

Caribou deaths signal need for more vigilance

by Jeff Richardson
Tundra Times staff

Northwest villages will have to wait until late August for results of radiation tests on tissue samples taken from caribou last month found dead in the vicinity of Cape Thompson. Although experts feel increasingly confident that an estimated 2,000-3,000 caribou of the Western Arctic herd died from starvation dating from last summer and compounded by a severe winter, residents particularly of Pt. Hope and Kivalina are still suspicious that residual radiation from government tests conducted in the 1950s may share some of the blame for the die-off.

Experts were quick to say that

the number of animals thought to have died was less than one percent of a herd that numbers about 450,000 animals. The herd crashed in the 1970s to a low of about 75,000. At the time, at least one official of the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game said that indiscriminate and wasteful hunting practices by Alaska Natives were a leading factor. However, this charge was never substantiated, and the causes of the crash were never established.

Times have changed considerably since then. Not only has the herd rebounded dramatically, but Jim Dau, a department biologist in Kotzebue, said he works closely with village hunters to

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monitor herd size and condition.

"We put a lot of stock in what local people say. Village people know their particular area like nobody else ever can because of their years of experience there," Dau said. "If the people at Pt. Hope hadn't kept calling me about the carcasses at Cape Thompson, I wouldn't have tried so hard to get up there."

Dau called for continued vigilance but cautioned against alarm. He said the herd remains stable and noted that in addition to increased cooperation with those who depend on the caribou to fulfill nutritional and cultural needs, there are two biologists in Kotzebue and one in Barrow providing professional monitoring.

Caribou are complex migratory animals whose ways remain somewhat unpredictable. Dau said while the die-off may not signal any further declines, it would not be unrealistic to expect some change in a herd this size.

"It's a pretty effective wake-up call to keep tabs on the situation (but) it's going to take me than one year for something big to happen. I think we're in a much better position to recognize change than we were 20 years ago," said Dau. "People here recognize that the herd is real big and we need to be alert. We're all on the same wavelength."

Dr. David Klein, senior scientist with the Alaska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit of the University of Alaska Fair-

banks said considerable resources were devoted to studying the Western Arctic herd after the 1970s crash, but that once the herd began to rebound, funds were directed to what were perceived as more urgent priorities. Thus, he said, a great opportunity was lost to collect the kind of detailed baseline information that allows researchers to detect long-term trends in animal populations.

"Caribou are ecologically more complex than other members of the deer family," said Klein. The more information we have, the better.

