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Ontario's caribou under growing threat: CPAWS' annual report

Toronto, ON -- In its second annual review of governments' efforts to conserve Canada's boreal caribou, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) finds that threats from industrial development to boreal woodland caribou have continued to increase while conservation and restoration efforts have shown little progress across the country.

CPAWS' findings are reinforced by news from the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) just days ago. The committee forecasts a greater than 30% decline of Canada's boreal caribou population in the near term because "much of its habitat has been degraded ... especially in the southern part of its range".

"In Ontario we're particularly concerned about a proposed 300km transmission line designed to supply power from Ignace/Dryden through high-risk caribou ranges to Pickle Lake; the five-year exemption for forestry activities from the *Endangered Species Act*; and active discussions of plans for roads, hydro lines and other infrastructure to allow industrial access to the Far North including the Ring of Fire," said Anna Baggio, Director, Conservation Planning for CPAWS Wildlands League.

Along with Ontario, CPAWS found examples of threats growing within vital caribou habitat across the country including in Manitoba where a mine has been approved in one of its provincial parks; in B.C. where natural gas extraction and exploration activities continue to increase; in Saskatchewan where a peat harvesting project is advancing; and in Alberta where about 5,000 km² of additional oil and gas leases have been approved in the past two years.

Reasons for the decline of boreal caribou include habitat fragmentation and loss, which increases access by predators. Caribou are bellwethers of the health of the boreal forest, which also cleanses our air and water, and stores vast amounts of carbon within its soils, moderating climate change.

The 2012 release of the Federal Recovery Strategy for boreal caribou under the *Species-at-Risk Act* outlined the critical need for conservation and restoration measures in vital caribou habitat across Canada, and required that the provinces and territories have recovery plans in place by 2017.

CPAWS found that only one province and one territory implemented concrete measures that will protect boreal woodland caribou in the past 12 months. Manitoba created a new park protecting about 1,000 km² of habitat, and Northwest Territories listed boreal caribou as threatened under its new species-at-risk legislation.

"We could not find one concrete measure that the Ontario government undertook in the past year to reduce threats to caribou or to protect habitat. This is frustrating because Ontario's Caribou

Conservation Plan was originally published in 2009 and here we are in 2014 with little indication that anything has changed on the ground,” Baggio said.

In light of all these findings, CPAWS urges immediate action by Ontario to implement caribou habitat conservation and restoration measures. These specifically include:

- rejecting further permanent infrastructure in high risk southern caribou ranges;
- conducting a regional strategic environmental assessment before allowing mining within the Ring of Fire;
- withdrawing the broad and sweeping exemptions for industry from the *Endangered Species Act* that threaten species; and,
- fulfilling Ontario’s promise to protect at-risk species by enforcing the *Endangered Species Act* as intended.

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View full report at: wildlandsleague.org

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