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Accuracy of Caribou Population Estimates

MR. RAMSAY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I am going to talk about caribou. Firstly, I want to state for the record that I respect wholly the aboriginal harvest of this great resource and I would defend that as a fundamental right of our aboriginal people here in the Northwest Territories.

---Applause

Preservation of the herd is vital, Mr. Speaker, to everyone. So is the truth, Mr. Speaker. What I do take issue with is how, as an MLA, I have been treated by the Department of ENR and the poor communication that, in effect, has limited my ability to represent my constituents in my riding. I have two of the three major caribou outfitting businesses in my riding, True North Safaris and Adventure Northwest.

On December 7, the Governance and Economic Development committee sat down with the Minister and his staff to discuss caribou. Their presentation that day was void of any mention of drastic cuts to tag allocation contained in a proposal that was, in effect, in the process of being delivered to the Wekeezhii Renewable Resources Board.

As we all know, the outfitting industry is in a fight for its very existence today. The most interesting theme throughout this fight is the fact that ENR has not, to date, publicly explained nor defended their assertions that the numbers are dropping like they say they are. As a Member of this House and someone who represents aboriginal harvesters, outfitters, and non-aboriginal harvesters, to me getting the numbers straight is paramount to taking any action to remedy the situation.

The question is, why? Why can't ENR defend the numbers when we're talking about the importance of caribou on the livelihood of so many people in our territory? Why is it that, as an MLA, if I can't get answers, how is the public supposed to get their questions answered? Why has ENR dodged the basic question of how many caribou were here in the Northwest Territories in 1980 and how many are here today?

According to their own website, Mr. Speaker, and information on it, in 1980: 65,000 Bluenose; 140,000 Bathurst; 110,000 Beverly; 39,000 Qamanirjuaq; for a total of 354,000. In 2006, again using only GNWT numbers: 2000 Cape Bathurst; 20,000 Bluenose West; 66,000 Bluenose East; 128,000 Bathurst; 200,000 Ahiak; 296,000 Beverly; 496,000 Qamanirjuaq; for a total of 1.2 million caribou. The number of 1.2 million is a number derived by adding up the current government estimates of caribou herds in the NWT, based on their own website.

Mr. Speaker, if you add to that the number of 1.534 million, which is the number ENR gave to the federal government in 2005 for a surveyed base count on chronic wasting disease, Mr. Speaker, the numbers do not add up and ENR has not come to the table with explanations. Mahsi.

---Applause