

Opposition to caribou convention lessens

by Bill DuBay and Bill Hess
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With a population of nearly 130,000 animals and a range as large as the state of Wyoming, the Porcupine caribou herd is thriving and healthy. The 7000 villagers spread across Northeast Alaska and in Canada's Yukon and Northwest Territories who depend upon the herd for their survival want to see that it remains that way.

Management of the herd poses some unique problems as its range is dissected by the boundary lines drawn by two nations, one state, two territories and a variety of local governments. Villagers, mostly Athabascan Indians and Inupiat Eskimos from the two nations, have long been pushing for an international treaty, or convention, to protect the herd.

"Today, many things are changing in our villages," Jonathan Soloman, president of the International Porcupine Caribou

commission, said last Thursday at a state hearing on the matter in Fairbanks.

"Jobs, Schools, better homes, electricity, communications and airports all help to make life better. But the life of our

community and the historical way we think about the world still depends upon the caribou."

The state held the hearings to gather comments on a state draft position on the convention. Under the Jay Hammond

administration, the state of Alaska opposed any idea of a treaty or convention, but Governor Bill Sheffield is looking favorably on participating in an agreement.

There was virtually no oppo-

sition to the drafting of some type of agreement expressed at the hearings, nor to the provisions called for in a resolution passed by Alaska members of the IPCC during a meeting.

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Cooperation sought to protect caribou

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held this past April in Arctic Village.

The resolution called upon the governments of the two nations to negotiate and implement an international convention to conserve the herd and its ecosystem and urged the state of Alaska to join with the IPCC in taking a lead role in the drafting of an agreement.

In the past, Alaska feared an international agreement might weaken State jurisdiction over the herd. All parties involved now seem to agree that state, territorial, and local management will not be damaged by an international agreement.

Last October, State Senator John Sackett of Ruby, who has taken an active role in the negotiations, organized a meeting with Governor Sheffield, Alaska Fish and Game personnel, Solomon and other IPCC representatives.

The Alaska Federation of Natives also drew up a resolution supporting efforts at reaching an international agreement.

Fish and Game and then the governor finally came out in support of the efforts. "This thing has been on the shelf for five years now," Sheffield said. "It is time to get going with it." He assigned Fish and Game to work with the villages.

During the Fairbanks hearings, Steven Ginnis, the Tanana Chiefs Conference subregional director from Fort Yukon, noted that as COPE and the Council of Yukon Indians finalized their land claims agreements with the Canadian government, another stumbling block to reaching a consensus is disappearing.

There have been opposition expressed out of fears the agreement would leave Canada with no management capabilities, but the agreements indicate otherwise. The settling of the land claims also promises to bring to an end a deadlock that could have tied up any type of agreement reached in the area.

Solomon stressed three points at the Fairbanks hearing. Local

people should have a big role in any convention reached. He said, the agreement must take effective measures to protect the habitat. It should recognize local domestic use as the first priority use of caribou.

During the April meetings, Solomon emphasized his concern for local participation, and the need to get an international convention as soon as possible.

"In 1959, when Alaska became a state, the Native people were a majority," Solomon said. "In 1980, we were only 18 percent, today we are only 15 percent. Today, every year, Anchorage is gaining a seat in the State House.

"Every three years, it gains a Senate seat. We must set up today, something in treaty form, which the state can not break. This is what this thing is based upon.

"When we started this thing 6 years ago in Old Crow, it was with the recognition of the need by the people of Northeast Alaska and the Canadians of the need for regulation.

"Our people speak of their

religious right to these animals. Our religion includes the rights to our natural resources. As we lose the votes in this state, we will find there are no religious and cultural rights for Native peoples in the state of Alaska.

"That is why we need a treaty or agreement or convention by which the state, the provinces, and the federal governments will recognize forever

our rights to these natural resources."

TCC President Spud Williams said, "The oil companies don't care about what we eat, they are interested only in getting out the oil. We have even more reason today to pursue this agreement than we did five or six years ago when we first started talking about this issue.