



Tweet

Recommend 30

Caribou migration runs through Northwest

September 18th, 2015 | [Carey Restino](#)print  email 

With caribou herds in decline and migration patterns swaying in recent years, news this fall that caribou are following a more traditional migration route near the communities of Kivalina and Noatak caused a buzz through Northwest Alaska this fall as hunters scrambled to put meat in their freezers for the winter.

But recent action near the Red Dog Mine has caused frustration among some hunters from the Kivalina area. The 52-mile-long Red Dog Mine road connects the mine to the mine's port site 17 miles south of Kivalina. Villager hunters have taken to accessing the mine road from the beach and using it to hunt from. But the mine road is a private industrial road, not public, and Red Dog Mine officials in conjunction with NANA closed the road Sept. 3. On Wednesday, the road reopened to hunters.

NANA's Vice President of Lands Rosie Barr said the move to initially close the road was made in large part to make sure the caribou herd moves past the road unobstructed. Traditional knowledge advises that if the leaders of the herd move through an area with ease, the rest will follow. Barr said after discussion with the NANA Land Department's subsistence committee, comprised of four residents from Noatak and four from Kivalina, the decision was made to close the road to four-wheeler traffic until the first 5,000 leaders passed through. Truck traffic will be limited or stopped as soon as caribou are sighted along the road, and the mine has cleared out a storage facility to allow it to shut down truck traffic for up to a week without hindering production.

An announcement was sent out over VHF telling residents that once the leaders have crossed, the road will be reopened for hunters with the provision that they check in at the port to alert drivers to watch out for four-wheelers on the road.

When last updated, Barr said the caribou were up near the mine, not along the roadside.

"We are monitoring it on a day-by-day basis," Barr said on Tuesday. "We want to get the first 5,000 to 10,000 across the road without pressure from hunters."

Concern over the impact of the road and the Red Dog Mine on caribou migration has long been a thorny issue for subsistence hunters and fishermen in the region. In 2009, a federal study linked reductions in caribou and beluga harvests by nearby villagers to the mine. The Environmental Protection Agency said the mine's operation, and especially road traffic, during migration times has likely lead to changes in migratory patterns.

Longtime wildlife biologist Jim Dau also studied the issue and concluded in 2013 that initial data indicated caribou changed their migration direction when they came in proximity with the road. While they eventually crossed the road, collared caribou first changed direction, some migrating as far northwest as Point Hope, before returning to the road. Once they crossed the road, they moved significantly quicker for the rest of their migration.

Dau said more research needed to be done to analyze other variables, such as terrain, vegetation and other man-made structures along the road, but he said the wisdom of elders regarding allowing leaders to pass through first stands.

"I think the same wisdom applies to roads and other sources of disturbance," Dau wrote. "If caribou near the front of a migration respond to the road, their response could affect many of the caribou behind them. Caribou survive by following other caribou - hunters have known this for thousands of years."

Caribou migration patterns, along with other species, have been unpredictable in recent years. Last year, the Western Arctic Caribou Herd was almost a month late moving to its winter grounds south of the Brooks Range. But unseasonably warm weather prevented problems with rivers freezing.

This year, after years of declining population numbers, the state took action to place bag limits and season length restrictions on caribou harvest in western Alaska for the first time in three decades.

The Western Arctic herd is Alaska's largest and at last count numbered at about 235,000 animals in July 2013, Dau said. That's a decrease from 325,000 caribou estimated in 2011, and well below the 2003 peak of 490,000.

The restrictions, depending on the Game Management Unit, included closing bull hunting during the rutting period and reducing the daily bag limits for resident hunters. Cow and bull restrictions vary based on time of year and region.

For most of the range of the Western Arctic herd, however, the resident bag limit remains five caribou per day as has been the case for years. There is no time of year when caribou hunting is completely closed for resident hunters: depending on the date, hunters are able to take either bulls or cows, and at some times of the year they are able to take a caribou of either sex. It is illegal for anyone, including subsistence hunters, to take calves of either sex. Specific dates and bag limits for caribou hunting under state regulations by resident and nonresident hunters have changed. The state advises hunters to be certain to familiarize themselves with the current State Hunting Regulations prior to hunting caribou from the Western Arctic and Teshekpuk herds?

While the restrictions may help stabilize the herd populations, others say disruption from sport hunters coming in via plane is greater than any other factor.

Still, where early season fish harvests and other subsistence practices were curtailed by unsafe thin ice, hunters in the region are anxious to get their freezers filled. Some expressed frustration with the management of the Red Dog Road and the caribou herds, saying caribou were already being seen to the south on the Noatak River.

Barr said, however, that the subsistence advisory panel wants to err on the side of caution in hopes of re-establishing the herd migration through the area. She said she understands that after years of minimal opportunity to hunt caribou in the region, any limitations can be frustrating.

"I think that's why there's so much concern," she said. "We didn't make this decision lightly."

Copyright 2017 The Arctic Sounder is a publication of Alaska Media, LLC. This article is © 2017 and limited reproduction rights for personal use are granted for this printing only. This article, in any form, may not be further reproduced without written permission of the publisher and owner, including duplication for not-for-profit purposes. Portions of this article may belong to other agencies; those sections are reproduced here with permission and Alaska Media, LLC makes no provisions for further distribution.