

# Conference urges 1994 Porcupine caribou census

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by Tricia King

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Gwich'in youth from Arctic Village dance for the *People, Science and Caribou Conference* held in the community last month. The purpose of the conference was to review the status of the Porcupine Caribou herd, which has declined in recent years.

*Photo by Tricia King*

ARCTIC VILLAGE, Alaska—"This is the first time I've been to a conference where all the agencies and scientists stayed until the end," said Jonathon Solomon of Fort Yukon. "Usually they give a 15-minute presentation and then they're gone. That's why more meetings have got to be held in rural Alaska, in the villages."

Solomon's remarks came at the close of the *People, Science and Caribou Conference* held recently in this northeast Alaskan village. The gathering brought together subsistence hunters from Alaska and Canada with scientists to discuss the status of the Porcupine caribou herd, which roams on both sides of the border.

The herd decreased by 18,000 animals between 1989 and 1992, according to census figures presented by the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game. Researchers think the decline is due to a high death rate of caribou calves during the last few years. Alaska Porcupine Caribou Commission members stressed the importance of knowing whether the herd is in fact still declining, and called for a new census to be taken during the summer of 1994, a year earlier than currently planned by management agencies.

Researchers reported findings that the herd's undisturbed use of calving grounds and insect avoidance areas is a critical factor in their survival, and Native subsistence users spoke of the importance of caribou to the physical and cultural survival of their families. "People will decline if the caribou decline. We live and die and multiply or decline by what that herd does," Solomon said.

The Alaska Porcupine Caribou Commission, as well as the Canadian government and the Canadian Porcupine Caribou Management Board, recommend that the calving grounds of the herd be protected and have called for the U.S. to designate the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as a sister conservation area to Canada's Ivvavik and Vuntut National Parks.

State Senator Georgianna Lincoln, charging that the state government is deficient in providing reliable biological data, pointed to

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contaminant research being conducted by the Tanana Chiefs Conference as an example of Native participation in scientific research. "We need to create our own data, bring in our own scientists," Lincoln said.

Although many Native representatives disapprove of research techniques such as radio-collaring of animals, scientists and villagers agreed that more direct involvement of subsistence users in research and management would be beneficial.

"There has been a wall between Native people and scientists. It's time now that we sit on the same side of the table. Scientists and Native people have to show some leadership and give direction to

governments as to exactly what we think about the environment," said Grafton Njootli of Old Crow.

Government funding programs exist which would allow village high school and undergraduate students to participate in research projects, according to Bob White, director of the Institute of Arctic Biology. But he added no method is currently in place to connect students to those opportunities.

Villagers also shared concerns about how low-flying aircraft, military operations, industrial development activities and contaminants may be affecting the herd and area residents.

The three day conference held last month was co-sponsored by the Alaska Porcupine Caribou Commission and Canada's Por-

cupine Management Board (PCMB). Speaking of the need for continued cooperation between subsistence users, scientists and governments of the two countries to insure the continued health of the caribou, PCMB member Billy Germaine of Mayo said:

"We have to live here together; we have to make decisions together, and we're going to have to start working together and having an open mind and open heart to do this. The generations have to de-

pend on the decisions we're going to make."

Resolutions passed by the Alaska Porcupine Caribou Commission include requests that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reinstate funding for its Arctic Contaminants Research Program, that governments include traditional knowledge in research programs and provide accurate information to user communities, and that aircraft harassment of the herd be prohibited

during the calving season.

Jonathon Solomon was named as the first Gwich'in Athabascan representative to the International Porcupine Caribou Board, which met in Arctic Village following the conference. The international board, consisting of government and subsistence representatives from both countries, was established in 1987 to provide advice and recommendations to improve management of the herd on both sides of the border.