

Caribou are canaries in coalmine for rising Arctic temperatures — and numbers are dropping fast

NP nationalpost.com/news/canada/caribou-are-canaries-in-coalmine-for-rising-arctic-temperatures-and-numbers-are-dropping-fast
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A wild caribou roams the tundra near The Meadowbank Gold Mine located in the Nunavut Territory of Canada on Wednesday, March 25, 2009. NATHAN DENETTE/CANADIAN PRESS / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Caribou in the Arctic are “having a hard time surviving the human age,” with a new report revealing numbers have dropped by fifty per cent in the last two decades.

According to the 2018 Arctic Report Card from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, numbers are down from 4.7 million to around 2.1 million. Some herds have shrunk by 90 per cent. The report was announced at a press conference at a meeting of the American Geophysical Union.

These findings are disturbing, says Candace Batycki, conservation program director at Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, an organization that protects Canada’s northern habitats.

“This tells me that caribou are at the front lines of environmental change. They’re canaries in the coalmines,” said Batycki. “Twenty years is not a long period of time for an animal that has been with us for millennia, for an animal that survived the ice age. Now, it’s having a hard time surviving the human age.”



A Woodland caribou bull is shown in an undated handout photo. HO via Canadian Press /

THE CANADIAN PRESS

Don Russell led the research on caribou. He points out that while caribou herds do fluctuate normally, what is concerning is how low the numbers have fallen. This drop is not unprecedented – one herd shrank from 780,000 to 5,000 during the 1950s, he said – but different factors today could prevent caribou from bouncing back, including global warming.

According to the report, global warming means there are more plants in the Arctic. Unfortunately, they’re the wrong ones for caribou. With warmer temperatures, plants are growing taller, crowding out the ground-level lichen that caribou like to eat.

Rain caused by warmer weather is also a problem. It falls and freezes, forming a hard layer over the tundra that caribou can’t push their noses through to feed.

And, warmer weather means more insects. “The caribou get exhausted by these bugs,” said Monica Allen, spokesperson for NOAA. “You can imagine getting swarmed with bugs for hours and days – they’re using all their energy to survive.”

“Often things move a little up, a little down in the Arctic,” she added. “This was a very dramatic finding.”

Russell also points to hunting as a factor in caribou decline. While usually, harvesting has no effect on herd size, it becomes an important factor when herds are at very low numbers. However, many indigenous groups have already made sacrifices to prevent overhunting, and this is having an effect on their food security and culture, according to the report.

“This has economic impact on them, because they need to rely more on store-bought food,” said Russell. “Plus, there’s a younger generation that doesn’t have the opportunity to learn the traditional hunting culture.”

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But, according to Batycki, there is hope, and it comes in the form of political will.

According to Canada’s report to the United Nations last December, Canada is on its way to hitting Paris agreement targets. Recently, Environment Minister Catherine McKenna announced that Canada will be ready to set tougher standards for 2020.

However, Ontario Premier Doug Ford introduced legislation to cancel the former Liberal’s cap-and-trade system last June. Meanwhile, Jason Kenney, Alberta’s United Conservative Party leader, says he will cut their carbon tax if he wins his election next spring. Conservative leader Andrew Scheer says if he is elected next year, shutting down the carbon tax will be a top priority.

With caribou populations teetering on the edge, political decisions made in the next few years could mean the difference between the existence or extinction.

“We need to get very serious about setting climate targets and actually hitting them,” said Batycki. “Caribou are in for a very rough ride if we don’t. Caribou are a stand-in for all of us – we should definitely be concerned.”



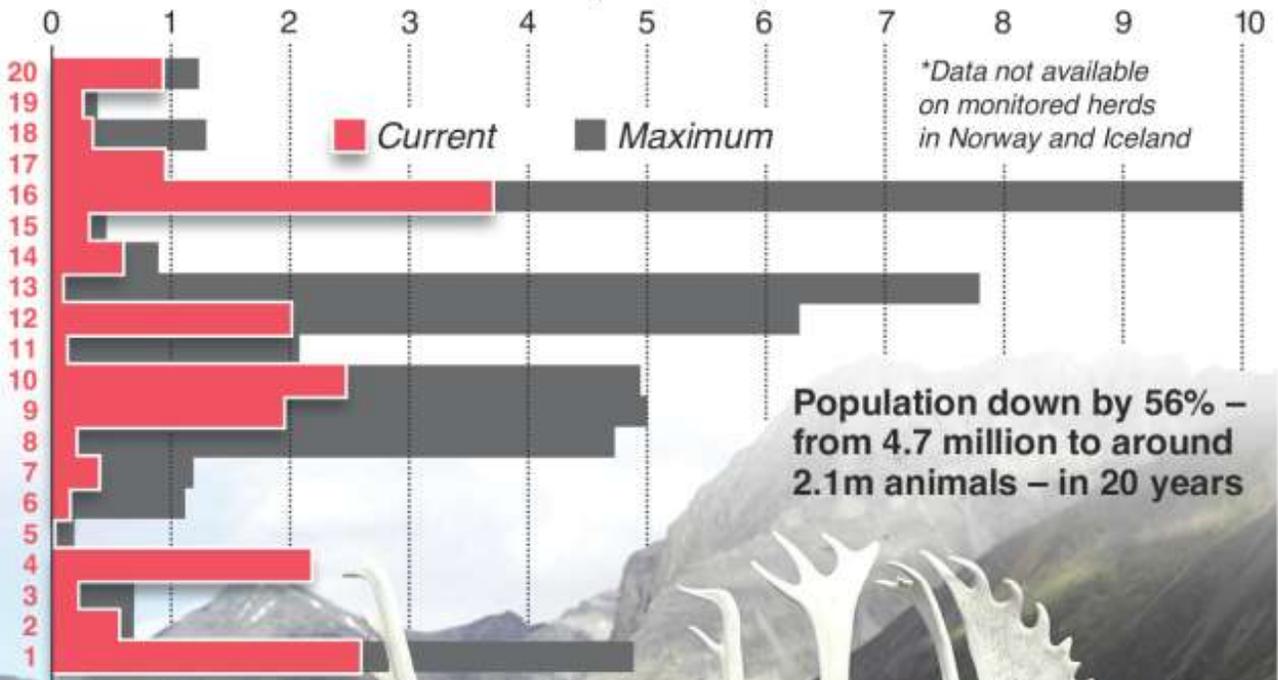


with some herds down by more than 90%

■ Warming climate causing taller plants to dominate tundra and engulf ground level lichen that caribou eat

■ Rain falling on snowy ground can form frozen icy layers over grazing tundra – caribou cannot push noses through

ESTIMATED POPULATION BY HERD* (100,000s)



Population down by 56% – from 4.7 million to around 2.1m animals – in 20 years



Sources: NOAA Arctic Program, BBC

Picture: Associated Press

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