

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AT CANADIAN MOUNTAIN HOLIDAYS

November, 2004

BACKGROUND

The nature of interactions between wildlife species and our skiing, hiking and flying continues to be a focus for CMH. It is not only a key piece in our overall approach to sustainability, but it continues to grow in profile because of the increasing federal and provincial (BC) government attention to Species at Risk legislation.

A FOCUS ON KEY WILDLIFE SPECIES

We consider the mountains in which we operate to be the home for a range of wildlife and plant species. Just like the challenges faced by many government wildlife management agencies, we can't realistically set up programs and practices for each and every species.

So, we focus on some key wildlife species which can act as gauges of the health of the mountain ecosystems where we operate. In the conservation world, these are often called "indicator species."

With the help of scientists and wildlife experts, we are focusing our efforts on: (1.) mountain caribou; (2.) mountain goats; (3.) grizzly bears; and (4.) wolverines. But this does not mean that we will ignore the other animals.

The mountain caribou continues to be a focus not only for us, but for governments, other resource sectors and conservation groups. The population of these animals, which inhabit many of our operating areas, continues to drop. A few years ago, it was estimated that there were about 2500 mountain caribou in BC. Now, that number appears to have dropped to as low as 1600-1800 animals.

WHAT ARE WE DOING TO MINIMIZE OUR IMPACT ON WILDLIFE?

We take this issue very seriously, and are taking a number of specific actions:

Wildlife operating procedures

Under Hans Gmoser's leadership, CMH was the first heli-ski company to develop a set of procedures for wildlife. These were written by Hans in 1988. Since then, our procedures continue to be up-dated as new research or operational experience becomes available. Recently, the procedures were re-written with the help of wildlife researcher Dr. Steve Wilson and biologist Dennis Hamilton to clearly describe the operating practices through which we will achieve our goal: not to displace key wildlife species from the habitats they need to survive. The procedures are available at:
<http://www.canadianmountainholidays.com/about/stewardship/publications/>

Using *SnowBase* as a decision tool

SnowBase is a sophisticated computer data-base that we developed over the last 10 years. Until recently, it was used primarily for keeping track of thousands of pieces of information about our patterns of skiing, and for snowfall, weather and avalanche conditions. Starting in

the winter of 2003/04, we added innovative enhancements to the system that now allow our guiding staff to set digital *wildlife flags* on their daily ski run lists. These flags permit us to:

- ✓ incorporate information from our own experience about where animals tend to be in these mountains, as well as what we might obtain from other sources such as government agencies and researchers (monitoring animals with radio collars), habitat maps and from other users about the actual or potential locations of wildlife
- ✓ choose ski terrain and flight paths that have low relative potential for interactions with wildlife
- ✓ track and monitor the decisions made by our guides to ensure that we're meeting our "no displacement goal"; and
- ✓ perform year-to-year comparisons and to provide information to government wildlife managers in a useful and consistent format.

Inventories

Working with partners (such as Pope and Talbot and BC's Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection), we continue to fund on-going inventory projects for mountain caribou (Central Selkirks and in the Quesnel Lake area) and mountain goats (Bugaboos and Bobbie Burns). These projects involve doing systematic counts of animals over a number of seasons, in the same places and using the same methods, to get a better sense of whether wildlife populations are growing, shrinking or staying the same.

On-going research projects

We recently joined with other partners to fund a retrospective look at how we interact with caribou in the Galena and Kootenay operating areas. This research, which compared our past run use information with past radio-telemetry observations of mountain caribou, found that there was a "weak effect" between our skiing and the location of caribou. It was not clear if that result was because caribou were choosing to stay away from us at some times, or because our non-displacement strategy was successful. We hope to extend this research to operating areas in the vicinity of Revelstoke.

Participation on recovery teams

We continue to participate on the provincial Mountain Caribou Technical Advisory Committee, and on the North Kootenay and Cariboo-Hart local recovery implementation teams. These teams, which include government, the forest industry, communities and conservation groups, are working together in response to requirements set under Canada's *Species at Risk Act*.

Staff training

We continue to train all operational staff (including area management teams, guides and pilots) on our operating practices. We bring in experts to add to this training. More generally, we will ensure that all staff at CMH are aware of the importance of this issue, of what we're doing as a company, and what their roles are as individuals to help us achieve our objectives.

Working with government and the tourism sector

The Province of BC recently announced a new approach to managing species at risk; they have set up a Species at Risk Coordinator in Nelson, BC who will be responsible for coordinating the activities of government agencies and licensees for recovery of species such as caribou, the spotted owl and the marbled murrelet. We support this approach, and will be working with the new coordinator to ensure that our operating practices are not only consistent with recovery plans for species, but that they are used as a positive example for other tourism companies and recreation groups.

We are also actively involved in a government-tourism team which is developing new sets of acceptable human behaviours for activities and ecosystems around the province. This work will not only apply to our operations, but to those of other tourism operators, public recreationists, and – potentially – others who are using similar modes of transport (snowmobiles, snow-cats, planes, helicopters, etc) for other activities.

External verification

We recognize that for our practices, procedures and research projects to have external credibility, we need to be transparent and open to scrutiny. In Canada's forest industry, this is already being done through certification schemes, but these are not well developed yet for tourism.

In the absence of such certification programs for tourism, there are two key ways in which we're doing this:

- (1.) we are working with the BC Helicopter and Snowcat Skiing Operators Association (BCHSSOA) on initial steps toward some form of external audit system for the Association's Best Practices document (<http://www.bchssoa.com>), in a similar fashion to what is already done for safety and operations.
- (2.) we are talking to some key conservation organizations about how we can work together to help verify that our practices are meeting our objectives around wildlife management and environmental sustainability.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

CMH has a long and respected history of environmental stewardship. Our efforts were recently recognized when we received the Tourism Industry Association – Parks Canada national award for sustainable tourism, and the Travel Alberta – EPCOR award for sustainable tourism.

We have set ourselves the goal of becoming the "leading sustainable tourism operator in North America," and our approach to wildlife is a critical piece to our success. Our public sustainability report and other related documents are available at:

<http://www.canadianmountainholidays.com/about/stewardship/publications/>

We will continue to work to clarify the questions that relate to our operations, and to find the answers to those questions. We will continue to work with governments, other tourism operators, other backcountry users, and conservation groups to ensure that we can continue to provide world-class mountain experiences for our guests.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Our approach to wildlife is only one component of our commitment to the environment and to environmental, social and fiscal sustainability. We welcome questions and comments. Please contact:

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