Issue Brief: The Decline of the Val-d’Or Caribou Should Be a Wakeup Call for Quebec

After more than a month of protests and public outcry, the Quebec government has abandoned its ill-conceived plan to move the critically imperiled Val-d’Or caribou herd to a zoo. This demonstrates the power the public can have in preserving Canada’s ecological treasures. The victory, however, is bittersweet. While the Val-d’Or herd will be allowed to remain in its home habitat, its long-term survival remains unlikely. Decades of Quebec’s indiscriminate green-lighting of logging and other development have severely degraded the herd’s natural habitat, depleting the herd to no more than 15 individuals.

Quebec’s recent misguided and, thankfully, abandoned, decision to move the Val-d’Or herd to a zoo is simply the latest in decades of poor policy choices province-wide that have allowed the continued degradation of the boreal forest. As the zoo announcement made clear, Quebec still has no comprehensive, cogent caribou policy in place, instead continuing its decades-long practice of making halfhearted gestures toward conservation that offer insufficient protection for the forest and its species. Even now, after admitting that the Val-d’Or herd’s condition was dire enough to warrant putting them in a zoo, the Quebec government refuses to take additional measures to protect their forest habitat.

For years, the provincial government has offered hollow promises to protect this iconic species, only to continually approve logging expansions in the intact boreal forests the caribou call home. Now, places like the Broadback River watershed, which is critical caribou habitat and has been home to First Nations including the Waswanipi Cree for millennia, are facing a similar logging threat. The Val-d’Or herd’s precipitous decline and uncertain future should serve as a wake-up call that without meaningful forest and caribou habitat protections, the fate of the Val-d’Or herd could become the fate of caribou in the Broadback and across the province.

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Condemned to a Zoo: A shocking and misinformed proposal

On April 21, 2017, the Quebec Government announced its plan to capture the Val-d’Or herd and transport it to the Saint-Félicien Zoo 250 miles away from its home range. At the zoo, the plan was to hold the caribou in an enclosure 1/100 the size of their protected habitat.

The Val-d’Or herd is one seven woodland caribou herds in Quebec. Woodland caribou, not to be confused with the close-related migratory caribou, depend upon intact boreal forest habitat and are highly sensitive to industrial disturbances. Woodland caribou herds are threatened across the province, particularly because of unsustainable logging, which for decades has taken a devastating toll on their habitat. The Val-d’Or herd, as one of only

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10 Smith, W. & R. Cheng, Five Percent of Canada’s Pristine Forests are Fragmented or Degraded, Affecting Up to Six
two herds remaining in the southern part of Quebec, has been particularly hard-hit by forest degradation. Located in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region of Quebec, about 300 miles northwest of Montreal, the Val-d’Or herd ranges over approximately 500,000 acres of boreal forest and peatlands. Over decades of industry encroachment into Val-d’Or caribou’s habitat, the region has become increasingly degraded, and their numbers have plummeted. According to a June 2017 report from the Bureau d’audiences publiques sur l’environnement (BAPE), a Quebec government agency, the region is 80% degraded, which far exceeds the 35% degradation limit after which a herd is unlikely to be self-sustaining.

While the plan to relocate the caribou to the zoo was ostensibly to protect the declining 

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13 *Id.* at 73.
herd, it was not based on any scientific recommendation, and scientists themselves condemned the move.\textsuperscript{14} Not only would the caribou have been unlikely to prosper in the zoo’s small enclosure, but, past experience indicates that wild caribou will not survive in a zoo. In July 2015, 19 of the Saint-Félicien Zoo’s 21 caribou died of unknown causes, though speculation is that it was due to a blood parasite.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, the capture and transport of the herd would have been rife with risk. The stress of being hunted by helicopter through the forest and driven onto frozen lakes to be captured,\textsuperscript{16} followed by a 250-mile trek to an enclosed habitat, would have had a high probably of harming and even killing some members of the herd.

The public outcry in response to the announcement was fierce. A petition with the slogan #pasauzoo (translated as “not to the zoo”) coordinated by Nature Quebec, SNAP Quebec, and Action Boréale garnered over 15,000 signatures,\textsuperscript{17} while citizens staged protests at the headquarters of Eacom, which logs in the herd’s habitat.\textsuperscript{18} First Nations who have called the region home for millennia, including the Algonquin communities of Pikogan and Lac Simon, spoke out against the relocation of the herd and against the fact that they were never consulted.\textsuperscript{19} These two First Nations questioned the science behind the decision and expressed concern over what this means for the protection of the region.

Because of this widespread public response, the Saint-Félicien Zoo decided to pull out of the plan. The zoo’s CEO cited public pressure and the fact that the relocation was not socially accepted.\textsuperscript{20} Cornered, the Quebec government admitted that its relocation plan was not based upon any scientific recommendation and decided to abandon it.\textsuperscript{21}

This is, without a doubt, great news for Quebec’s conservation community and the Val-d’Or herd. However, the Quebec government has stated that it will not take any additional measures to protect the herd or stem the tide of logging and mining.\textsuperscript{22} This is particularly troubling given that earlier this year the province approved a logging road that will go directly through the herd’s habitat.\textsuperscript{23} Nor has the government acknowledged its

\textsuperscript{16} Graeme, supra note 7.
\textsuperscript{17} Nos Derniers Caribous Pas Au Zoo!, http://www.pasauzoo.org/.
\textsuperscript{20} Radio-Canada, supra note 1.
\textsuperscript{22} Shields, supra note 3.
\textsuperscript{23} Gendron, Stéphanie, Québec autorise la construction d’une route contre l’avis de ses experts, LE JOURNAL DE MONTRÉAL, May 5, 2017, http://www.journaldemontreal.com/2017/05/05/une-route-sur-le-territoire-des-caribous-
responsibility for the decline of the herd, having continuously chosen industrial development over saving the caribou’s forest habitat for the last 25 years. Now that relocating the herd to the zoo is off the table, Quebec is once again turning a blind eye to the herd’s protection.

Choosing Industry over Caribou: A History of Government Inaction Leading to the Herd’s Decline

The Quebec government has known for decades that the Val-d’Or herd was teetering on the brink of extinction, yet it has continued to prioritize rampant logging and mining in the region over protecting caribou. Since 1984, when the Ministère de l’Énergie et des Ressources naturelles (MER) first proposed opening up the region to logging, environmental groups, First Nations, and scientists have warned of the effect this would have on the herd. At the time, the Val-d’Or herd had approximately 50 individuals – what is now considered the minimum number for the herd to be viable in the long term. Throughout the 1980s, the government’s own scientists warned of the impact that logging would have on the herd.

In 1989, the Quebec government decided to ignore all of these warnings and opened up the region to logging.

As the logging began, warnings about the herd’s decline continued to pile up. Scientific studies in 1995 and 2001 showed that, without increased caribou protections, the herd had an insufficient reproductive rate to survive long-term. In 2004, the Quebec Union for the Conservation of Nature (QUCN) deemed the herd’s situation to be “urgent” and recommended protecting the herd’s entire range. That same year, a case study from the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy found that “[c]aribou management is the headline conservation concern in the Abitibi region....” In 2009, at the Adik Conference on the future of the herd, Luc Bélisle of the Quebec Ministry of Natural Resources said the Val-d’Or herd was the most threatened herd in Quebec. In 2010,
advocacy group l’Action Boréale Abitibi-Témiscamingue (ABAT) called for a halt to new disturbances in the herd’s habitat as the only potential means of protecting the herd.\textsuperscript{32}

Meanwhile, monitoring showed an accelerating decline in the herd’s numbers: 40 individuals in 1994, 30 in 2008, 20 in 2014,\textsuperscript{33} and now no more than 15.\textsuperscript{34} Nevertheless, the province continued to approve logging and mining projects, and refused to close access roads that were opening the region to hunting, fishing, ATVs, and other recreation.

Despite the growing scientific evidence of the poor outlook for the herd, the Quebec government took only minimal measures to save the caribou. While management plans for the Val-d’Or region have been in place since 1989,\textsuperscript{35} these have fallen well short of what

\begin{itemize}
  \item Id.
  \item Forêts, Faune et Parcs Québec, \textit{Protection des espèces menacées ou vulnérables},
\end{itemize}
was necessary to save the herd. Rather than stopping the primary cause of decline, the degradation of the region’s forest, these management plans relied on piecemeal measures, such as limiting access near calving and rutting areas during certain times of the year.

It wasn't until 2009, 25 years after the first warnings, that the Quebec government created the Réserve de Biodiversité des Caribous-de-Val-d’Or for the herd. But at 100,000 acres, this reserve is only one-third the size of what scientists and activists had called for over more than a decade to fully protect the herd’s habitat. Furthermore, this reserve is far from untouched. At the time of its creation, the reserve already contained private lodges and hunting camps and was open to recreation, seriously undermining the quality of the habitat for the disturbance-sensitive caribou. In 2012, after two years of inaction from the Quebec government, many members of a government-led recovery committee, including ABAT and several first nations, resigned rather than be “complicit” in the decline of the herd.

The Quebec government’s continued prioritization of industry over the Val-d’Or herd has only become more apparent in the last year. Even with the Val-d’Or herd on the brink of calamity, in 2017 the Quebec Government approved the Eacom Timber Corporation’s application to construct an access road directly through critical caribou habitat. According to the government’s own scientists, this road violates the regional wildlife management plan and will have dramatic consequences for caribou in the region. In a move denounced by environmental groups, this road will now also be used by the Agnico Eagle mining to carry copper and gold ore from its planned Akasaba West mine just 5km from the caribou reserve.

Learning from the tragedy facing the Val-d’Or herd

“I will not sacrifice a single forestry job for the caribou.”

-Philippe Couillard, Quebec Premier

The decline of the Val-d’Or herd could potentially have been prevented had Quebec heeded the warnings of its scientists and placed the necessary limitations on logging in the region. It is a cautionary tale of what will happen throughout Quebec if the government does not begin prioritizing conservation over indiscriminate logging.

36 Nature Québec, supra note 24, at p. 8.
38 Jacob & Desjardins, supra note 27.
40 Id.
As NRDC’s experts have discussed in earlier blogs,\textsuperscript{42} Quebec has fallen far short of its promises and federal obligation to protect its precious woodland caribou. Quebec has not taken meaningful steps to implement its province-wide 2016 Habitat Stewardship Plan, nor has it set timetables for doing so, even though this plan contained “immediate” measures to be taken. Furthermore, Quebec has continued to authorize cutting in the Montagnes Blanches region and it has failed to protect the Broadback region, even though it promised to protect these areas as first priorities in its Habitat Stewardship Plan.\textsuperscript{43}

Even where the province has taken action to protect caribou, it has undermined these measures by allowing continued development. After signing an historic agreement in 2015 with the Cree Nation Government that contains language regarding further protections in the Broadback, the government of Quebec continued to approve logging roads precariously close to the proposed Broadback preserve and into the intact forest, critical caribou habitat. Two of these new logging roads are scheduled to be built in the summer of 2017.\textsuperscript{44}

\textit{Woodland caribou}

\textit{Government of Canada}

Quebec’s premier, Philippe Couillard, explicitly addressed prioritizing economic development over caribou. During his 2014 election campaign, Couillard stated, “I will not


\textsuperscript{44} Sparks, \textit{supra} note 34.
sacrifice a single forestry job for the caribou.” So far he has lived up to this campaign promise.

It’s imperative that the Quebec government learn from its inaction in Val-d’Or. While it may ultimately be too late to save the Val-d’Or caribou, the province still has the chance to take meaningful measures to protect the habitat of other woodland caribou herds throughout Quebec. Forests with vital caribou habitat like the Broadback, La Sarre, and Montagnes Blanches regions require immediate protection to stem the tide of logging that has been wreaking havoc on the forest ecosystems. Protecting the caribou in these regions also means protecting the livelihoods and cultures of First Nations across Canada who have lived in the boreal forest for thousands of years. The Waswanipi Cree, for example, have been fighting for over a decade for the protection of their ancestral homeland, the Broadback, which is also critical caribou habitat.

If the Quebec government remedies its past inaction by protecting the Broadback and other critical intact boreal forest and releasing substantive management plans, the legacy of the Val-d’Or herd can be sparking meaningful caribou conservation throughout the province and the protection of First Nations’ way of life. Quebec should turn its attention to protecting the other woodland caribou herds to prevent them from suffering the same fate. As such, we recommend Quebec take the following measures in the near term:

- Submit detailed, effective caribou conservation plans in October 2017, as required under the federal caribou recovery strategy.
- Prevent logging in in Quebec’s boreal woodland caribou ranges, including the Broadback Woodland Valley and the Montagnes Blanches (White Mountains) region, until scientifically sound caribou recovery plans are in place in the province.
- Place the Broadback River Valley forest under permanent protection as called for by the Waswanipi Cree.

There is a scene in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* when Ebenezer Scrooge is given a glimpse of his dark future if he continues down his current path. In anguish, he cries, “Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!” The fate of the Val-d’Or caribou is Quebec’s Ghost of Christmas Future, showing what could happen if the province does not prioritize conservation of its boreal forests. Quebec should take this all-too-real vision as a warning, and begin fulfilling its promises to protect this iconic, majestic species.

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