

Dene K'éh Kusān

ALWAYS WILL BE THERE

WHŪDZĪ (WOODLAND CARIBOU) AND THE KASKA DENA

IMPORTANCE TO KASKA DENA

Whūdzī - Woodland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) are a culturally important species to Kaska Dena. They are a high-profile species of the north, and the herds (Northern Mountain Population Woodland Caribou) in the Kaska Ancestral Territory are considered a Special Concern under the Federal Species at Risk Act.

The herds are of such significance that all herd winter ranges have been designated by Kaska as Cu Cha Duga (For the Grandchildren) areas. The Kaska know that one of their most important goals within Dene K'éh Kusān is to protect and safeguard northern mountain woodland caribou populations in our ancestral lands and to make sure the ranges stay intact for future generations.

Woodland caribou are a prime traditional food source for Kaska Dena and have been managed through Kaska's traditional methods of conservation that is based on our natural laws and stewardship of the land. Protecting the caribou as a resource, including the herds' ecological range, is important to safeguard the continuation of Kaska Dena heritage and culture





ECOLOGY

Woodland caribou are the northern mountain ecotype which have elevational migrations between ranges and use a variety of seasonal ranges throughout the year. Calving, summer and rutting range are generally in alpine and subalpine habitats, and as snow levels increase after the rut, caribou will migrate through forested habitats to lower elevation forested winter ranges. Each range is separated by elevation or distance. While maintaining all the ranges are important for survival of the herds, the forested winter range, migration corridors, and calving ranges specifically, are considered critical.

There are 7 herds with intact and contiguous annual and seasonal ranges in the Dene K'éh Kusān. Retaining the annual and seasonal ranges across elevations will support the essential movement for these herds. Within these areas are vital winter ranges, mineralized waterbodies and licks, calving areas, areas of insect relief, pre rut and rutting areas and important migration routes that are needed for these herds survival.

24% of the
Muskwa Herd Range

86% of the
Rabbit Herd Range

53% of the
Gataga Herd Range

84% of the
Frog Herd Range

49% of the
Horseranch Herd Range

4% of the
Finlay Herd Range

39% of the
Liard Plateau Herd Range

STATUS AND MANAGEMENT ISSUES

The Northern Mountain Population (NMP) of Whūdźī - Woodland Caribou herds are in trouble and are estimated to be declining in numbers¹. The threats are similar to boreal and southern mountain caribou with habitat fragmentation and alteration, permanent habitat loss, and increased predation through resource development and human settlement encroaching on the ranges of the NMP caribou herds.

In addition, the increased size and frequencies of natural disturbance events in the Kaska Ancestral Territory through climate change factors are affecting caribou range, removing winter habitats at an increasing pace. Scientific population information is scarce for these herds. Indigenous knowledge and local knowledge for all the herds in the Dene K'éh Kusān and the Kaska Ancestral Territory indicate all the caribou populations are in decline. To offset these factors many important management strategies are needed to help support these populations.

Kaska Dena see these herds and their intact ranges as the last refugia of woodland caribou in the province. The simplest, and most effective management outcome is protecting large intact boreal landscapes to protect our Whūdźī. The Kaska Dena Conservation Analysis shows the impacts to resource development by the establishment of the Dene K'éh Kusān will be negligible, while the benefits to the caribou could be the preservation of the NMP ecotype in British Columbia.

Both the Government of Canada and Government of British Columbia need to work with the Indigenous Nations in the protection of NMP caribou herds and in particular the Kaska Dena for these 7 herds in British Columbia.



¹ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/plants-animals-ecosystems/wildlife/wildlife-conservation/caribou/north-mountain-caribou>

BENEFITS OF THE DENE K'ÉH KUSĀN FOR THE WHŪDZĪ

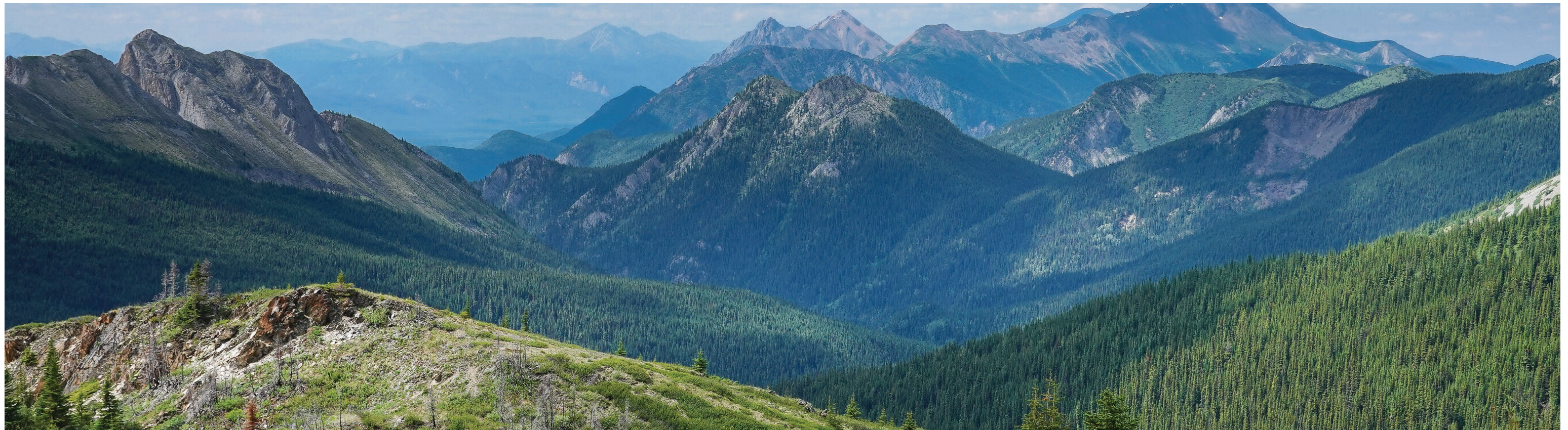
Precautionary Principle

- ❖ Recovery outcomes for the boreal and southern mountain woodland caribou ecotypes show restoring mature coniferous ecosystems, restoring forested lichen ecosystems, and reclaiming contiguous forested landscapes for woodland caribou can take 6-10 decades. Restoring caribou habitats has been a challenge with limited success in the Canadian North.
- ❖ Kaska Dena laws, knowledge, and practices support a cautious and precautionary management approach to maintain our land and wildlife. Simple and effective management erring on survival of the Whūdzi is the best approach for the Kaska Dena. Traditional knowledge and wisdom from Kaska knowledge holders are necessary for us to avoid past management mistakes for the NMP herds. We need to be aware of this disjuncture in our environmental policies and blend the knowledge of this important species to our people.
- ❖ Ensuring intact contiguous boreal landscapes is the simplest and most effective way to maintain caribou in the Ancestral Territory and ensure protection from habitat loss, fragmentation, and increased predation from resource development and human influences.



Habitat Protection

- ❖ Dene K'éh Kusān will protect 40,000 km² (~4,000,000 ha) of critical ranges of 7 herds in the core of the Kaska Ancestral Territory in British Columbia.
- ❖ The ranges of Northern Mountain caribou make good boundaries for delineating protected areas to secure naturally regulated large mammal ecosystems. Ensuring intact contiguous boreal landscapes are critical to the survival of woodland caribou.
- ❖ Protection from habitat loss, fragmentation, and increased predation from resource development and human influences requires protected area strategies that allow for the flexible approach in managing a vitally important species.



Co-Management and Stewardship

- ✦ As a means to protect Dene K'éh Kusān, the Kaska Dena of British Columbia will institute a law called the Kaska Protected Area Law, a subset of sacred laws – āī, to protect their Aboriginal Rights, and the area within Dene K'éh Kusān to govern the relationship between the Kaska Dena and their lands and waters.
- ✦ All stakeholders have a desire to ensure that caribou are used and managed in ways that will insure ongoing use for future generations. The structure of co-management is envisioned to be through existing government to government agreements. It is with this view that the Kaska are working towards the designation of the proposed area as a Conservancy under the provincial protected areas legislation to enhance the inter-relationships of these ecosystems.
- ✦ Dene K'éh Kusān is an area which supports the criteria of Title as laid out by the Supreme Court of Canada.



Dane Nan Yé Dāh (Kaska Guardians)

- ✦ Using Kaska knowledge, laws, and practices, a set of management practices, monitoring, and inventories on Whūdźī will be developed and implemented to update information on the herds.
- ✦ We are training the next generation of land managers who will be the ones implementing our co-management and governance models.
- ✦ Guardians are trained to work in the areas of wildlife, forestry, ecosystem monitoring, archeology, climate change, water management, and include the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into all of our work.
- ✦ The Guardians will be trained for the conservation economy and the monitoring efforts to ensure its success.



The Guardians program represents important connections between the social, cultural, environmental, and economic well-being of the Kaska Dena. As we move into a changing future, we need to recognize, respect, and acknowledge what it was like in the past, and provide for the future possibilities with decision making processes that determine how we develop, protect and conserve landscapes. The disconnection from nature is the biggest threat to the future of our natural world as human beings. The most powerful way we can ensure the continued existence of a healthy Dene K'éh Kusān is to reconnect. Reconnection to the land, water, plants and animals. Reconnection to Gudźih.

