deer, and moose. Where wolf populations have been extirpated in North America, a cascade effect is observed in which small mammals, fish, insects, birds, amphibians, ungulates, tree species and vegetation all suffer (e.g., Banff National Park, Yellowstone National Park). Wildlife management policies based on reducing carnivore numbers have caused, and will continue to cause, severe harm to many other organisms that seem distantly removed from the apex (top) predators like wolves.

I regard the act of shooting thousands of wolves from helicopters, or killing them slowly in strangling neck snares, as no different from a holy war where no one “wins”. Put bluntly, [I do not think that saving caribou is worth the slaughter of thousands of wolves.](#)

Government scientists admit that [‘there is no humane way to kill wolves’](#), an admission that goes unremarked upon in this widely cited paper. I am not alone in believing that [ethics is integral to “good science.”](#) Other scientific publications have focused on the questions surrounding the collective decision of what practices are acceptable in efforts to save caribou, [noting the distinction between efficacy and ethics](#) when it comes to how we treat carnivores. This matter is not only a math equation that increases the growth rate of caribou.

One issue of serious import includes the role that [wolves, as apex predators, provide](#) in maintaining healthy forests, healthy herds, and ultimately, healthy ecosystems. In addition to moving grazing animals around the landscape to allow plants and trees to grow, [large carnivores exert many indirect effects](#) that help ecosystems stay diverse and resilient.

One of these involves a dampening effect that wolves have on [disease transmission](#). Chronic Wasting Disease [is spreading across North America](#) and all cervids (including caribou) are susceptible to it. The first two known cases [were recently recorded in BC](#). This deadly prion may even pose a [direct threat to humans](#). Also discounted is evidence that [predators help other species to adapt](#) to our changing climate. Neglectfully, there has not been an environmental assessment of the impacts of BC's tax-funded wolf-kill program on wolves — in the short- or long-term — or ecosystems. Western [provinces appear to have been bought out by “big business”](#) and blindfolded to the issue of causing more harm. It is surely the two-legged that need managing here.

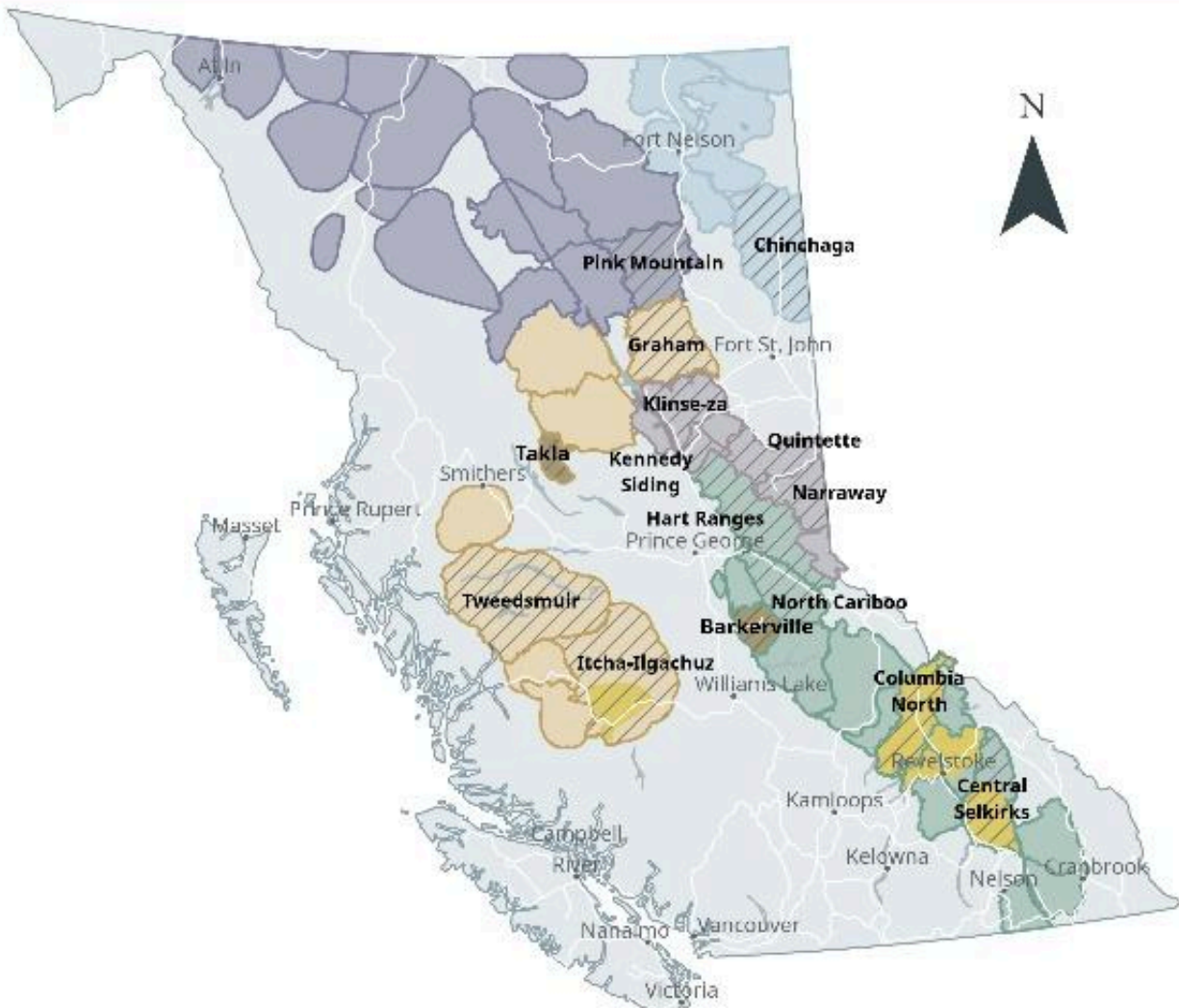
The wolf-kill programs taking place in Western Canada under the false guise of caribou conservation are not unlike applying a Mickey Mouse Band-Aid to a gangrenous wound; at first it may appear to some that care is being given, but in the long run, and without proper treatment, the sore will continue to fester and worsen. If caribou are to continue to exist, their remaining habitat must be off-limits to extractive industries and new roads. Killing wolves does not lessen these landscape-level impacts, although it provides a temporary distraction.

The paper also ignores the spiritual and cultural benefits that wolves afford us, raising questions as to the outcome this violent act will have on the collective human psyche. In the story of [Ishmael, a novel by David Quinn](#), we learn of *Leavers* and *Takers*. Quinn makes the case that humans have not yet destroyed the community of life, and with it, ourselves. He raises the question, valid today more than ever, of what kind of species we *want* to be. It is a good question.

As a conservation biologist, I was taught that [science is a tool to help inform us, but it does not give us permission to cause harm](#). I am not alone in wanting to improve the ways [we treat other sentient beings](#), or

in advocating for publication reform to safeguard wildlife from researcher harm. Science without ethics is not acceptable and the 34 authors of this paper are risking the future of academics, and society, who do not acknowledge this limitation when it comes to sharing this planet with other beings. We all have a responsibility to engage in this sociopolitical, rather than scientific, problem of scapegoating wolves to satiate industrial and recreational interests.

Caribou Herd Ranges Prioritized for Predator Reduction Program in B.C.



B.C. Caribou Herd Boundaries

- Boreal
- Northern Mountain
- Southern Mountain (Central Group)
- Southern Mountain (Northern Group)
- Southern Mountain (Southern Group)
- Continued Predator Reduction
- New Treatment Areas
- Continued Predator Reduction (Cougar)



This image shows how extensive the tax-funded wolf-kill program has become.

Sadie Parr lives in Golden, B.C. She is dedicated to working towards conserving wolves across Canada as part of a functioning ecosystem.

Updates and corrections | [Corrections policy](#)

July 2nd 2024

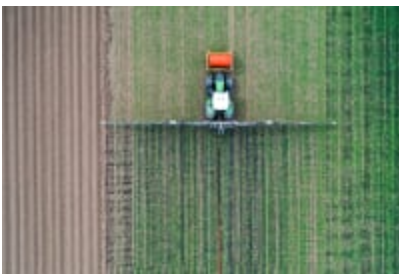
The original op-ed was updated on July 2nd to address concerns presented by an author of the scientific publication, and to clarify some of the statements within. Specifically, updates were made to reflect that the scientific publication did make mention of ongoing compromise to caribou habitat through new industrial tenures and that climate change was impacting what remains of caribou habitat. The author of this op-ed laid out the suggested timeline for recovery of mountain caribou habitat more concisely. The edited version also allows that the authors of the cited paper noted that killing wolves will likely be reflected in the number of elk, moose and white-tailed deer on the landscape, which they suggest can be managed for caribou through increased hunting licences.

June 28th 2024



Sadie Parr
[@sadie_parr](#)

Keep reading



Email shows 'irresponsible attitude' by senior official to pesticide rules, say observers

By Marc Fawcett-Atkinson | News | June 27th 2024



Developing a plan to make Canada's new federal housing plan work?

By Sheena Sharp | Opinion | June 27th 2024



Migrant farm workers unionize for first time in decades

By Marc Fawcett-Atkinson | News | June 27th 2024

Share this article



Comments

Post a comment

Patricia Spencer | June 28th 2024, 07:38 am

I couldn't agree more with this article. The caribou are in trouble primarily because of us- we have logged off their habitat. And as Sadie points out, we continue to do so. Shameful!

Reply

Geoffrey Pounder | June 28th 2024, 08:41 am

Caribou require specific conditions to thrive. Including undisturbed forest habitat that protects them from wolves.

The logging industry, O&G "development", and recreational uses all degrade caribou habitat, and allow wolves easy access to caribou.

Unless and until humans stop invading, disrupting, and destroying caribou habitat, we will have to cull wolves, with all the collateral damage that entails (strychnine poisoning), FOREVER.

Cruelty to wolves knows no bounds, apparently.

Industry, governments, and recreational users are unwilling to give caribou the space they need. Caribou habitat is not on its way to recovery.

Killing wolves allows other cervids to proliferate. Moose and deer compete with caribou for space and food resources, and also lead remaining predators to caribou. A hopeless situation.

Biologists who support or participate endless wolf culls have lost their ethics and humanity. Wildlife "management" is a farce. Mass culls — the cheap and easy non-solution — always have blowback.

Other species have lived in balance for millennia. There is only one species that needs management. Us.

Reply

Cathy Rogers | June 29th 2024, 11:25 am

As apex predators, wolves underpin ecosystem health. Must we “discover” this the hard way, yet again?

<https://x.com/Rainmaker1973/status/1765029501468070058>

Reply

Cathy Rogers | June 29th 2024, 11:27 am

Human incursion is what endangers the caribou.

Reply

Dale Corbett | July 2nd 2024, 04:32 am

Nearly 50 years after the publication of Barry Lopez's epic book *Of Wolves and Men* we continue to regard the wolf as an evil creature of destruction that is to be shot, poisoned, tortured and driven to extinction. Wolves were caught and set on fire, lassoed and dragged to death or pulled apart by two horses. We run over them with snowmobiles and shoot them from airplanes and helicopters. Old time wolfers found dens, retrieved the pups and strangled them, leaving the mother to survive so they could repeat the process the following year. Wolves and caribou existed together for thousands of years. The threats facing caribou are the relentless degradation of their habitat by mining, forestry and the climate crisis, all man made problems. Killing wolves will not save the caribou. We need to address the fundamental problem which is excessive and unrestricted resource development that attaches no value to wildlife or environment. It's time we saved the wolves.

Reply

Michael Jones | July 4th 2024, 09:53 am

Sadie.

Thank you for your excellent article.

Of course we shouldn't be killing wolves, or any being, suggesting that we think caribou are more valuable or important in some way. Especially since the killing of the wolves will not solve the problem, habitat loss. And, even more so when our governments are allowing development, motorized vehicles and other activities simply so that someone can make money or have what they call fun.

You have said what many of us feel and know must be considered and acted on in every instance.

Thank you,

Michael

Reply

Support award-winning independent journalism with your subscription today



Finalist

Canadian Association of Journalists

Data journalism award

Human rights reporting award

Outstanding investigative journalism



Winner

Michener Award

Meritorious public service journalism

2019 & 2016



Winner

National Newspaper Award

Columns (2021)

Business reporting (2016)



Finalist

Canadian Journalism Foundation

Award for Climate Solutions Reporting



[Jobs](#)

[Freelance for Us](#)

[Masthead](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Search](#)

[Help](#)

[The Trust Project](#)

[Contact](#)

[Ethics](#)

[Terms](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Admin](#)

[Subscribe](#)

Newsletter

Donate

Download our app

App Store

Google Play