

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the plan to cull up to 1,000 wolves in British Columbia, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

Politicians using wildlife as a scapegoat, instead of tackling the real problems at the heart of so many conservation issues, exasperates me. The latest hypocrisy is the notorious wolf cull in British Columbia (BC), Canada. A recently leaked document reveals that BC's provincial government plans to kill up to 1,000 wolves by 2020. It claims that it's essential to save the endangered southern mountain caribou. But it's all poppycock.

The government's own data shows that habitat loss is the greatest threat to caribou. Not wolves. And it ignores its own abject failure to protect and restore the old-growth forest required by mountain caribou to survive. Indeed, for decades, it has actively encouraged the destruction of this critical habitat by industrial logging, oil and gas exploration, mining and recreational snowmobiling. This is what has pushed the caribou herds to the brink of extinction. Yet in the past two years alone, it has approved hundreds of new clear-cut logging blocks within critical caribou habitat.

Wolves are merely a scapegoat, to make it look as if the politicians are 'doing something' without having to rein in BC's voracious logging, oil and mining industries. There is absolutely no scientific justification for killing wolves. BC's provincial government has been killing and sterilising them for more than a decade – with no measurable benefits – and a 10-year culling programme in neighbouring Alberta had absolutely no effect on caribou survival.

To make matters worse, the wolves are being killed inhumanely,

chased and shot from helicopters or caught with neck snares, which should have been outlawed decades ago. But the government doesn't care. British Columbia is one of only two Canadian provinces that has not adopted the Canadian Council on Animal Care standards that guides the welfare and humane treatment of wild and domestic animals.

The whole saga is over a storm in a teacup anyway. The irony is that caribou are not endangered: there are nearly three million of them around the world. They are divided into umpteen different sub-species (there is no agreement on the exact number) and one of these is the woodland caribou which, in turn, is divided into five ecotypes.

One of these ecotypes is the southern mountain caribou, which is adapted to the wet, mountainous forests of British Columbia and

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western Alberta. Due to habitat loss, numbers have been steadily declining and there are now just 3,800 left. No one wants them to disappear, of course, but the southern mountain caribou is only an ecotype within a sub-species.

British Columbia's provincial government needs to be honest about the real issue at stake – habitat protection – and have the guts to confront the industries that are directly to blame. It also needs to come clean about its ulterior motives for targeting wolves – it is kowtowing to a powerful hunting lobby that claims they are a threat to game species such as moose, elk and deer.

There are only about 8,500 wolves in British Columbia and, under the provincial Wolf Management Plan, huge numbers are already being killed for sport without a special licence. It's less a management plan, more a predator control and exploitation plan. But far from slaughtering wolves, the BC government should be setting aside protected areas for them to fulfil their role as apex predators in healthy, functional ecosystems.

The sad fact is that, against logging, mining, hunting and many other powerful lobbies, conservation is always at the bottom of the pile. As US Senator Bernie Sanders put it so succinctly on 30 August 2019: “If the environment were a bank, it would have been saved already.” 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE describes himself as a frustrated and frank conservationist.

 **WHAT DO YOU THINK?** If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



British Columbia intends to expand its wolf cull programme.