

Variety of viewpoints ponder future of herd

By Jane Pender
Anchorage Daily News

Six panelists and about 150 concerned and vocal citizens played Catch 22 all day Saturday during a conference on the survival of Alaska's caribou herds.

Sponsored by the Fairbanks Environmental Center, the conference brought together widely divergent viewpoints related chiefly to the decline of the once prosperous Western Arctic caribou herd. Some refinement of definition resulted, but mostly the conference illuminated the opposing interests and the fragmentation of management.

"You've caught us in the middle," said NANA region village development manager Willie Goodwin. Pointing out his region had made land selection, he said, "We're not

too sure whether we want to keep it in wild lands or go for development. We don't want to get ourselves locked up."

Tom Scarborough, past president of the Tanana Valley Sportsman's Association, talked of the Joseph's coat Alaska maps on the wall. Composed of fragments of brown, blue, pink and green, it demonstrated who owns what, said Scarborough. "Where the caribou herds exist, you're going to have a multitude of land management. There'll be several federal agencies, the state, and private holdings...a number of Native corporations, park service, BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, and State of Alaska. They can't get along at the present time, and I don't see them getting along in the future. But for the survival of that caribou herd, it'll be mandatory."

Everyone agreed that if preservation of the caribou was of prime importance, preservation of their range was basic. But even there, there was a Catch 22. The NANA region, like others in the past, has recently bought reindeer permits, and is currently husbanding a small herd of 5,000 animals. Dr. David Klein, leader of the Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit of the University of Alaska, said that if there is extensive development of reindeer herds, it could have an "irreversible deleterious effect" on the caribou herds. Klein also told the group that development activity in other countries - agriculture, hydroelectric projects, roads, pipelines - has resulted in the destruction of wild caribou herds and warned that the same is occurring with the tiny (5,000) central Alaska herd which ranges

north to south, through Prudhoe Bay.

"Would industry be willing to wait until the state develops a land use plan?" somebody asked panelist Dr. Max Brewer. Brewer, long director of Naval Arctic Research Laboratory at Barrow, is now an executive vice president for Husky Oil which is doing oil exploration on Pet 4.

"The answer would have to be no," he said. He pointed out that the operators of Pet 4 are under contract to perform, with specific dates. "By law the agencies (who issued the contracts) are mandated by the Congress to accomplish certain work. Somebody's head would roll if they didn't." He said sometimes "certain arrangements" could be worked out to delay projects in order to obtain, for example, environmental information, but said

that often industry had no choice but to move ahead.

Bob Hinman, deputy director of the State Division of Game, took considerable heat on the subject of wolf control. At one point he wondered, "If some of the adverse reactions (to wolf control) stem from a disagreement over whether man even has a right to use and therefore a right to manage wildlife resources." He added that if it can be accepted that man is a part of the ecosystem, "then I think we can arrive at some common grounds."

Jim Kowalsky, Alaska field representative of Friends of the Earth, was outspoken in his objection to wolf control, saying the aerial hunts authorized for the arctic should be immediately stopped. But, when questioned about alternatives, given the present plight of the herd, he said perhaps another method should be used, for the short term. He said perhaps the local people in the affected areas could be encouraged to shoot wolves, rather than allow aerial hunts.

That was fine with Goodwin who said, "Unless something is done about the wolves right now, they're going to get some Eskimo one of these days and they're going to eat him up." He told of hearing of packs of 20 and 30 who had chased people and added, "I think we should shoot them all." He said his people did equate the decline of the caribou herd with the ban on wolf control early in the 1970s.

On the other hand, Klein said perhaps the large numbers of caribou in that herd (260,000) might have been a contributing factor in its crash. That high population was encouraged by Fish and Wildlife wolf control policies initiated before statehood and extending to the early 70s.