

Kwethluk hunters bag 28 caribou in successful hunt

by Geoff Kennedy
for the Tundra Times

Kwethluk hunters killed 39 caribou during the emergency subsistence hunt that ended last week, said Mike Coffing, the subsistence resource specialist for the Division of Subsistence in the state Department of Fish and Game.

He said 28 of 31 permit holders successfully bagged animals.

The hunt went well, he said.

"There were no instances of people from other villages in the hunt," Coffing said.

Earlier this month, U.S. District Court Judge H. Russel Holland overturned a Game Board decision and opened a 10-day hunt for Kwethluk. The Game Board action came after a decision in December by the Alaska Supreme Court that the state subsistence law is unconstitutional.

The village suffered from a very poor fishing season last year and a

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resulting cash shortage, heavy rains which destroyed caches of dried fish and a very poor moose season, says John Sky Starkey, attorney for the Kwethluk Indian Reorganization Act Council.

Holland's emergency order limited the hunt to residents of Kwethluk, the number of harvested caribou to 50.

The Game Board had turned down the village's request for the emergency hunt because state officials wanted to continue to protect the Kilbuck caribou herd after biologists found very few caribou in the Kilbuck Mountains in the mid-1980s. The board determined that although the number of animals in the herd had reached at least 1,187 late last year, that number did not constitute a harvestable surplus.

But state subsistence biologists haven't yet determined the number which would constitute such a surplus.

And the state hasn't yet devised a management plan that would determine that number, says one ADF&G official.

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"There is no magic number," the official said, adding that's what the management plan is for.

"It's really a public policy issue, not a conservation issue," the official says.

Attorney Starkey agrees. What is that magic number when the Game Board will allow the herd to be hunted again? he asks.

"Is it 1,000, 10,000 or 100,000?"

In fact, a Nov. 18, 1987, memorandum written by Sam Patten of the Department of Fish and Game promised villagers, "Once the resident caribou population reaches 1,000 animals, hunting will be opened again on a permit basis."

The Cowper administration, nevertheless, has protested the decision.

The governor is concerned that Holland set a precedent when he overturned a state game management decision, says Assistant Attorney General Lance Nelson.

"We want a clarification and a narrowing of the scope of the decision. Interpreted broadly, it could set precedents at least on other subsistence cases," Nelson said. "I'm certain other attorneys (on other cases) will use this against us."