

SUBMISSION TO THE
NUNAVUT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT BOARD (NWMB)

Regular Meeting No. RM 003-2025

FOR

Information:

Decision:

Issue: *Proposed 2025-2026 Revision of the Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) and Non-Quota Limitation for Harvesting of Baffin Island Caribou (BIC) from 2025 to 2032*

Background:

In 2022, the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board (QWB) recommended an Inuit system of caribou harvest management on Baffin Island to start on July 1, 2022, in accordance with sub-section 5.1.2(e) of the Nunavut Agreement. This harvest management system was based on past practices of Inuit harvest management and Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) regarding natural long-term changes of caribou populations on Baffin Island (Ferguson et al 1998, and Inuit Elders). The QWB proposed that its caribou management system should continue for 10 years until 2032, with the aim to remove or modify any Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) and any Non-Quota Limitation (NQL) after a review with co-management partners.

In 2022, the NWMB approved an increase of 100 Baffin Island caribou in the Total Allowable Harvest (TAH), to be followed by an annual increase of 50 caribou from 2023 to 2032. In 2022, the QWB had also proposed a gradual increase in the maximum harvest of females to reach about 50% of the total annual harvest by 2032. In a closed NWMB session, the NWMB decided to set the maximum harvest of females at 20% of the total harvest throughout the period from 2022 to 2032. These decisions were finalized by their acceptance by the responsible Minister.

In 2022, the QWB proposed to reassess the schedule of increases in the TAH after five years; however, many HTOs and Inuit in the communities are expressing concerns about the speed at which the caribou population is increasing in many parts of Baffin Island. The consensus among Inuit appears to be that the TAH is too low and the NQL is not needed and unnatural, leading some Inuit to advocate for elimination of both the TAH and NQL already, some seven years before 2032.

The QWB is very concerned that these observations by Inuit make it reasonable to conclude that the current limits on caribou harvesting may jeopardize the key objectives of the QWB's 2022 proposal, which were based on the principles of conservation in section 5.1.5 of the Nunavut Agreement. The QWB reasserts its objectives for the conservation of Baffin Island caribou through Inuit systems of caribou management and Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit, as stated below:

- Maintain the natural balance of the lichen-caribou-Inuit ecological system that has existed since time immemorial

- Protect caribou winter habitats, and enable the regrowth of ample lichen needed for future caribou populations,
- Maintain a vital, healthy caribou population across Baffin Island capable of sustaining Inuit harvesting into future decades
- Restore and revitalize a depleted population of caribou and their habitat over the long term.

Assertion of Primacy of Inuit Systems of Wildlife Management in Decisions in Nunavut

In December 2020, the Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board (QWB) adopted the position to assert that the Nunavut Agreement, a constitutionally protected treaty between the Inuit of Nunavut and the Crown of Canada, provides primacy to Inuit Systems of Wildlife Management with respect to decision-making processes and outcomes regarding wildlife and wildlife harvesting by Inuit. This primacy extends to Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) because IQ is the basis for Inuit Systems of Wildlife Management. In this context, “primacy” refers to what comes first and remains most important. Inuit Systems of Wildlife Management are specifically recognized in sub-section 5.1.2(e) of the Nunavut Agreement. Other sections of Article 5 of the Nunavut Agreement point out the special rights and effective roles that Inuit have in wildlife management and harvesting in Nunavut. Science and scientific wildlife management are not mentioned in Article 5 of the Nunavut Agreement. The QWB asserts that any wildlife management plan, recommendation, decision or other measure established or implemented regarding caribou or other wildlife in Qikiqtaaluk Region needs to give primacy to Inuit rights, Inuit Systems of Wildlife Management, and Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit. This view is supported by both the Nunavut Agreement and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Inuit System of Long-term Management of Caribou on Baffin Island

Since time immemorial, Inuit on Qikiqtaaluk (i.e., Baffin Island and nearby islands) have known about and managed the long-term population caribou cycles that occur over the lifetime of an elder, or about 70-90 years. Children are taught by elders that if there are many caribou in their young years, there will be very few caribou when they have children of their own to feed, but if they live to become elders, there will be many caribou again. Inuit know and recognize many more specific signs of shorter-term changes that predict how the caribou population will change in local areas and across the island in the near future throughout the 70-90-year cycles.

During each phase of the long-term cycle, Inuit have harvest management strategies that are stated very simply, but include a huge amount of knowledge and deep understanding of the factors and processes that cause, regulate and affect each phase. For example:

“Snow is no problem unless there have been too many caribou for too long.”

This statement reflects Inuit understanding that the amount of lichen food for caribou in winter is a major factor in the growth and decline phases of caribou populations on Qikiqtaaluk, and that over time, caribou can deplete their lichen food resources when there has been “too many caribou for too long”. Lichens have no roots and grow very slowly. If caribou find ample lichen after digging through snow, they can maintain their strength and dig through deep, hard snow. If they do not find ample lichen, they become weaker, cannot get enough food, move to other areas, feed in riskier areas like cliff faces, become more susceptible to wolf predation, and

produce fewer calves that may not survive, resulting in gradual but dramatic declines in abundance and distribution over about 15 years in one phase of the cycle. According to IQ, one such period of rapid decline occurred from about 1930 to 1945.

Once there have been “too many caribou for too long” and while lichen food resources have not yet recovered, males can become important for the entire population because, with their heavier and stronger bodies, they may break through hard surface snow and sometimes ice when digging craters for feeding. Thereby, males can enable females and calves to expand the craters that they started, so females and calves can also access more food during winter.

The decline phases of the long-term cycles are all very normal and predictable for Qikiqtaaluk caribou. In the late 1990s and early 2000s after decades of too-many caribou, Inuit across Qikiqtaaluk started to see signs of impending decline, and predicted the next great decline phase of the long-term cycle, which actually occurred from about 2000 to 2015, as predicted by knowledgeable Inuit, who did not need complicated mathematical or scientific models.

The QWB and southern Qikiqtaaluk HTOs called for an IQ-based management plan for the decline phase expected by Inuit during 2005 – 2020. Based on Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and elders’ predictions, the plan was developed but not implemented by government. The QWB also called for development of a similar IQ-based plan for northern Qikiqtaaluk, but this again was not undertaken.

Based on Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and Inuit observations of caribou in many areas, the long-term cycle has now entered a new critical phase that requires a flexible Inuit system of harvest management that is distinct from that advocated by the Government of Nunavut at least until 2022. The depleted lichen food that caribou need during winter has not yet had time to replenish itself. Caribou have the potential to increase in abundance faster than depleted lichen can grow.

Until 2022, the GN managed the caribou for immediate maximum population increases. By limiting harvesting to mainly males, the caribou may increase in some years, but they will potentially eat as much lichen food as grows each year, but the lichen is already depleted. Such a harvest strategy could keep the caribou’s food in an over-eaten, depleted condition for many years, perhaps perpetually depleted so that the abundant Qikiqtaaluk caribou population of the 1970s – 2000s may never return.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Inuit intentionally managed caribou using a very different strategy, one that applies again today! Even though there were few caribou in the 1950s, Inuit elders knew that:

“We had to keep harvesting the caribou. The land needed to rest.”

In the 1950s and 1960s, important Inuit elders knew that there had been “*too many caribou for too long*” in previous decades, and caribou abundance declined, just as Inuit had predicted in the 1930s and 1940s because they did not have enough lichen to eat. Inuit knew that “*the land had to rest*” with a low abundance of caribou maintained through harvesting by Inuit for two or three decades in the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Inuit understand how large Baffin Island is and realize that it is very difficult cause extensive caribou depletion across the island. Continued harvesting of caribou by Inuit during the late 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s allowed the slow-

growing winter food of caribou, lichen, to recover in large amounts over large areas again, so it could support great abundances of caribou seen in subsequent decades.

The great abundance of caribou on Qikiqtaaluk from about 1970 to the early 2000s was not an unexplainable accident. It occurred because of the Inuit System of Caribou Management and intentional harvesting by Inuit near local communities, camps and elsewhere during previous decades.

This proven and ancestral Inuit System of Caribou Management on Baffin Island, based on Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit, must be enabled, implemented and adjusted as needed and as advised by Inuit using their own IQ over the next 10-20 years, so that the critical food of caribou, lichen, may recover in sufficient quantities to support the next great abundance of Qikiqtaaluk caribou, consistent with all of the principles of conservation in the Nunavut Agreement and the QWB's objectives for the conservation of Baffin Island caribou.

Consultation:

After consultations with the HTOs, in 2018, 2019 and 2020 the QWB proposed modest increases in the 2015 Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) for Baffin Island caribou. The NWMB did not approve any of these requests, although a minor adjustment in the harvest of females was allowed in 2020.

The 2021 Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the QWB discussed the IQ and the Inuit systems of Baffin Island caribou management, with advice and input from staff of NTI. During subsequent AGMs of the QWB and at other meetings, most HTO delegates have repeatedly recommended larger annual increases in the TAH, and increases the NQL to allow for more females to be harvested.

The QWB has passed interim regional caribou harvesting by-laws so that community allocations may be adjusted from year to year so that communities that harvest in excess of their allocations do not put other communities at a disadvantage.

“The land needs to rest.”

Recommendation:

The QWB Executive recommends that the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB) approves and implements the following revisions to the Inuit system of caribou harvest management on Baffin Island starting on January 1, 2026, or sooner:

6. a) An increase of the Total Allowable Harvest (TAH) for Baffin Island caribou of 50 on January 1, 2026 or before, for a total of 550 caribou for the harvest year from July 1, 2025 to June 30, 2026; and
- c) Then subsequent annual increases of the TAH for Baffin Island caribou of 100 in each of the next six (6) years to reach a total of 1,150 on July 1, 2031.

7. Adjust the Non-Quota Limitation (NQL) so that the maximum harvest of females will be 40% females of the annual TAH (e.g., up to 220 females in 2025-2026, up to 460 females in 2031-2032);
8. Until at least June 30, 2032, the Basic Needs Level for Inuit will equal the entire annual TAH.
9. The QWB may reassess changes in the TAH and NQL based on input received from HTOs and any other available and relevant information. If a change in subsequent TAHs and NQLs appear warranted, the QWB will make a proposal to the NWMB for any recommended changes. Input from other co-management partners will be solicited through NWMB consultations and other processes
10. The QWB Executive Committee will be responsible for HTO allocations in accordance with its interim regional Baffin Island caribou harvesting by-laws.
6. During 2031-2032, the QWB will assess whether or not the TAH and NQL may be eliminated on July 1, 2032, or if the TAH and NQL should be continued or modified in future, based on all available information. The GN will be consulted during this assessment process. The QWB will make a proposal to the NWMB for any recommended changes.

Literature Cited:

Ferguson et al. 1998. Inuit Knowledge of Long-term Changes in a Population of Arctic Tundra Caribou. *Arctic* 51: 201–219.

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