



Joe Tetlich Protecting the Porcupine Caribou

The Porcupine caribou herd has sustained communities in the N.W.T. and Yukon for centuries. Now they're the focus of a unique management plan.

By Cooper Langford
Illustration by Jacqui Oakley

Earlier this year, Joe Tetlich received a piece of news that made his day. The results of a long-awaited census of the Porcupine caribou had been compiled, and the news was good. In fact, it was better than good: the population stood at a healthy 169,000, putting to rest fears that the herd was in decline. “We are really happy, extremely happy,” he told a local newspaper. But as chairman of the Porcupine Caribou Management Board, he also knew his work was cut out for him.

For the past decade, Tetlich has been playing a lead role in developing a management program for the Porcupine herd, which ranges from the northwest corner

of the Northwest Territories, through the Yukon and into Alaska. It has been a long and complex process, involving Gwich'in and Inuvialuit First Nation communities that have based their livelihood on Porcupine caribou for centuries, as well as federal and territorial governments. Now those efforts are paying off with the endorsement by all participants of a plan that is unique for its basis in both scientific and traditional knowledge and an ongoing process to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Porcupine herd. “It’s been quite a journey,” Tetlich says. “That said, this is a plan that was created for all-time... It’s not a plan that’s going to grow dust.”

The seeds of the board's management process were sown in 2001 after a meeting to discuss the impact of harvesting female caribou on the overall size of the herd. The message was blunt, Tetlichy recalls, zeroing on how hunting cows diminished the herd's ability to reproduce. That started a discussion of how to communicate to traditional communities the importance of hunting, an aboriginal right, with a view toward the sustainability of the herd. What developed from there was a program to develop a formal management process that would be embraced right down to the grassroots level.

The board's efforts received an additional, though controversial, boost in 2009. With weather conditions having thwarted census efforts over several preceding years, fears were high that the Porcupine were in decline, like many other herds. In response, the Yukon government unilaterally imposed hunting restrictions on the herd. Though an understandable measure, the move went against deeply held desires for a co-operative management process. The ensuing controversy, however, did have a positive side, Tetlichy says: it underlined the need to develop a management plan in which all parties would play a vital, co-operative role.

In that context, the news this year that Porcupine numbers are historically healthy comes as a relief. Moreover, it gives Tetlichy and the board a lift as they implement the management plan, which is centred on annual evaluations of all scientific information and findings from local hunters, leading to recommendations for conditions to be applied to that year's harvest. The information is then distilled into a colour code, similar to a forest fire hazard code, with various levels of risk corresponding to best practices that range from normal harvest to extremely limited harvests, and then only for aboriginal communities.

The key to success, Tetlichy says, will be ongoing communication with communities, local boards and higher levels of government to reinforce and sustain commitment to the process, its principles and decisions made. He is confident about the prospects for success. "It's like a web," Tetlichy says. "Everyone is working together on one front to make sure the information gets out and we can make good on our plan." a

Lion Hunter

Sea lions are here on Mitlenatch—somewhere under the squall of screeching seabirds

By Ryan Stuart Photos by Philip Stone



PAGE CI-CONTRE
des chercheurs floridiens sont capables d'identifier les lamantins grâce aux cicatrices laissées par des hélices. Certains individus ont plus de 40 marques. / Wallace J. Nichols, Ph. D.,

One of the many translations for Mitlenatch Island is "it looks close, but seems to move away as you approach it." As James Fisher, my captain for the day, pushes down the throttle and we pull away from Vancouver Island towards our destination, the translation comes to life. The rock bulging out of the Strait of Georgia seems to duck below the ocean surface, just like a shy sea lion. Its shape-shifting ways continue. Dark spots appear on its monotonous brown surface. It looks like several islands. Suddenly it grows big. Now it looks white. And so goes the journey for another 30 minutes until we're alongside Mitlenatch's southern cliffs. Pelagic cormorants patrol past. Double-crested cormorants line the cliff top. A feathery cloud of smoke erupts as a bald eagle disturbs nesting glaucous-winged gulls.

Stranded 15 kilometres from the nearest chunk of land, Mitlenatch is home to the largest seabird colony in the Strait of Georgia, the strip of water separating Vancouver Island from the British Columbia mainland. But I'm not here for the birds. I've come hoping to see sea lions, to me the most impressive marine mammal. Unlike seals, which seem so out of place flopping along the ground, sea lions have powerful front flippers that allow them to walk on all fours. They look as powerful, if not as graceful, on land as in the water, cantering along in a shuffle, even sunbathing at attention. And once they hit the ocean, they seem to transform from bulky weightlifter to figure skater, entirely in their element.