CHAPTER SEVEN

Gender and the Social Dimensions of Changing Caribou Populations in the Western Arctic

Brenda Parlee and Kristine Wray

Just before dinnertime in a small Arctic village, a group of men riding snowmobiles returns after a long day of hunting miles away. They had gone in search of caribou to feed their families. Their arrival is cause for jubilation, for the hunt has been successful. Attached to the snowmobiles are sleds now laden with meat, which is carried into the houses of those in the party and spread out on kitchen floors. We sit by the wood stove in one of the houses, listening to the stories of the women, who are excitedly anticipating several days of drying the meat together by the fire. They will laugh and tell stories about previous hunting expeditions, on which they sometimes joined their husbands, brothers, fathers, and grandfathers.

The chapter is a synthesis of insights garnered from more than five years of research among the Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú communities of the Northwest Territories on the social dimensions of caribou population change. The caribou in question are barren ground caribou, specifically, those of the Porcupine, Cape Bathurst, Bluenose West, and Bluenose East herds that migrate across portions of Canada’s western Arctic region (see map 7.1). Since at least the early 1990s, these herds have, on the whole, been declining in numbers—part of a pattern of population change evident
in many parts of the circumpolar Arctic. This decrease in numbers is to some degree natural: as biologists have established, populations of barren ground caribou undergo cyclic variations, peaking every forty to seventy years. Concerns have been raised, however, about how far the current decline in population numbers—which has been quite dramatic in the case of some herds—is the result of global warming and other anthropogenic changes to the environment (see, for example, Vors and Boyce 2009).

For the Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú communities of the Northwest Territories, periodic reductions in caribou numbers are nothing surprising. Oral histories tell of the comings and goings of caribou, movements that are as much about changes in population as they are about seasonal migrations. In the past, however, outside observers attributed declines in caribou numbers to alleged overhunting—“wanton slaughter”—on the part of Aboriginal peoples (for discussion, see Campbell 2004; Usher 2004). Even though conclusive evidence of such wholesale destruction was always lacking, federal government campaigns against hunting were set in motion over the years, and the consequent reduction of caribou in the diet of Aboriginal peoples had significant implications for their health. Particularly since land claims were settled in the 1980s and 1990s, inaugurating an era of co-management, outright bans on hunting have given way to less draconian approaches, such as quota systems. All the same, the tendency to disregard the socioeconomic and cultural implications of hunting regulations remains.

As is well documented, Indigenous peoples have their own ways of coping with scarcity. Despite the history of government intervention in caribou management, contemporary Arctic communities retain many of their customary mechanisms for adjusting to variations in the food supply. In addition to traditional knowledge and skills, these approaches turn on flexibility, both social and tactical, and an underlying ethic of mutual support. Nuttall et al. (2005, 669) describe five cultural practices that enable Indigenous peoples to cope with changes in the variability of resources:

- Mobility of hunting groups; seasonal settlements; group size flexibility with grouping and regrouping of self-supporting economic units
- Flexibility of seasonal cycles of harvest and resource use, backed up by oral traditions to provide group memory
- Detailed local environmental knowledge (traditional knowledge) and related skill sets for harvesting, navigating, and food processing
• Sharing mechanisms and social networks for mutual support and risk minimization; high social value attached to sharing and generosity

• Inter-community trade along networks and trading partnerships, to deal with regional differences in resource availability

Map 7.1  Approximate ranges of the Cape Bathurst, Bluenose West, Bluenose East, and Porcupine caribou herds. Source: Map drawn by Kelsey Jansen, 2013, adapted from Northwest Territories, Environment and Natural Resources 2011, 6 (figure 1).
A host of other factors influences how, when, and where hunting takes place, or whether it takes place at all. These factors include caribou population levels at a given time, whether hunting is generally carried out communally or by individual households, the structure of these households (the number of unmarried males, for example), and the degree of participation in the wage economy (Nuttall et al. 2005; Berman and Kofinas 2004; Kruse et al. 2004).

As is now widely recognized, much of the information we have about the cultural practices surrounding hunting derives from a male-dominated research model, in which the focus falls on the hunt itself, with less attention paid to other aspects of community life. “Man the hunter” has been the archetype created and reproduced in much of the historical ethnography about human-animal relations in the circumpolar world, and its effects persist in contemporary contexts as well. As Karla Jessen Williamson points out, “Most literature on peoples of the Arctic was written by males whose writings have yet to be analyzed through non-patriarchal and non-colonial frames of perception. The strong male bias about the Arctic has led into a situation where relatively little is known about Arctic women’s roles” (Williamson et al. 2004, 188). By entrenching a disregard of women as agents in household and community decision making and as active participants in subsistence economies, the reproduction of this bias in management policy has narrowed our understanding of the place of caribou in the lives and livelihoods of peoples in the Canadian North.

This neglect of women is to some extent the legacy of a male-dominated anthropological tradition that privileged Indigenous men, whether because they were assumed to be the authorities or because male anthropologists found men more easily approachable (Parlee 2013). Gender bias may also be symptomatic of a larger problem in the study of traditional knowledge systems. As others have noted, the persistent tendency is to fragment and decontextualize traditional knowledge, abstracting it from its original source and place, typically to serve the agenda of the state (Ellis 2005; Nadasdy 2003). The implication is that we discount, rather than embrace, the complexity and diversity of the relationships that exist in northerly communities between human beings and the environment. By listening to the voices of women, we aim to arrive at a richer understanding of the social dimensions of caribou population change in the western Arctic. More specifically, we examine questions of agency. What role do women play in the comings and goings of caribou? In consequence of their knowledge and responsibilities,
what perspectives do they bring to bear on issues of caribou scarcity? And what part do women play in both household and regional responses to caribou population change?

**Background Literature and Ethnography**

The chapter draws on research conducted among the Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú peoples who inhabit the western portion of the Northwest Territories (see map 7.2). The Inuvialuit, an Inuit people, are the most northerly of the three. The Inuvialuit Settlement Region was created in 1984, as part of the settlement of the first in a series of comprehensive land claims in the Canadian Arctic (Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1984). From the border of the Yukon with Alaska, the region extends east along the coast of the Beaufort Sea and the Amundsen Gulf and, to the north, includes Banks Island and the western section of Victoria Island, encompassing a total area of roughly 435,000 square kilometres. The Gwich’in are a Dene (or Athabaskan) people who live along the southern slopes of the Brooks Range in northern Alaska, in the northern Yukon, and in the Mackenzie Delta region of the Northwest Territories. According to oral tradition, the Gwich’in have occupied this area since time immemorial or, by more conventional estimates, for as much as twenty thousand years.¹ Today, the Gwich’in living in Canada occupy an area defined in the 1992 Gwich’in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1992). The Gwich’in Settlement Region comprises traditional lands in both the Northwest Territories and the Yukon covering an area of nearly 24,000 square kilometres. South of the Gwich’in Settlement Area is the Sahtú Settlement Area, which was defined the following year in another comprehensive land claim settlement (Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1993) and spans an area of approximately 41,440 square kilometres. Like the Gwich’in, the Sahtú (or North Slavey) are Dene peoples, who live in the vicinity of Sahtú, or Great Bear Lake. The Sahtú Dene Council represents four First Nations: the Behdzi Ahda’ First Nation (based at Colville Lake), the Délı̨ı̨ne First Nation (based at Deline), the K’asho Got’ine First Nation (based at Fort Good Hope), and the Begade Shotagotine First Nation (based at Tulit’a).

Although their regions are ecologically diverse, stretching from the Arctic tundra to the boreal forest, the Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú communities have all traditionally depended for their livelihood upon barren ground caribou, known as *tuktu* in Inuvialuktun, *ekwe* in Sahtú, and *vadzaih* in Teetl’it Gwich’in. Throughout these regions, rich oral histories establish relationships between human beings and caribou and imbue the surrounding biophysical landscapes with meaning.

Ethnographic studies and documented oral histories about women in Inuvialuit, Gwich’in and Sahtú societies are relatively limited, although what little there is suggests a general position of powerlessness. For example, Diamond Jenness ([1932] 1972, 403) said of Gwich’in women that they “received no gentle treatment; they performed nearly all the hard work in camp, transported all the family possessions, ate only after the men had eaten, and had no voice in family or tribal affairs.” Such views, while commonplace at the time, have not been borne out by academic research, nor do Aboriginal
women themselves hold such views. In Dene oral traditions and histories recorded elsewhere, women are identified as leaders and guides, with natural as well as supernatural powers of endurance and healing. For example, respect is given to women who have endured physical hardship, such as those who have managed to care for others despite having been left on their own. The late Judith Catholique, of the Łutsël K’é Dene First Nation, talked about “working like a man—we had to learn to hunt for ourselves” (quoted in Parlee et al. 2001). The Łutsël K’é Dene live along the eastern arm of Great Slave Lake, not far from Parry Falls. According to Denéséliné oral tradition, the “old lady of the falls” is said to help care for people by providing them with guidance about the location of the caribou during fall and winter months (Parlee, Manseau, and Łutsël K’é Dene First Nation 2005, 34). Denéséliné women have been celebrated as powerful leaders of their peoples, as is evident in the oral histories surrounding Thanadelththur, the seventeenth-century Chipewyan woman who helped to make peace between her people and the Cree.

Although the roles of women in Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú cultures have been little explored, stories about the comings and goings of caribou are common in many northern Inuit and Dene narratives. In the Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú regions, oral history has contributed to a cautious acceptance that caribou are presently scarce and to a parallel faith in their eventual return. Elders and hunters point to a variety of ecological factors in explanation of the present decline—fire, predation, and extreme weather events, as well as disturbances brought about by resource development (Wray 2011). In numerous traditional narratives, however, women are featured as those principally responsible for the arrival or departure of caribou.

According to these explanatory frameworks, lack of respect for caribou is the central cause of their disappearance, and the restoration of that respect is key to their return. Within this dynamic, women exercise a power that can be positive or negative. If they are careful not to touch or walk over hunting tools and demonstrate respect through the careful preparation of meat and hides, so that nothing is wasted, the caribou are likely to return. Conversely, women who are not careful to use all of the caribou that has given itself to human beings will potentially be blamed by family and community if the caribou subsequently fail to return.

Contemporary ethnographic evidence speaks further to this dimension of women’s power. Rituals associated with puberty are particularly important,
as puberty is a critical point of transition in the development of women’s power: only mature women have access to the knowledge of healing and the right to share that knowledge with other women. Although to some extent men hold a similar medicine power, women are said to possess special powers of their own, which they have to control if hunting activities are to be successful. According to an ethnographic study of Gwichya Gwich’in (Heine et al. 2001, 98), “women accepted the responsibility to exercise this control and to behave in the appropriate manner; this was one of their indirect contributions to the hunters’ work.”

Women and the Survival of Traditional Knowledge

It may be in recognition of this power that many Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú women insist on the importance of passing on their knowledge and skills to future generations. Concern appears to be growing about a generation whose capacity to connect with the land has diminished, at the same time that a push exists in the North for youth to become “strong like two people” by forging combined identities and drawing on two systems of knowledge (Martin 1991). Given that youth have relatively scant experience with living on the land, one must ask how far concepts and practices grounded in traditional knowledge hold meaning for them. Moreover, while what a community recognizes and respects as traditional knowledge varies across communities, the general tendency has been to privilege the voices of elders (mainly men) and thus to discount the knowledge and capacities of other members of the community, namely, women and youth. Young women have arguably suffered most from this bias toward elders, with policy makers as well as researchers decrying their limited understanding of traditional ways of life and their lack of connection to the land.

If it is currently difficult to say what traditional knowledge means for young women in the western Arctic, for older women, such knowledge has much to do with responsibility and care for the family. The preparation of meat and hides is generally regarded as one of a woman’s most important responsibilities, one that serves a dual purpose. Such labour provides for the needs of the family, who require not only food but clothing. At the same time, by making use of the hide—that is, by not wasting any part of the caribou—women offer respect to the caribou, thereby ensuring their continued presence or, as the case may be, their return. Tanning a caribou hide is a
labour-intensive process that must be carried out carefully. The steps in the process are described in the inset box below.

Table 7.1 The process of tanning a caribou hide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tanning a caribou hide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A good time to work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Soaking the skin</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scorching the hair side</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thinning out the hair side</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Draining out the blood</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Twisting the wet hide</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Soaking the hide in warm brain water</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scraping the hide on the hair side</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tanning a caribou hide (cont’d)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scrapping the hide on the inside</th>
<th>The inside of the hide was scraped with a stone scraper until it was more or less dry, and the dried flesh was then removed using a metal scraper. To make the scraping easier, the horizontal pole was lowered so that it was only about 3 feet above the ground.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparing the hide for smoking</td>
<td>The cleaned hide would be then smoked to soften it so that it could be used to make moccasins, pants, and coats. Before smoking, the holes would be sewn up and the edges trimmed off. The hide was hung on a stick 3 to 4 feet off the ground, with a canvas sometimes attached to the bottom to act as a funnel for the smoke.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking hides</td>
<td>The fire used for smoking was made of rotten wood and had to be well tended so that it would not either go out or become too hot and scorch the hide. The smoking fire would be kept for almost a whole day [eight hours]. Once the inside of the hide was smoked, it was taken off and scraped to soften it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Heine et al. 2001, 142.

A strong tradition still exists in many Arctic communities of preparing hides and sewing slippers, mitts, and mukluks. Given the current decline in caribou numbers, however, opportunities to pass on the knowledge of how to tan hides have become increasingly scarce. The predominant concern is that the youth of today will no longer have the skills to work with caribou hides, with the result that caribou will be wasted. Although themes of frustration and loss often dominate discussions of the preservation of traditional knowledge, many communities are working hard to build relationships between elders and youth and to awaken an interest among young people in their cultural heritage, with women actively participating in these efforts.

Adapting to a Decline in Caribou: The Value of Women’s Perspectives

In Arctic communities, as elsewhere in the world, women play a pivotal role in household food production. They are responsible for the nutritional health of immediate and extended family, as well as for providing food at
community functions and feasts. By virtue of this role, they bring a front-line perspective to bear on questions surrounding how best to adapt to changes in the availability of caribou meat. As Yvonne Hanson (2011, 1) notes, “Women’s traditional relationships to food production, purchasing and preparation, and their socialized role in ‘caring’ for family members, aptly position them to comment on the competence of policy in creating and maintaining healthy communities and households.” The perspectives of women arguably stem from three different roles that they assume within the household economy. The first of these is the role of hunter.

Figure 7.1 Dene woman hunting, ca. 1950s. NWT Archives, Henry Busse fonds, N-1979-052, item no. 4888.
Caribou hunting is a mainstay of Arctic household economies in Canada. In the decade from 1988 to 1997, for example, caribou meat harvest in Inuvialuit communities amounted to 110,730 kilograms, or 33.3 percent of the total harvest of traditional foods (Usher 2002, table 2 and 23). In the Gwich’in region, the harvest was 553,910 kilograms over five years, accounting for more than 75 percent of the total traditional food harvest (Gwich’in Renewable Resources Board 2009). A study of adaptive responses to food shortages among the K’asho Got’ine (McMillan 2011) suggests that, in the Sahtú region, caribou account for a similar percentage of the total harvest. Although a coarse measure of value, the annual replacement value of caribou meat is estimated at tens of millions of dollars in the Northwest Territories as a whole and hundreds of thousands of dollars in most of the Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú communities (Northwest Territories, Environment and Natural Resources 2011).

As hunters, men are primary drivers within this traditional economy. Many women in the Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú regions also hunt, however, and have done so for many generations (see figure 7.1). The crucial participation of women in hunting is attested by the comment of a successful Iñupiat hunter: “I’m not the great hunter, my wife is.” He was referring to his wife’s ability to attract animals, as well as to butcher, share meat, and sew clothing, all of which are described by the Iñupiat as hunting skills (Bodenhorn 1990). As hunters, women have a perspective similar to that of men on changes in the availability of caribou.

Women’s active role in the wage economy affords them a second perspective on shifts in caribou populations. The average employment rate for women in the three regions under consideration is 48.9 percent, as opposed to 46.3 percent for men (see table 7.2). If we exclude the towns of Inuvik and Norman Wells, which have relatively large non-Aboriginal populations, the employment differential becomes even greater, with women having an employment rate of 44.1 percent versus 38.7 percent for men. As wage earners, women participate in the market economy, and they are probably more likely than men to be responsible for the purchase of store-bought foods. As a result, they have a clearer sense of the cost of alternatives to traditional foods.

A third perspective comes from the role of women as the primary caregivers within families. As such, women are responsible not only for procuring food but for storing and preparing it, and they also take part in
the sharing of food (such as the caribou with which this chapter opened) with other members of their communities. With the declining availability of caribou, what kind of food choices are women making among traditional foods and store-bought alternatives? A comprehensive answer to this question would require detailed longitudinal research, but it is clear that such choices are influenced by a number of factors, in addition to matters of preference. These factors include both individual and community perceptions of the degree to which the availability of caribou is shifting, as well as various possible interpretations of the change. They also include relative ease of access to other sources of traditional foods, on the one hand, and to food purchased at grocery stores, on the other, as well as considerations of cost (see table 7.3).

Table 7.2 Employment rate for Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú women, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Employment rate female (male)</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Employment rate female (male)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fort Good Hope</td>
<td>47.0 (40.0)</td>
<td>Fort McPherson</td>
<td>34.6 (35.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colville Lake</td>
<td>54.1 (34.8)</td>
<td>Inuvik</td>
<td>67.3 (74.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deline</td>
<td>47.5 (37.7)</td>
<td>Aklavik</td>
<td>41.9 (31.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tulita</td>
<td>43.4 (40.0)</td>
<td>Tuktoyaktuk</td>
<td>44.2 (44.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman Wells</td>
<td>72.8 (85.9)</td>
<td>Paulatuk</td>
<td>43.8 (49.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsiigehtchic</td>
<td>41.2 (35.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Heine et al. 2001, 142.

Investigation of the influence of such factors on harvest behaviour has so far been limited, given that harvest studies have typically focused on counts, that is, on the number of animals “struck and retrieved.” As Peter Usher and George Wenzel (1987, 157) point out, although the specific objectives of such studies have varied, “wildlife management and socioeconomic analysis objectives are not easily reconciled (although it is by no means impossible to do so).” Perhaps for this reason, the socioeconomic factors driving harvest behaviour, including those that pertain especially to women, largely await exploration (see Parlee et al. forthcoming).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Principal consideration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of change in availability of caribou</td>
<td>Depending on the location of their community and hunting area relative to the herd, individuals will read the “comings and goings” of caribou differently. Population surveys by government scientists suggest that groups dependent on the Cape Bathurst herd are experiencing more drastic changes than those in the region of the Bluenose East herd. In addition, communities located on the periphery of the fall and winter range are more likely to observe and experience a loss or decline in the availability of caribou than those who live closer to the calving areas or to areas of overwintering and migration, where caribou activity is greater. Information originating with government or the media can also influence perceptions of caribou availability. Information from such outside sources may compete with or be filtered through local knowledge and will be accepted or not accepted depending on how much trust individuals place in those providing the information and in the methods used to produce it.</td>
<td>Do people perceive a change in the availability of caribou?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of change as a decline in population or a change in location</td>
<td>Interpretations of changes in the availability of caribou will often hinge upon past experiences, including oral histories about the “comings and goings” of caribou. Whereas some tend to assume that a decline in caribou activity must mean that because population numbers have declined, in many communities the prevailing theory is that the caribou move around and disappear for spiritual reasons, as well as in response to physical stresses such as extreme weather events and disturbances produced by development activity.</td>
<td>Why have the caribou moved away?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Principal consideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preferences and access to other traditional foods</td>
<td>Although caribou are a mainstay in the diets of many Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú families, many other traditional foods are also valued and may, in the context of the declining availability of caribou, increase in dietary significance depending on preference and access. Considerations of access include the physical availability of the various foods, the traditional knowledge and skills required to harvest a particular food, and the relative cost and convenience of procuring the food. Access and preference are interrelated: as caribou become less available, other traditional foods may increasingly be preferred.</td>
<td>What other traditional foods are available?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences and access to food from grocery stores</td>
<td>Traditional food is critical to the diets of Arctic peoples; however, food from the store may be preferred over certain traditional foods that, while offering an alternative to caribou, are not commonly consumed in these communities. In this context, considerations of access include the relative physical availability of each kind of food, the traditional knowledge and skills required for procuring traditional foods, and the cost and convenience of harvesting versus purchasing food from the store.</td>
<td>What are the alternatives to traditional foods?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Women in Co-management**

Caribou are managed through regional co-management boards made up of representatives appointed by Aboriginal communities and by the territorial and federal governments. The Porcupine Caribou Management Board, the Inuvialuit Game Council, the Wildlife Management Advisory Council (Northwest Territories and Yukon North Slope), the Gwich’in Renewable Resources Board, and the Council of Yukon First Nations have an overlapping interest in the management of the Porcupine caribou herd. The Porcupine Caribou Management Board is itself a co-management arrangement that brings together groups who dwell within the range of this herd.
The Bluenose East, Bluenose West, and Cape Bathurst herds are jointly managed by the Sahtú Renewable Resources Board, the Gwich’in Renewable Resources Board, the Inuvialuit Game Council, and the Wek’eezhii Renewable Resources Board. Each of these organizations includes representatives from Aboriginal communities; however, very few of these representatives are women. Out of forty-four positions, currently only one is occupied by a woman—a mere 2.27 percent (see table 7.4).

Table 7.4 Representation of Aboriginal women on co-management boards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-management board</th>
<th>Aboriginal women members / Total members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife Management Advisory Council (WMAC), North Slope</td>
<td>0/4 No Aboriginal women are currently members of the council (one Aboriginal woman is named as an alternate).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porcupine Caribou Management Board</td>
<td>0/8 No Aboriginal women are currently members of the board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inuvialuit Game Council</td>
<td>0/8 No Inuvialuit women are currently members of the council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwich’in Renewable Resources Board</td>
<td>0/8 No Gwich’in women are currently members of the board (one Aboriginal woman is named as an alternate).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sahtú Renewable Resources Board</td>
<td>1/8 One Sahtúgotine woman is a member of the board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wek’eezhii Renewable Resources Board</td>
<td>0/8 No Aboriginal women are representatives on the board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1/44 (2.27%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main task of co-management boards in recent years has been harvest management planning in response to reported population declines. Starting in 2007, harvest management plans were created for the Porcupine, Cape Bathurst, and Bluenose herds through a process led by the Porcupine Caribou Management Board and the Bluenose Caribou Management Plan Working Group. In the case of the Porcupine Caribou herd, a voluntary “bulls only” harvest was promoted in 2007 through an education campaign: “Leave the Cows Alone.” In addition, in 2009, the Yukon Government enacted the Porcupine Caribou Subsistence Harvest Regulation (Yukon O.I.C. 2009/159),
which specified legal limits as well as requirements for reporting (see Yukon, Environment Yukon 2009). In the case of the Bluenose West herd, a quota system was put in place in the Northwest Territories in 2009 that allowed a maximum annual harvest of 700, to be divided equally between the Inuvialuit and Sahtú communities. This is thought to represent an 80 percent decrease from the harvest levels calculated through the Inuvialuit and Sahtú harvest studies. In 2010, the Bluenose East harvest limit was set at just over 1,900 animals for the Tłį Chǫ and Sahtú communities, which the Government of the Northwest Territories estimated to be 30 to 40 percent of peak harvest levels. Arriving at consensus on the Harvest Management Plan was a challenge that occupied the better part of the time of staff and board members for some two to three years, and compliance by harvesters on a day-to-day basis is still a significant unknown. Caribou harvesting rights are entrenched in both the Constitution of Canada and in the regional land claim agreements of the Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú regions. Thus, government tracking of local harvests is politically charged and legally complex.

Concerns about overharvesting may, however, be moot. Research suggests current harvest levels are a fraction of historic levels and are declining; in that context, little evidence has been found that harvesting has a significant ecological impact (Usher 2004). The more pressing issue is arguably the sustainability of families and communities. To date, the social and health implications of declining caribou populations have largely been off the conventional caribou management table. Rather, these issues have been left to the kitchen table, around which women gather and converse. The tacit assumption is that decisions about how best to cope with matters affecting diet falls into the domain of personal responsibility and that the government should therefore play no formal role. An overemphasis on personal behaviour as a determinant of health, however, conveniently ignores the fact that socioeconomic and ecological factors often exercise a decisive influence on health. In situations of increased health risk, the assumption that people can and should control their own health “instructs people to be individually responsible at a time when they are becoming less capable as individuals of controlling their health environment,” which in turn promotes victim-blaming (Crawford 1977, 671). In view of the risks to human health, we urgently need to reframe caribou population change as more than a wildlife management issue and the food choices made in the context of decreased availability as more than an issue of personal responsibility. Perhaps this
can be accomplished only by linking the boardroom tables with the kitchen tables in communities in the Canadian North.

Conclusion

Our aim in this chapter has been to discuss the social dimensions of changing barren ground caribou populations in the western Arctic, with an emphasis on the role of women in adapting to these changes. In addition to taking care of their families, Inuvialuit, Gwich’in, and Sahtú women alike have responsibilities for “taking care” of caribou that reflect women's spiritual power and their ability to influence the appearance or disappearance of caribou. These women also wield traditional knowledge and skills, and, whether as hunters or wage earners, play a central role within the household economy. Given their responsibility for providing nourishing meals, they bring a practical perspective to bear on questions surrounding adaptive responses to a scarcity of caribou. And yet they largely lack a voice in co-management decision making, and their role in household economies has been neglected in research and rarely informs policy. The socioeconomic and health dimensions of caribou population change have been similarly overlooked, with the focus falling instead on the principally male domain of hunting.

What is missing, in short, is a conceptualization of the problem of declining caribou numbers that is more integrative of women’s perspectives. Incorporating these perspectives would do more than simply enrich the information base on which policy rests. It would also enhance our awareness and understanding of vitally important issues such as economic hardship, cultural disruption, food insecurity, and risk of diabetes and other chronic illnesses. Such issues must be confronted if we expect to create sustainable communities and environments in the Canadian North.

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