

Vadzaih - Caribou

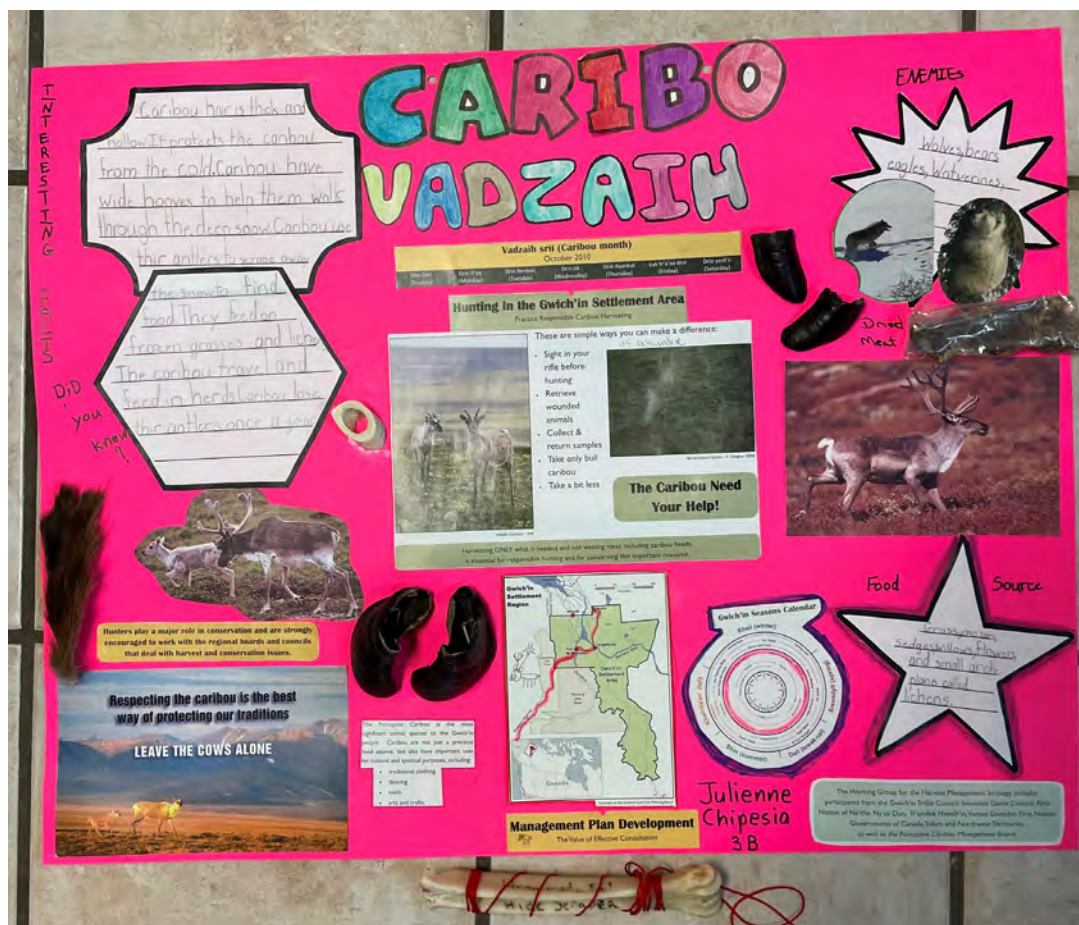
Wanda McDonald

It is an honor to co-edit the Xagots'èèhk'ò journal themed around Caribou with John B. Zoe.

Thanks to Jessica Davey-Quantick and the editorial committee that consists of many talented individuals who contribute their time and knowledge to making the Xagots'èèhk'ò Journal what it is.

Our initial discussion focused on how this edition would evolve and John B. Zoe spoke of the evolution of caribou from traditional times to present. It was up to the Co-editors and Jessica, supported by the Editorial Committee, to transpose our vision into a journal that reflects the Caribou from a traditional to modern context.

There are nine caribou herds in the Northwest Territories. Barren-ground caribou herds include: Ahik, Beverly and Qamanirjuaq, Bathurst, Bluenose-East, Bluenose-West and Cape Bathurst, Porcupine and Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula. Caribou numbers range from 4912 to more than 115,000 thousand.



Our elders told us that since time immemorial, the caribou roamed the land and they spoke of stories where animals and humans were interchangeable, as described in Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak *The History and Stories of The Gwichya Gwich'in*. There are similar traditional stories shared in the journal that provide the reader with messages from our past.

"Ts'ii deii people, ts'ii deii animals - This was a time when it was believed that everyone was the same - animals, birds, and humans. It was believed that a creature or human could change from animal to bird, human to animal, bird to human. It was also believed that with the change, animals and birds had the power to speak." - Edward Nazon.

We have always been told from generation to generation that the caribou is very special and sacred and not to waste any parts of the caribou.

Traditionally, Northern Indigenous peoples were nomadic hunter and gathers, following the seasons and animals. The nomadic lifestyle did not require a lot of material items. With the introduction of religion, permanent housing and the wage economy, Indigenous peoples' nomadic lifestyle slowly changed from living on the land following the seasons and animals to residing in a community. This change in lifestyle contributed to less dependency on the caribou as the main source of food and materials for everyday living.

The traditional uses of all parts of the Caribou are listed below:

Antler – used for carvings

Head – used for soup, brains for tanning hides

Hide – used for tent, inside flooring, clothing, footwear, boat, babiche used for rope, twine and string - lacing for snowshoes, dog whips, harness, snares and drums

Body – used to make dry meat, bone grease and cooking meat

Intestines, organs – used as food and storage for bone grease

Hooves – preserved as an emergency food source and can be eaten

Bones – used for tools and bone grease

The caribou was fully harvested with the exception of the lungs and intestines. Modern times have changed the usage of caribou – we use plastic containers, canvas tents, metal tools, and alternative materials for clothing and footwear. Caribou is a preferred food source, bones are used for carvings, buttons, earrings and hides are used to make traditional drums.

Today, caribou is a supplemental source of food for those families who are able to hunt. Sharing caribou meat is still practiced however. The demand for caribou is increasing as the rising prices of food creates a food security issue. At the same time, rising prices to purchase gas, shells and maintain snowmobiles makes caribou hunting unaffordable for lower income families. On the land programs to help supplement the high cost of purchasing equipment, gas and building cabins are important programs to allow for community residents to pursue part time harvesting.

The introduction of major infrastructure development in the North such as highway corridors and major resource development activity have impacted and changed the northern landscape. Prior to development, the land was mainly used by the animals with little to no human disturbance. Industrial activities such as the discovery of oil, mining and infrastructure such as highway corridors have had an impact on caribou habitat and contributed to changes in migration patterns and reproduction.



Simultaneously, modern technology such as trucks, high powered snowmobiles, quads, satellite imagery and guns have lead to changes in hunting practices. Traditionally, we practiced the principles of “take only what you need, share, respect the land and animals.” However, there needs to be continuous messaging of “take only what you need” to avoid mass hunts and wastage of meat. There needs to be a common understanding of “individual versus collective rights as it relates to hunting” which in most cases are defined under the Comprehensive Land Claim agreements.

Climate change is affecting the environment and impacting caribou habitat, slumping, erosion, hot summers, forest fires, low water levels, longer seasons and excessive snowfall all contribute to changing caribou migration patterns.

In the present day context, caribou face the challenge of competing herds such as the reindeer herd which was introduced as an economic initiative. The muskox have migrated into caribou habitat across the Northwest Territories. Lichen is the main source of food for caribou. Once the Muskox pass through caribou habitat, caribou do not return for some time as the muskox dig up and eat roots of lichen and create a disturbance to the land. The reindeer herd is located close to Inuvik and has less of an impact as they are not free roam like the muskox.

The first Government of Northwest Territories *Game Act* in 1896 was the start of regulating wildlife in the North. Regulating wildlife was a foreign concept to Indigenous peoples as traditional practices were passed from generation to generation. Traditional practices were based on a balanced approach to managing and preserving the caribou herds for future generations.

Another significant historical event was the signing of Treaty 8 in June 1899 and Treaty 11 in 1921 followed by the signing of modern comprehensive land claim agreements between 1984 to 2003. The signing of these historical and modern agreements are significant to the management of caribou these agreements formally recognize Indigenous governments in the management of wildlife including caribou, and the ability to incorporate traditional knowledge into the various management processes.

With the settlement of modern comprehensive land claim agreements came the establishment of Co-management boards responsible to protect, manage and preserve wildlife including caribou. There is satellite technology that can track in real time the various caribou herds' location which is another modern management

tool. Co-management boards consist of representatives from Indigenous, Territorial and Federal governments and provide a shared multi jurisdictional responsibility between the parties.

The Co-Management boards incorporate traditional knowledge into the management of caribou herds through the establishment of management plans and community input. The incorporation of traditional knowledge is critical and has the same weighting as scientific knowledge in the management and preservation of caribou for future generations.

The Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board has incorporated traditional messaging onto stickers "Let the Leaders Pass". This messaging is critical to preserving the caribou herd. Many of our past Gwich'in leaders spoke of protecting the Leaders of the herd and let them pass.

In summary, over a very short timeframe of roughly 100 years, major infrastructure and resource development, the introduction of permanent communities, changes to the political landscape such as the establishment of the Government of Northwest Territories wildlife act,, signing of treaties and settlement of comprehensive land claim agreement has had a significant impact on wildlife and caribou management. It is important that traditional knowledge practices are incorporated in the regulatory framework for the protection and preservation of wildlife including Caribou herds.

Development of the land, responsible management of muskox and reindeer herds are important.

A multifaceted approach on managing caribou as a renewable resource for future generations is critical. It is up to future generations to preserve the caribou herds by learning and applying traditional practices and principles such as respecting the land, animals and environment. Take only what you need, do not waste any meat, share with those families who are not able to hunt. Following responsible hunting practices is another important management tool. There are plenty of educational resources on hunting practices and educating young hunters available through the co-management boards.

We conclude the Xagots'eekh'q Journal with an in Memoriam to Elder Charlie Snowshoe, Tetlit Gwich'in who was a long time advocate for Caribou. It is hoped that Charlie's contribution to the preservation of the caribou will have a lasting effect in preserving and managing the caribou. Mussi

REFERENCES

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Wanda McDonald is a Gwich'in Participant and lives in Inuvik, NT. She was born in Fort McPherson, raised in Tsiigehtchic and moved to Inuvik. Her parents Emily and Shorty McDonald and Grandparents Joanne and Edward Nazon raised their family to understand the importance of a traditional lifestyle and the pursuit of an education. Wanda is currently employed as Residential Manager and volunteers with homelessness in Inuvik. She also is a Director at Large, Aboriginal Sports Circle Board, a Board Member at Large, Surface Rights Board and Member, Editorial Committee for Xagots'eekh'q Journal. Wanda's personal interests include creative writing, basic photography, scrapbooking, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle through exercise, distance hiking and cycling.