



**Kugluktuk Angoniatit Association • Hunters' & Trappers' Organization**

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## **SUBMISSION TO THE NUNAVUT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT BOARD FOR**

**Information:**

**Decision: XXX**

**Issue: Request to increase the total allowable harvest and to remove the non-quota limitation for Bluenose-East caribou in Nunavut**

### **Background:**

In 2017, an interim total allowable harvest (TAH) for the Bluenose-East caribou herd was established, restricting Nunavut harvest to 340 caribou annually. In 2020, further limitations on the harvest were established, reducing the TAH to 170 caribou and a sex ratio non-quota limitation (NQL). These measures have had a severe and negative impact on Inuit in Kugluktuk, the only community in Nunavut that harvests Bluenose-East caribou.

The harvest restrictions were imposed in response to a generally acknowledged decline in the abundance of the Bluenose-East caribou herd. Kugluktuk Inuit have abided by the TAHs and NQL placed on the Bluenose-East caribou herd but did not agree with the level of harvesting limitations.

Recent information indicates that the herd is recovering, and that harvest restrictions should now be reconsidered.

### **Context:**

The Bluenose-East caribou herd's historical calving grounds are located west of Kugluktuk; the herd's annual range extends into the Northwest Territories (NWT), south and east of Great Bear Lake. In addition to Kugluktuk, a total of nine communities from the NWT typically harvest Bluenose-East caribou—although availability of the herd has been reportedly reduced. Prior to the setting of a TAH for the Bluenose-East herd, Inuit used to harvest approximately 600 caribou (including Dolphin-Union and Bathurst caribou) annually. Historically, 1500-1600 caribou were harvested annually.

Caribou is a staple food for Kugluktuk Inuit. In addition to food sovereignty, caribou harvesting is crucial for cultural continuity and knowledge transfer. The Kugluktuk Angoniatit Association (KHTO) manages the caribou harvesting of Kugluktuk Inuit, in accordance with the *Nunavut Agreement*. The KHTO's power to regulate the harvesting practices of its members includes the authority to establish management approaches in-line with Inuit systems of wildlife management, such as a community-based management plan for the Bluenose-East herd.

With respect to TAHs, the *Nunavut Agreement* clearly specifies that Inuit harvesting can only be restricted or limited where necessary to give effect to a valid wildlife management purpose (i.e., conservation) and, even then, "only to the extent necessary" (s. 5.3.3). Similarly, NQLs cannot "unduly or unreasonably" constrain Inuit harvesting (s. 5.6.50). The KHTO understands this to mean that these are measures of last resort, only to be considered sparingly when less restrictive alternatives (e.g., HTO-driven conservation efforts) have proven ineffective.

## **Impact of TAH and NQL on Kugluktuk Inuit:**

In its 2020 decision, the NWMB appeared to consider some of the effects that an excessively low TAH might have on Inuit food security and cultural continuity, as well as on the confidence and trust of Kugluktuk Inuit in Nunavut's wildlife co-management regime. As it turned out, the scarcity resulting from the TAH of 170 caribou brought on a disruptive sense of urgency never experienced by Kugluktuk Inuit—even while the initial TAH of 340 was in effect.

The caribou harvesting patterns of Kugluktuk Inuit usually vary on a seasonal basis, with either male or female caribou preferred depending on the intended end use (e.g., meat, bedding, clothing). The ability to harvest caribou bulls and/or cows year-round is crucial for both food security and the continuation of cultural practices. Since the introduction of the latest TAH and NQL, however, Kugluktuk Inuit have moved away from these traditional harvesting practices. Whereas the summer harvest was always relatively small, it is now almost the only harvest (in 2023, for example, tags were made available on July 1; by July 3, all 170 tags were signed out even though caribou in July are not fat and their hide is unusable). The lower TAH has encouraged harvesting (annual average of 170.7 caribou during the first three years of the 170 TAH vs. annual average of 156.8 caribou during the four years of the 340 TAH that was never fully met). Basically, the sense of scarcity is so pressing that Kugluktuk Inuit rather have a substandard harvest than have no caribou meat at all.

The TAH of 170 Bluenose-East caribou is also eroding the community's social fabric. People always shared what they harvested with family and other community members. The introduction of the TAH and NQL has caused a major change in Inuit values and practices. Caribou and muskox TAHs generate heated arguments and pit Inuit families and households against each other creating grief. Kugluktuk Inuit and the KHTO want—and need—to be able to move away from this destructive trend by emphasizing cultural practices.

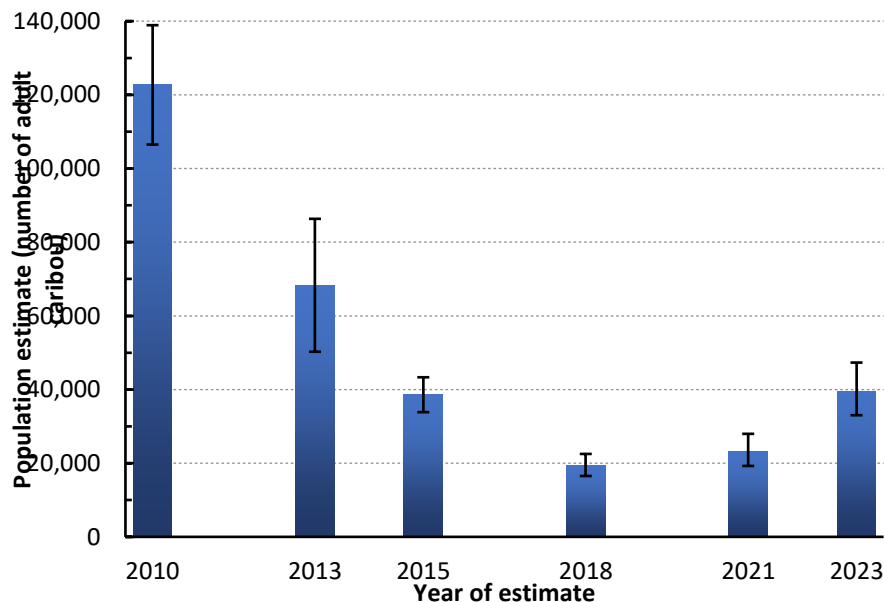
## **Current herd status:**

The KHTO's submission to the NWMB for the 2020 Bluenose-East caribou public hearing already highlighted that Kugluktuk Inuit were noticing multiple signs of herd recovery, such as sightings of numerous calves—including twins—and healthy fall harvests. Community observations also identified environmental conditions promoting herd recovery, such as cooler, wetter, and windier days leading to reduced insect disturbance.

KHTO members have continued to observe many caribou yearlings and still see cows with two calves. Despite a very dry and hot summer, Bluenose-East caribou remain healthy (aside from a brief episode in September 2023 due to an insect-borne disease) and their numbers are increasing. Vegetation is

thriving (e.g., berries were amazing last year) regardless of NWT forest fires or how hot and dry past summers have been. The KHTO firmly believes that the on-the-land observations of Kugluktuk Inuit, in and of themselves, are valid grounds to assert that the Bluenose-East caribou herd is recovering. The KHTO's standpoint is further supported by work undertaken in the NWT.

A series of population estimates (Figure 1) produced by the Government of the NWT (GNWT) likewise suggest that the Bluenose-East caribou herd is recovering with a significant increase in the population estimate between 2021 and 2023 (from 23,000 to 40,000 caribou, approximately); about an overall doubling in numbers since 2018. Since 2018-2020, additional survey-derived indicators (e.g., summer calf and collared cow survival rates, pregnancy rate, calf: cow ratio) also support the increase in the population estimate.



**Figure 1.** Survey-derived population estimates of the Bluenose-East caribou herd, with error bars representing 95% confidence intervals. (Source: GNWT reports)

In parallel, the Advisory Committee for Cooperation on Wildlife Management (ACCWM) has produced *Taking care of caribou*, a management plan for the Cape Bathurst, Bluenose-West and Bluenose-East caribou herds. The ACCWM's plan, published in 2014, includes four colour-coded levels of herd status and management actions. In November 2023, the NWT's Wildlife Management Advisory Council approved the ACCWM's proposal to prolong the status of the Bluenose-East herd as "Yellow" (intermediate and increasing).

### **KHTO involvement:**

The KHTO has taken a variety of proactive actions to ensure that the Bluenose-East caribou herd remains a vital, healthy wildlife population capable of sustaining Inuit harvesting needs, in accordance with the principles of conservation set forth in the *Nunavut Agreement*.

## **Harvest Management**

Back in 2016, the KHTO resolved to develop a comprehensive community-based management plan for Bluenose-East caribou as a viable approach to the conservation of the herd. While an updated version of the 2019 plan has still not been submitted to the NWMB for approval, the KHTO has nonetheless voluntarily implemented the following elements of the plan:

- No commercial harvesting or sport hunts;
- No organized community caribou hunts;
- No support of sale/purchase of caribou under the country food distribution program;
- Active participation in caribou monitoring and sampling programs;
- Encouragement of a shift towards the harvest of alternate species;
- Increase in public and educational caribou harvesting awareness initiatives; and
- Creation of a no-harvest zone to the immediate west-southwest of the community.

Kugluktuk Inuit are adhering to the KHTO's community-based measures. In fact, harvesters are actually cooperating beyond what is required under the plan (for instance, the KHTO is receiving fairly complete records of moose harvests even though reporting is not mandatory).

## **Predation control**

The KHTO has repeatedly been advocating for predator incentive programs, seeing as Kugluktuk Inuit have knowledge of the impact that prospering wolf and grizzly bear populations can have on caribou herds. The KHTO has accordingly been appreciative of the GNWT's wolf incentive program, which is now in its last scheduled year, and is seeking support from co-management partners for the continuation of wolf incentives in Nunavut. From the KHTO's point of view, successful wolf predation control has very likely played a role in the creation of conditions facilitating the recovery of the Bluenose-East caribou herd.

## **Collaborative approach**

The KHTO fully recognizes that Kugluktuk Inuit are not the only ones to have been affected by the decline in the abundance of the Bluenose-East caribou herd. Back when the TAH was being introduced, the KHTO even proposed that the recommended proportion of the overall harvest allocated to Kugluktuk be slightly decreased to allow NWT communities to share the overall harvest. Over the years, the KHTO has worked closely with the Kitikmeot Regional Wildlife Board and the Kitikmeot Inuit Association, especially regarding the community-based plan, and has developed a constructive relationship with Government of Nunavut (GN) Conservation Officers on issues relating to caribou specifically, and to matters of wildlife conservation and enforcement generally.

The KHTO also acknowledges that some Indigenous harvesters in other jurisdictions have determined that, from their perspective, the status quo is suitable for the time being. The KHTO respects their decision, underlining that the 2020 NWMB decision voiced confidence "that interjurisdictional conservation can be achieved despite some minor differences in harvest levels, especially when everyone is working together to conserve the herd" (p. 5).

It is precisely with this collaboration and transparency in mind that the KHTO approached Indigenous harvesters of Bluenose-East caribou from the NWT and initiated a meeting bringing together NWT and Nunavut co-management partners despite being under no obligation to do so. The KHTO wished to ensure that co-management partners were informed. KHTO has listened to the initial reactions and concerns of co-management partners and taken this into consideration while preparing this submission to the NWMB. The KHTO has not received any objections to their proposal to increase the TAH and remove the NQL to date.

## **Recommendations:**

- The Kugluktuk Angoniatit Association (KHTO) recommends that the total allowable harvest (TAH) for the Bluenose-East caribou herd for Nunavut (Kugluktuk) be increased to 450 caribou.
- The KHTO further recommends that the up to 1:1 female-to-male harvest sex ratio non-quota limitation (NQL) be removed.

## **Rationale:**

The TAH of 170 caribou was imposed to promote herd recovery. This level of harvest restriction has resulted in severe hardships for Kugluktuk Inuit. Observations of KHTO members, supported by population estimates and other survey-derived indicators, very strongly suggest that the Bluenose-East caribou herd is recovering. The conservation goal of the TAH of 170 has therefore effectively been met. As the TAH of 170 caribou is no longer necessary to give effect to the desired conservation purpose, it now restricts Inuit harvesting beyond the extent necessary. Moreover, in its 2020 decision, when the herd was thought to be at a lowest point in abundance, the NWMB determined that there was no evidence suggesting that "a low level of harvest (below 950 caribou per year) will have a significant impact on the herd's potential for recovery" (p. 5). Increasing the TAH for Bluenose-East caribou will also lead to an easing of the pressure on Dolphin-Union caribou, which are a concern.

The up to 1:1 female-to-male ratio NQL was likewise instated to promote herd recovery, given the importance of cows to the reproductive success of the herd. The caribou harvest of Kugluktuk Inuit has historically been towards bulls; although female caribou are preferentially harvested for specific purposes and at certain times of the year, male caribou have always accounted for the large majority of the community's overall harvest. This had been the case in pre-TAH years, during the initial TAH without NQL and since the introduction of the NQL. Taking the KHTO-encouraged Inuit self-regulation of the Bluenose-East caribou harvest into account, the imposition of a formal sex ratio limitation is unwarranted. In that sense, the NQL is an undue restriction of the harvesting of Kugluktuk Inuit.

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