

# **Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit of Caribou Habitat**

## **Workshop Report**

Baker Lake Hunters and Trappers Organization

September 12, 2015

Written by Warren Bernauer

The Baker Lake HTO held a workshop on September 12 to discuss protection for caribou habitat. Fourteen hunters and Elders were present. The workshop was facilitated by Warren Bernauer, a consultant with the Kivalliq Wildlife Board. The workshop was also attended by David Pelly, a consultant with the World Wildlife Fund Canada, who has carried out similar traditional knowledge studies in Baker Lake in the past. Brandon Laforest, an employee of the World Wildlife Fund Canada, was also present for the workshop. Brandon and David assisted in recording and mapping information the Hunters and Elders provided. Two interpreters were hired to facilitate the participation of unilingual Elders.

In the workshop, hunters and Elders shared their knowledge of calving grounds and water crossings. They were clear that “this knowledge from our ancestors must be passed on” and must be respected. The hunters and Elders also shared their perspectives on caribou conservation and the creation of protected areas for caribou habitat.

### **Calving Grounds**

Hunters and Elders shared the following knowledge of caribou calving.

- Calving grounds are sacred areas for caribou and Inuit.
- Caribou are very sensitive to disturbance when they give birth and immediately afterwards.
- Inuit traditionally did not live or camp in calving areas.
- Traditionally, Inuit were very selective about which caribou they would hunt. For example, they did not hunt female caribou during calving or immediately after calving. However, exceptions would sometimes be made if there was threat of starvation or famine.
- There are multiple stressors on caribou (human hunting, wolf predation, etc.). Mining in calving grounds would result in too much stress.
- Even if exploration is stopped seasonally, the disturbance to land will impact calving.
- Caribou give birth in the same general areas year after year. However, within this general area there is occasional variation. Just like farmers leave fields to lie fallow to regenerate nutrients, caribou leave parts of the calving grounds to lie fallow to regenerate their food supply.
- There was consensus that exploration and mining activity should be banned altogether in the entire area used traditionally for calving.

## Water Crossings

Hunters and Elders identified important water crossings along the Thelon and Kazan rivers, near Pitz Lake, Whitehills Lake, Ferguson Lake, and the eastern end of Baker Lake. Hunters and Elders shared the following information about water crossings.

- Before moving to the community, water crossings were very important hunting areas for Inuit that lived on the Kazan River, Thelon River, Pelly/Garry Lakes, and Baker Lake.
- In the lower Back River area, water crossings were less central to Inuit hunting practices. Inuit who lived here had much larger hunting areas.
- Inuit would hunt caribou when they crossed the rivers and lakes with qajaqs and spears. Inuit would also hunt caribou from land at water crossings, after they emerged from the water.
- Hunting caribou when they emerge from water crossings is still a very important hunting practice for Baker Lake Inuit today. Some people still hunt caribou from boats.
- Caribou are very sensitive to disturbance before they cross the water. If caribou see past activity and disturbance to the land, they will not cross and change their routes. Caribou do not cross immediately when they reach water crossings – they gather and linger at the crossing first. It seems like they observe and assess, to make sure there are no threats nearby. If they are disturbed, they will not cross.
- There are many traditional rules for how Inuit should treat water crossings, including:
  - Do not walk, hunt, skin animals, cache meat or camp on the side of the river where caribou enter the water. Even footprints will disturb caribou.
  - Camp upstream from water crossings; camps should not be visible from the crossing
  - Clean up all animal remains near a crossing. Even blood on the ground should be buried.
  - Dogs and people should be silent at water crossings
  - Do not hunt the first group of caribou that cross the water. The rest of the herd follows this leading group, and if the leaders are hunted, the others may not follow across the water at the crossing.
  - Do not hunt the first caribou in the group (the leaders of the group). This will disorient the other caribou who follow. The leaders should be allowed to pass, and the followers can be hunted.
- One hunter reported having taken his son and nephew, both in their early 20s, out to a caribou crossing near Kazan Falls earlier this fall. This hunters' father had taught him the proper methods for hunting and camping in the area. He passed this knowledge on to his nephew and son on this trip.
- There are many archaeological sites near water crossings.
- Elders have always taught not to disturb these sites (graves, tent rings, etc.)

- Hunters and Elders agreed that water crossings should not be disturbed. They agreed that there should be no disturbance to water crossing areas what-so-ever, because:
  - “As hunters who live in Baker Lake, we want to make sure these caribou routes are not changed by disturbance and that means the water crossings must be protected at all times.”
  - If water crossings are disturbed, caribou may change their migration route and cross through another area. This could add twenty miles or more to a hunters’ journey, and limit the community’s food supply.
  - Baker Lake Inuit have been trying to protect these areas since the early 1970s through petitions, land freeze proposals, management plans, and historic sites.

### **Inuit Perspectives on Conservation and Protected Areas**

Hunters and Elders also shared their perspectives on the creation of protected areas and the conservation of caribou herds.

- Hunters and Elders suggested buffer zone should be placed around calving grounds and water crossings, where exploration and mining activity should be banned. They suggested that this buffer zone should be (at minimum) the distance between the community of Baker Lake and *I’ninit Nuvua* point (roughly 25 kilometers).
- Baker Lake Inuit do not have sea mammals to hunt. Caribou are their primary source of country food. Even beyond the food, there is no replacement for the value of caribou to Baker Lake Inuit culture.
- Baker Lake Inuit do not want to have a hunting ban or quota system like there is on Baffin Island, and therefore want strong protection for important habitat.
- Caribou are already changing migration routes and use of water crossings, because of the impacts of the Meadowbank mine and all weather road, exploration drilling, airplanes, and helicopters.
- Some youth are not being taught the rules for hunting that were shared at the workshop. Hunters and Elders would like to find ways to better transfer this knowledge and respect for caribou.
- “The Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary, we respect it and do not hunt there. Mining companies should respect calving grounds and not mine there.”
- If the Government can ban caribou hunting on Baffin Island, why can’t Baker Lake Inuit ban mining on calving grounds?
- The calving grounds and water crossings are like *Atgaktalik* [a sacred rock on the Thelon River that Inuit were taught to respect by leaving the area completely undisturbed].