



# SOUTHAMPTON ISLAND BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU

## What *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* and community observations reveal about caribou

Tuktu (caribou in Inuktitut) are central to Inuit culture, identity, and wellbeing. Across Inuit Nunangat, they are sustainably harvested for food, clothing, and income. In Nunavut, caribou are co-managed by the Government of Nunavut, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB) and other partners using the best available knowledge, recognizing both *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ: Inuit knowledge, values, and perspectives) and Western science.

### The Southampton Island Caribou Knowledge Project

Inuit on Southampton Island have long-held knowledge about caribou and their importance for culture, food, and community wellbeing. This project is led by the Government of Nunavut's Department of Environment Wildlife Research Division. It seeks to respectfully gather, document, and mobilize IQ as reflected in harvester, Elder, and community observations about changes in caribou abundance, condition, movement, and management over time. By mobilizing IQ into co-management processes, the project aims to ensure that Inuit voices and perspectives guide decisions through the NWMB. This knowledge will support stronger stewardship of the Southampton Island herd, inform discussions on the Total Allowable Harvest (TAH), and recognize both Inuit and scientific knowledge systems in decision-making.

"Rain during the winter... puts a layer of ice on the snow, and that makes it very difficult for the caribou to dig for the food to eat. That's when you'll start seeing some die-offs here and there."

- Samuel Emiktowt, Aiviit HTO Director

"I'm very happy that hunters are respecting the HTO even though hunters have power in the NLCA Nunavut land agreement, and they still managed to listen to the HTO."

- Moses Nakoolak, Aiviit HTO Director

"A couple years ago, we had to really look for them, but now they're almost everywhere—right around town. Seems to have doubled in a couple of years."

- Eepah Netser, Caribou Harvester in Coral Harbour

"Caribou is our main dish. We constantly need to eat it. It's still our source of healthy food"

- Resident of Coral Harbour

"If we say, 'don't come hunt on this island,' it could backfire on our culture and the caribou abundance... it's our animal collectively, and sharing food is a key part of Inuit heritage."

- Lucassie Nakoolak, Coral Harbour Elder

### Interviews with Knowledge Holders

We spoke with harvesters, Elders, members of the Aiviit Hunters and Trappers Organization (HTO), and other key knowledge holders to gather IQ about Southampton Island caribou. These interviews shared ecological and cultural observations spanning many decades, covering the community of Coral Harbour, all of Southampton Island, and neighbouring Coats and White Islands.

"The numbers are going up, not drastically, but they're going up... they're steadily climbing I find. The numbers are rising."

- Samuel Emiktowt, Aiviit HTO Director

"I believe it's a work in progress. Like, it feels too low [Total Allowable Harvest], but at the same time it's helping to keep the caribou numbers growing. Over time, we're open to see an increase in the harvest—and also an increase in the herd."

- Samuel Emiktowt, Aiviit HTO Director

"They seem to run away faster. There's wolves and wolverines on the island now, and [caribou] seem to be more alert. They're running from predators. Sometimes we don't even see them and they're already running."

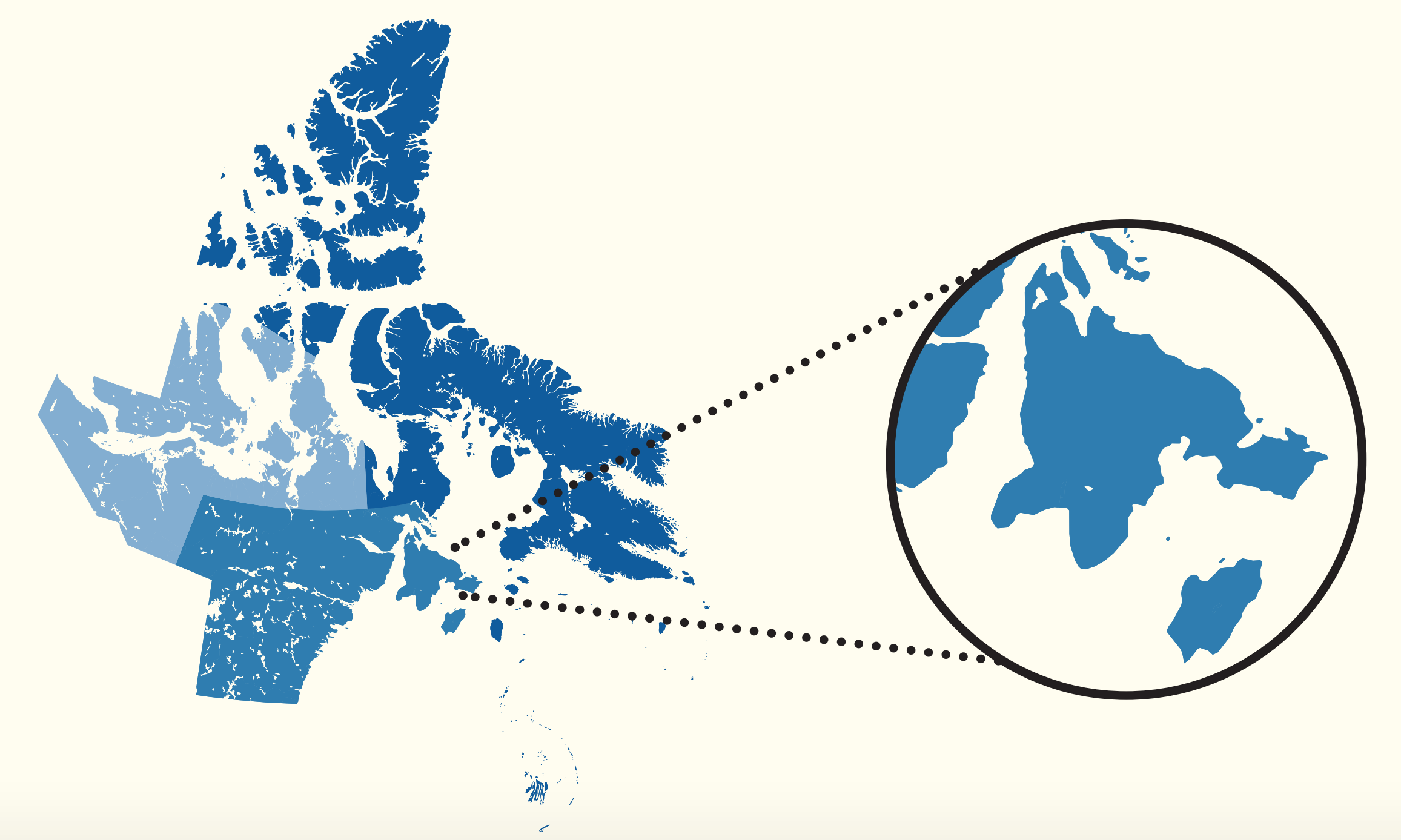
- Eepah Netser, Caribou Harvester in Coral Harbour

"Community hunters are always aware of where the caribou are. This winter, those caught were healthy and fat, showing they're eating well. Sharing this knowledge helps the community recognize when caribou are healthy or low in abundance. You carry the information from what you see."

- Lucassie Nakoolak, Coral Harbour Elder

“One thing I do know, it's very good to have caribou. I've been here when you're not allowed to get caribou.”

- Samuel Emiktowt, Aiviit HTO Director



### Inuit Culture / Health - Relationships to Caribou



• Tuktu (caribou) are a main source of food and clothing, essential for Inuit health and wellbeing.



• Sharing caribou meat across communities reflects IQ and cultural values of care and reciprocity.



• Elders emphasized that caribou connect past and present, carrying deep cultural meaning, identity, and survival.

• Healthy caribou mean healthy people — supporting food security in Coral Harbour.

### Ecology - Caribou Abundance and Health

#### Sub-population/Herd trend

• **Caribou are coming back/on the come back:** Since the 2010s brucellosis outbreak, harvesters report caribou steadily increasing, with more animals seen near town in recent years.



#### Body condition/health

• **Healthy Herd:** Caribou are recovering from past diseases like brucellosis, with sick animals rarely seen, and are generally in good body condition, fat through fall and winter.

• **Calves Thriving:** High calf numbers and strong survival are supported by responsible harvesting practices.

#### Other observations



• **Emerging Concern: Wolves & Wolverines** Increasing predators may be making caribou more skittish and shifting their distribution.



• **Emerging Concern: Winter Ice & Rain** Freezing rain and ice layers in winter can block access to food, sometimes causing die-offs, especially for calves.



• **Finding the Right Balance:** The island's ecosystem is relatively small and closed, meaning caribou numbers must stay balanced to prevent overpopulation, food shortages, or disease.

### Management and Stewardship

#### Traditional Inuit Stewardship & IQ

• IQ includes stories, artifacts, and memories linking generations to the original Southampton Island caribou and occasional arrivals via ice bridges, including Peary caribou in the 1980s.

• Inuit emphasize sharing caribou across communities reflects cultural values and IQ, supporting food security and stewardship.

• Participants support reviving organized sharing programs while respecting sustainable harvest limits

#### Inuit perspectives on management

• Most participants support careful monitoring of caribou numbers, balancing sustainable harvest with herd recovery.

• Some suggest increasing household tags from four to six, reflecting rising caribou abundance.

• Stronger community-based enforcement and monitoring, including by HTO patrols for off-island hunters, was recommended to support compliance and herd health.

For more information contact:  
Andrew Kadykalo

Please see QR code for a copy of the Southampton Island Barren-Ground Caribou Report

