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Chair

Mr. Harold Albrecht

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● (0850)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC)): I'd like to call meeting number 54 of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development to order.

We have appearing today at this point only three witnesses. We're waiting for the fourth. We have by audio from the Northwest Territories, Mr. Evan Walz, acting assistant deputy minister, Environment and Natural Resources. Accompanying him for backup are Jamie Chambers and Lynda Yonge.

As well, by video conference from Sidney, Nebraska, we have from Cabela's Canada, Mr. John Tramburg, vice-president; and from Winnipeg, Darin Brecht, director of finance and e-commerce.

We're going to proceed in that order. We have some advance notice that we may need to conclude here by around 10:15 if the information is correct, so we'll keep that in mind as we're proceeding through questions and answers.

Mr. Walz, if you want to proceed with the 10-minute opening statement, we'll then go to Mr. Tramburg and Mr. Brecht in that order. Then following that we will go to committee members for questions.

Mr. Walz, go ahead, please, for 10 minutes.

Mr. Evan Walz (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Environment and Natural Resources, Government of the Northwest Territories): Thank you.

Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members.

As you mentioned my name is Evan Walz. I'm the acting assistant deputy minister of operations for the Department of Environment and Natural Resources with the Government of the NWT.

I'm joined today by Jamie Chambers, head of our field support unit, and Ms. Lynda Yonge, our director of wildlife.

Before I get going I wanted to say thank you to the committee and its staff for their flexibility. We had to bump our dates once and the committee and the staff were very accommodating. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, committee members, thank you for the opportunity to share with you our views on the cultural and economic significance of licensed hunting and trapping in Canada.

Wildlife populations in the NWT have sustained people here for thousands of years. Caribou, moose, muskox, bison, polar bear, grizzly bear, black bear and Dall sheep are some of the more prominent game animals found here. As well, there are many species of waterfowl and fish. Bear, coyote, lynx, mink, beaver, marten, weasel, and otter are just some of the additional wildlife that have been and continue to be trapped in the NWT. These species are essential to the health of many people, especially those living in smaller, more remote communities.

As many of you know, the population of the NWT is approximately 44,000 people. About half of those residents have aboriginal or treaty rights to hunt and trap in the NWT. They do not require a licence to exercise those rights. Aboriginal rights holders can also receive a general hunting licence, or a GHL, which allows them to harvest throughout the NWT subject to provisions of land claims as well as laws of general application.

The intent of the GHL is to allow aboriginal rights holders to continue harvesting throughout the territory until such time as all land claims are settled and access is governed through resulting agreements. General hunting licences are available only to aboriginal rights holders, and there are few restrictions on harvesting by those holders.

Mr. Chair, in 2013, 52% of aboriginal people in the NWT over the age of 15 reported that they participated in hunting and fishing, and 17% reported that they participated in trapping. Although the number varies somewhat by size and remoteness of communities, aboriginal communities reported that between 50% and 94% of households obtained 50% or more of their meat and fish from country foods, so you can see how important hunting and fishing are.

All people who do not have an aboriginal or treaty right to harvest in the NWT require a licence to hunt here. Residents who have lived in the NWT for at least 12 consecutive months can obtain a resident hunting licence, which allows them to hunt big and small game. During the past 10 to 12 years, an average of about 1,200 residents purchased resident hunting licences each year. That represents about 8% of the non-aboriginal population over the age of 15.

This number, 1,200, has been fairly steady but represents a decline from the previous 10 years when the average ranged somewhere between 1,600 and 2,200 resident licences sold each year. This drop, we believe, can be largely attributed to the serious decline in the barren-ground caribou herds, one of the major species that are harvested here. The decline may also be linked to aging demographics, urbanization, immigration, changing attitudes towards hunting, a decline in available time given other work pressures, etc.

Between 10% and 30% of households in predominantly non-aboriginal communities report obtaining 50% or more of their meat and fish from country foods. So even in the non-aboriginal communities you can see that hunting and fishing are very important. For many non-aboriginal residents of the NWT, hunting is a way of life that has been passed down from generation to generation.

A recent study on the value of nature to Canadians has estimated that residents of the NWT spend approximately $12 million a year on hunting and trapping activities here. People who do not live in the NWT for at least a year can still obtain a non-resident hunting licence, which allows them to hunt big and small game, but they need to access and make use of a licensed guide and outfitter to hunt big game.

There are eight outfitters currently licensed to provide big game outfitting services within the Mackenzie Mountains. Game harvested by non-resident hunters through these outfitted hunts include Dall sheep, moose, mountain goats, wolves, wolverines, and mountain caribou. Meat from the harvest is often distributed to aboriginal communities.

It's estimated that the outfitting hunting industry provides about two and a half million dollars a year to individuals, businesses, and governments in the NWT. It has also been estimated that it employs somewhere between 150 and 170 people as outfitters, guides, cooks, helpers, etc.

I'd like to chat a little about trapping.

Virtually all trapping in the NWT is done by aboriginal rights holders. A special licence to trap can be issued to non-rights holders, but only at the request of an aboriginal community and, typically, for someone living a subsistence lifestyle or providing for an aboriginal family. A non-resident or resident licence does not allow the holder to trap for bears in the NWT.

Over the years, we've seen that participation in trapping is influenced by a variety of factors, including fur prices, employment levels, and other employment opportunities, but more often by the cost of trapping equipment, fuel, supplies, etc.

We define active trappers as those who participate in and sell their furs through a program we have here in the Northwest Territories called the Genuine Mackenzie Valley Fur Program. There are some individuals who may operate outside of that program and who trap and use fur for their own use. They would not be captured in the statistics I'm going to walk you through here.

The number of trappers participating in the GMVF, or Genuine Mackenzie Valley Fur Program, for the 2014-15 season was just under 600 at 593. The total value of furs submitted to auction, again for that same season, was about $686,000. Once we add the prime fur bonus, which is an element of the GMVF program, trappers in the NWT received almost $890,000 for that season.

The number of people trapping in the NWT has decreased since the early eighties, but has levelled out to be more stable in recent years, ranging typically from 600 to 740 participants per year. That number has been relatively constant for the last eight years.

One of the greatest challenges to maintaining that number is the availability of economic opportunities and wage employment in some of the smaller communities. In the NWT, trapping as a full-time occupation is now rarely seen. It's often a secondary or a tertiary source of income for households and is often just part of the annual cycle of activities that generate food and income needed to sustain the lifestyle.

I mentioned earlier that market prices often affect trapper participation. By way of example, in 2006 artificially high fur prices, driven largely by China purchasing fur at a premium price, resulted in more trappers participating in the following year in virtually all regions of the NWT. The only exception to that was in the northern Arctic, where the popular species marten was not available for harvest.

Mr. Chair, and committee members, our government operates a number of programs, including trapper training and Take a Kid Trapping, to support continued participation in this lifestyle. As you can imagine, the benefits of this lifestyle often have non-economic value.

In summary, hunting and trapping in the Northwest Territories have very important cultural, social, and economic value. The activities are parts of northern and aboriginal cultures, and they help to connect people to the environment and to the land. They also provide high-quality food, which is linked to better human health in northern communities.

As a government and as a department, we strongly support this activity. We believe it links the land and environment to the health and cultural well-being of citizens.

Thank you.

● (0855)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Walz. You're well under your time, so I appreciate that.

I'm going to move to Mr. John Tramburg, vice-president of Cabela's Canada.

Mr. Tramburg, go ahead, please.

Mr. John Tramburg (Vice President, Cabela's Canada & Outdoor Services, Canadian Division, Cabela's Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for the opportunity this morning.

As previously stated, I serve as the vice-president of Cabela's Canada and Outdoor Services. As you would imagine, being a vice-president of Cabela's Canada includes providing oversight and leadership of our corporate office located in Winnipeg, our seven retail locations, and our e-commerce site. Mr. Darin Brecht is our director of finance and e-commerce, and he will speak shortly.

At Cabela's Outdoor Services, a group here in Sidney, Nebraska, we book hunting and fishing excursions literally throughout the world, particularly in North America.

Cabela's was truly thrilled to join the Canadian landscape a few years ago, and I'll speak to that from an industry perspective. We view Canada as truly aligning with the heritage and values of our customers who we've grown up with over the last 50 years. Our data had proven that a variety of Canadian customers came from Canada into our northern stores, thus prompting us to look further north as an expansion opportunity, which we did.

In our view, our industry has a passion for the outdoors that extends well beyond selling merchandise. In the words of our founder, Dick Cabela, many years ago, we sell fun. What we've come to learn about the Canadian landscape is that we sell fun and many goods that are deemed necessities by a variety of people who look to our products as a way to live their life.

As we open every new store, and in every existing store, we place a manager who is solely responsible for connecting with our local communities through booking our conference rooms free of charge to local organizations, coordinating fishing excursions, and helping to ensure outdoor lifestyles connect with and extend even further into local communities.

Our expansion has been well received. To date we have seven locations across Canada. In a few weeks we will open in Moncton, New Brunswick, and then this fall in Calgary. Next year we will be represented in Ottawa, as well as in Abbotsford, with a few more store on the drawing board as we continue to expand throughout the country.

Our growth is fuelled by Canadians' passions for the outdoors, a connection that goes beyond a retail transaction to being a way for people to live their personal lives in everything they do.

Our employees are referred to as outfitters. Something we look at, beyond the fact that they know their merchandise, is that they can live their lives and connect to our customers. If you enter the fishing department of one of our locations, you will find Canadians who truly know the local lakes, what is biting at what time, and what not to use. Those are the people we're looking for to be great outfitters in our locations.

As we've grown up in Canada over the last couple of years, we've customized our retail assortment based on what we've learned specifically from what our Canadian customers have asked us. We've expanded our trapping assortment. That didn't exist a few years ago. We've learned to add that. We've revised our hunting and soft goods assortment to be more reflective of the conditions for which people need products.

We continue to improve daily, weekly, and seasonally in different assortments. As an example, we opened our Nanaimo, British Columbia, location last year and changed our fishing assortment, as you would well imagine, rather considerably. To that store alone we added over 4,000 SKUs, or different product types, for fishing, based on what we had heard from our local communities.

As much as we are focused on opening up east to west, in Abbotsford as well as in Ottawa, we do serve a fair number of our remote communities in Canada. Our direct-channel business, or e-commerce, which serves customers through a catalogue business as well as an Internet site, www.cabelas.ca, ships a variety of packages into such areas as the Northwest Territories.

On a personal note, I had a chance to live in Canada for three years, in Winnipeg. Our family experienced the best of the Canadian outdoors from Lake of the Woods pickerel—Darin will talk about his personal experiences, but Darin and I have had a few good times on Lake of the Woods—to Manitoba geese, Saskatchewan white-tail, and Alberta moose. My family, my friends, and I were truly impressed with what Canada has to offer. Canadians' passion for the outdoors is truly unique and is ingrained in their lifestyles and their heritage.

Cabela's customers' passions and our passions for the outdoors are very similar across North America.

● (0900)

I'm going to turn to Darin at this point, who is our director of finance and e-commerce, to talk about not only his personal experience but also the hundreds of thousands of customers who visit our website, and what they're looking at.

Mr. Darin Brecht (Director, Finance & E-Commerce, Canadian Division, Cabela's Canada): Good morning, and thank you, Mr. Chairman and honourable members, for the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Darin Brecht. I'm the director of finance and e-commerce for Cabela's Canada. I'm going to talk briefly not just from a retail perspective, but from a personal perspective, as a Canadian citizen.

My father's side is from the municipality of Viscount, Saskatchewan, and my mother is from Alonsa, Manitoba. Hunting has played a pivotal role on both sides of my family, in our history and in our roots. I grew up with stories of life on the prairie in the distant and not-so-distant past, when you consumed what you grew in good times and you supplemented from the land, the forest, and the water around you in less prosperous times. My father and grandfathers all held a high level of respect for wildlife and the land they hunted and trapped on, and they instilled a deep and important lesson in each of us about the role we play in protecting our land and sustaining the wildlife for generations to follow.

John has told you that at Cabela's we look at ourselves as selling fun. I've always looked at us as selling fun and as being a company that sells a connection between our past and our future. We sell that first BB gun or twenty-two rifle that a grandfather is going to buy for a grandchild or the first fishing rod a dad is going to give to his daughter. I want it to be said that we sell a link to a simpler time. If the number of licences sold over the past 10 years is any indication, we live in a time when hunting and fishing are declining among Canadians. As more Canadians move from rural to urban centres, our youth are offered interests and preoccupations other than the outdoors. As baby boomers age, there is less knowledge and love of the outdoors transferred to their children and grandchildren, and we will see a further decline in the number of hunting licences and in the experiences of the outdoors by our youth and our children's children.

We don't see one solution to this decline. Instead, we believe that part of the solution is for corporations such as ours, in partnership with local outdoor associations and governments where possible, to help provide our youth, both inner city and rural, the proper level of outdoor educational programs that will provide experiences and opportunities that they otherwise might not have.

The level of sustainability of our wildlife resources is also of concern, as evidenced by the closing or elimination of hunting seasons for certain species in our provinces. We believe it's important that outdoors people in all provinces work with our government leaders to ensure we provide proper structure, harvest reporting, and limits on harvests, so that there will be abundant wildlife for our children and their children for generations to come. It will require a great deal of courage and leadership at all governmental levels—municipal, provincial, and federal—to ensure that our heritage and culture of hunting, trapping, and fishing in Canada are maintained for now and the foreseeable future.

I'll turn it over to John to conclude.

● (0905)

Mr. John Tramburg: Environmental sustainability is not only critical from a retailing perspective but also, for Darin and me and a variety of our outfitters across our company, a matter of who we are. It's what we do in our spare time as well as in our professional lives. Lifestyles across generations are woven into the outdoors. Hunters, fishers, and trappers are emotionally connected to their heritage now and will be into the future, and teaching environmental stewardship to our children is absolutely critical, as Darin mentioned. That involves talking about a fair harvest and operating within the guidelines set forth in each province to ensure that we're taking game correctly and ethically. We need our governments' help in safe-guarding our heritage now and into the future.

Mr. Chairman and committee members, thank you very much for the opportunity today.

The Chair: I want to thank all of our witnesses.

We are still awaiting Chief Allan Adam from the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation. He has not yet arrived, as we can see, but when he does, we will defer to him for his statement.

At this point we'll move to Mr. Carrie for the first seven-minute round, and I think he's sharing his time with Mrs. Ambler.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Mr. Brecht, I was wondering if you could let the committee know if you have an idea of how hunting contributes to the Canadian economy.

Mr. Darin Brecht: For the Canadian economy, I can't quote specifics. I looked at a document yesterday, which was somewhat dated. What was interesting was the decline in licences in Canadian provinces. I'm going to generalize here, and I apologize, but it was a pretty lengthy document. It was a federal document, by the way. It quoted data from 2004 to 2008. I think it was written in about 2010. What was interesting was that the decline of licences in Canada was somewhat offset by the increase in tourism by Americans and Europeans coming for hunting services.

John could probably add to this. He heads up our outdoor services department, which provides hunting trips, fishing trips, and so on, in Canada. From a tourism perspective, this has greatly helped what we call outfitters, hunting guides, fishing resorts, etc. We have seven stores and two more coming. We sell hunting, fishing, and camping gear. Obviously, from a retail perspective, it adds to the Canadian economy. From a pure tourism perspective, from a pure cross-border perspective, I can't quote numbers, but from what I saw in the federal document, it was quite an extensive contribution.

Mr. Colin Carrie: What are some of the significant differences between licensed hunting in Canada and that in the U.S.?

Mr. Darin Brecht: I can't quote on that.

Mr. Colin Carrie: John, do you know? Can you comment on that?

Mr. John Tramburg: It's a very good question. From my experience, without quoting specifics, I would view the Canadian outdoorsman as much more focused on hunting as a percentage of penetration. Just anecdotally, I would say it's significant.

If I could circle back to Darin's comments, just to give a little bit of scope, I would say we view the outdoor industry in Canada as a multi-billion dollar industry with potential for that to increase.

● (0910)

Mr. Colin Carrie: Okay.

I think you mentioned restrictions on hunting and fair harvest. Are those some of the challenges people in Canada have to overcome when they are involved in licensed hunting and trapping?

Mr. John Tramburg: I'm sorry. I don't believe I mentioned that.

Mr. Colin Carrie: I think Darin mentioned that there are certain restrictions on hunting in Canada, and you mentioned the importance of fair harvest. I was wondering what you see as obstacles to licensed hunting and trapping in Canada.

Mr. Darin Brecht: I am speaking not as an officer of the company but as a person, a citizen of Canada. We read in the paper, quite commonly, that there are restrictions. For example, yesterday I read in an article from April of this year that moose numbers in eastern Ontario have declined some 21% since 2012. There are a variety of reasons for that, but it certainly does put a downward pressure on the number of licences that you are going to be able to issue to hunters in a variety of provinces just due to the decline of the populations.

I can't speak to the reasons. Those are for the specialists. The decline does affect our business, and it does affect hunters on a personal basis.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to go to Mrs. Ambler for the last three minutes.

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.

I took particular note, Mr. Walz, of your comments with regard to families and the cultural and social significance of hunting in the north. In particular, I was hoping you could tell us a little bit about the Take a Kid Trapping program. Part of the reason I am asking is that, as a member who represents an urban riding, I still understand the value of connecting children with nature. I know that my son, who is a teenager, does not wake up until noon if you don't get him up, except when his grandfather and uncle take him fishing. Then he is up at five o'clock, and he is ready and raring to go.

Could you tell us a bit more about that program?

Mr. Evan Walz: In the Northwest Territories, the maintenance of that lifestyle is so important. We have embarked on programs like Take a Kid Trapping or trapper training.

I am going to ask our head of field support, who has his feet firmly in the field, to speak to it a little bit. It's all focused on trying to support and maintain that traditional lifestyle.

With the chair's indulgence, I'll ask Mr. Chambers if he can elaborate.

The Chair: Mr. Chambers, go ahead. We have about one minute for your response.

Mr. Jamie Chambers (Head, Field Support Unit, Environment and Natural Resources, Government of the Northwest Territories): Thanks a lot.

The Take a Kid Trapping program is partnered with our department and two other departments here. The way it is set up, it can be tailored to young children, grades 1 to 3, for day trips, or to middle-school kids for three-day trips. The schools always work with local aboriginal people or harvesters. The kids stay at their cabins and learn survival skills, such as how to make a fire. They typically trap for muskrats through the ice, or for beaver. It is all done with safety in mind.

There is also a group of high-school kids who go out for as long as two weeks at a time. Our renewable resources officers, who are conservation officers, also go out and work with the people providing the service and with the kids. At the end of the day, it's a pretty positive experience all around, and although the kids may not take up the trapping lifestyle, at least they have been exposed to it. It gets them out of their communities and gives them another option that is available in northern Canada.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: That's wonderful. Thank you. It sounds as though the children have a lot of fun and they learn some practical skills as well. Thanks.

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. Bevington for seven minutes.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Northwest Territories, NDP): Good morning to the witnesses.

Mr. Walz, you alluded to the big problem we're facing when you spoke about the barren ground caribou. Perhaps you could describe to us what that has caused in terms of the harvesting of those animals, the kinds of arrangements that had to be struck with first nations, and the restrictions you put on hunting that species in order to protect it. That's one of the things we're trying to understand on this committee—the industry, but also the impact on animals and on the environment—since this is the environment committee.

● (0915)

Mr. Evan Walz: The decline in caribou populations in the NWT has had a very significant effect on all harvesters, particularly aboriginal harvesters. We recently saw a substantial decline in the Bathurst herd. We're seeing what we believe might be trends on a neighbouring herd, the Bluenose-East. In both of those cases we've placed some fairly strict restrictions. We've gone so far as to have to restrict aboriginal harvest, which is a big deal here in the Northwest Territories, to use plain language.

Our director of wildlife, Lynda Yonge, is here. She can speak to some of the numbers. It has had a dramatic impact to the point where the Bathurst herd, which was once in the neighbourhood of 450,000 or 480,000 animals, we're estimating is down below 15,000 animals. This year we have had to essentially say there is no harvest whatsoever, not even for aboriginal rights holders.

Linda, I don't know if you want to add anything to that.

Ms. Lynda Yonge (Director, Wildlife Division, Environment and Natural Resources, Government of the Northwest Territories): The only thing I want to add is that those declines are not linked to or caused by harvesting of those species. I'm sure many of you know that caribou do have a cycle in which they naturally go up and down, so it's very important, when the caribou are at this low level, that we restrict the harvest and control the harvest so that they'll be able to come back up again.

I just want to make it clear that it's not an overhunting issue, but harvesting does contribute to a decline once they're in a declining phase.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Although hunting is not a particular issue with that incredible decline, and you say it's cyclical, do you have any evidence that the herds have declined to this point in the past?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: We do have some evidence that the cycles are long. They're probably between 30-year and 50-year cycles. Through traditional knowledge, we do have information that these cycles have happened in the past. In fact, aboriginal people have had to switch game species, food species, and in some cases they starved. We do have evidence that this is not the first time.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Are you familiar with the work of Anne Gunn, previously a caribou biologist with the Government of the Northwest Territories, on the impacts of climate change on these herds?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: We are.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Do you agree with the conclusions she came to?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: Dr. Gunn has suggested that the trends in caribou herds are likely linked to climate, and we don't really understand that very well. We're not sure what the changes due to climate change are going to be and how they are going to affect those cycles.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: With this decline in caribou, have you seen migration of other animals into caribou areas?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: We haven't seen so much related to the decline in caribou, not yet. We don't know if that's going to happen. It doesn't seem to be one species replacing another, but we are, with climate change, seeing new species moving north. Certainly we're seeing more white-tailed deer moving into the north. We're seeing more coyotes. We are seeing that gradual move from the south.

● (0920)

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Muskox migration has been reported on a number of occasions.

Ms. Lynda Yonge: Based on traditional knowledge, it appears that when muskox are in an area—our muskox populations are very healthy right now—they tend to expand, move into new territories, spread out, and then colonize new areas. We are seeing muskox moving south into the treeline now, not necessarily into the same areas that barren ground caribou move through towards the winter, so it's not so much a displacement of barren ground caribou habitat.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: You say we have a healthy muskox population, but we've had some fairly serious die-off in some areas. Is that correct?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: The muskox in the far north have been declining. Muskox also tend to do a bit of an explosion and then decline. There are still large numbers of muskox, but we have seen a decline up in Banks Island in the High Arctic islands.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: In any circumstance for wildlife management, in terms of how you deal with the wildlife and the kinds of licensing you work through, is this an ongoing task and is there always a role for regulatory processes in determining the health and the harvestability of animal species?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: Absolutely. Particularly for caribou, which is, in some areas, the most harvested species, we monitor those populations very closely. This year we'll be spending over $1 million doing wildlife population studies on caribou to see how those populations are doing. We take an adaptive management approach, through which we monitor populations, we see how they're doing, and then we adjust harvesting accordingly. We do have a set of priorities for those restrictions on harvesting whereby aboriginal rights holders' rights to harvest are protected and they are the last to be restricted. Commercial harvest is affected first, followed by resident harvest, followed by aboriginal harvest.

The Chair: Mr. Sopuck, go ahead, please.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): I appreciate the witnesses' testimony. I found it very interesting.

Just for your information, I am chair of the Conservative Hunting and Angling Caucus, and we're the only party in government that has that kind of caucus. It's been going for a number of years now and I've had the honour of travelling across Canada and meeting with hunting and angling groups.

Mr. Tramburg, with regard to your comments about passion for the outdoors, I live it myself, but experiencing it through talking to these groups across the country is truly extraordinary.

Could you elaborate on how that passion for the outdoors translates into the very extensive conservation programming and projects that the hunting community finances and supports?

Mr. John Tramburg: As we're well aware, the more dollars and the more emphasis that our customer base and outdoors people across Canada extend in the community, the more those drive the process of conservation.

Mr. Sopuck, are you looking for more specifics in terms of how Cabela's is involved?

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Yes. Tell us about Cabela's support for conservation programming as well.

Mr. John Tramburg: I think it's an excellent question, sir.

Cabela's participates not only in national programs but also more specifically in local communities. Manitoba Wildlife Federation is an example as is Women in the Outdoors. We do really anything we can to support local conservation and the growth of the experience, whether it is bringing new children into the community of hunting, fishing, and angling or just supporting what's already there. That's a specific priority for us and, as I mentioned earlier, every retail location we open has a manager specifically designated to try to encourage and bring more consumers into the fold through supporting outdoor events, through, for example, donating fishing rods, and through setting up training seminars in every store on how to process a pickerel or a jack or on how to field dress a big game animal.

It extends well beyond selling merchandise, to educating people who really want to learn more. In fact, if you go onto www.cabelas.ca, a subset of that website is actually dedicated to store events, which you'll find periodically throughout the year. It includes elements we'll do on weekends just trying to bring more people to the outdoor experience in terms of how to do things in the outdoors, hands-on, as opposed to just selling stuff.

● (0925)

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Mr. Brecht, as a fellow Manitoban, you know we're both quite familiar with the conservation work that the hunting and wildlife community does back home. Why do you think the role of the hunting community in environmental conservation isn't better known or better appreciated by the population at large?

Mr. Darin Brecht: Speaking from a private citizen's perspective, I think sometimes it gets caught up in a political discussion, and I think it doesn't get front and centre in the news because there's so much news these days. Let's look at conservation from the perspective I talked about earlier. We really have to look at what we're going to leave for our children and our children's children.

We're urbanizing very quickly. I come from farm families on both sides. You, sir, come from rural Manitoba, from what I understand. What we're really looking at is there's too much noise out there that takes away from what outdoors people should really be concerned about. We hunt and fish on weekends and we go back to our life during the week, and that's it.

As John alluded to this: quite frankly, do we at Cabela's do enough? We probably do not. We could do more, but I will tell you that, from a corporate perspective, our donation policy is strictly around conservation and youth programs. We do not donate to anything other than that. That is important to us. I'll speak from a selfish corporate perspective. Our customers of tomorrow are the youth of today and they are tomorrow's hunters and tomorrow's fishermen. So we have an interest in that.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Turning to the representatives from the NWT, I'd like to follow up on the caribou question. I found the decline in those numbers absolutely astonishing, to have only 15,000 caribou left in that particular herd.

Is it possible there will be wolf predation to such an extent that it will almost prevent that herd from recovering, given that the numbers are that low? I think the biological term for it is a predator pit. What role will the wolf play in keeping that caribou herd low?

Mr. Evan Walz: Thank you for the question.

We have seen, as we mentioned, some pretty dramatic declines. There has been a lot of talk about predation, about wolves, and we are undertaking studies to try to ascertain the relative health of the herd. Typically when a prey species declines, the predator declines as well.

I'll ask Lynda to speak to some of the specifics, but Mr. Bevington alluded to climate change. We've often said that this decline, as Lynda alluded to, is a 30- to 50-year cycle. There's no one thing that causes it, and as a result of that there's no one solution. There's no silver bullet that's going to fix it. We have to attack this from as many fronts as we can.

Lynda, could you maybe speak to some of the work we have been doing around wolf populations and predation?

The Chair: Ms. Yonge, we have about 35 seconds if you can make a quick statement, please.

Ms. Lynda Yonge: We have been doing some work. All the work we've done about wolf population levels shows that they are declining along with the caribou levels, and we're working with our communities to see what's happening and to encourage wolf harvest through the trapping program.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. McKay, go ahead, please.

The Honourable John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you to the witnesses.

I don't know whether the witnesses, particularly those from Cabela's, know that we have among us a noted author, Mr. Sopuck. I just wondered whether your stores were carrying his book.

It's not as if I'm his agent and am prepared to promote his book, but I do get 10%.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. John McKay: I did find Mr. Bevington's line of questioning quite interesting. There has been a dramatic drop-off. Is there evidence to say that previous cycles are such that the drop-off of the caribou species has ever been so precipitous?

● (0930)

Mr. Evan Walz: Thank you.

As Ms. Yonge alluded to earlier, we do see through traditional knowledge that there is a cycle to this, typically of between 30 and 50 years.

There certainly is a cycle. We have seen something like this in the past. Traditional knowledge tells us that this has happened in the past.

Does that help answer your question?

Hon. John McKay: It does, but drilling down a little deeper than that, I'm assuming you have examined the herd, possibly even carcasses, and things of that nature. Is there any one thing that stands out? Is it a disease? Is it changes in vegetation, changes in predation? What is your analysis for such a drop?

Mr. Evan Walz: There is no one factor that stands out head and shoulders above the rest. The same factors exist. As Lynda mentioned earlier, we certainly don't blame the decline on harvesting, but what often happens is that as the herd declines, hunters are able to get at the herd with modern technology.

We also see that we're not alone in this. If you look at the circumpolar world, there are a number of herds that are in the same difficult situation, perhaps not as acutely as we see in the Bathurst herd, but this happening everywhere in North America.

Hon. John McKay: If it is a circumpolar issue, it would kind of drive you, at least intuitively, to the notion that climate change is affecting the herd, because the Arctic is warming and the sub-Arctic is warming with it, and species that have never been observed there are moving north. Is that a reasonable conclusion?

Mr. Evan Walz: Given that it's happening in other areas in North America, it certainly suggests there's something larger at play here.

Lynda, do you want to provide any detail beyond that?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: Yes. We don't know what drives these cycles. We do think there is a climatic factor, as Evan has said. Climate change may be a factor, but climate change may also be a positive factor in that green-up is happening earlier. We don't know what the balance of the changes with climate change will be. It's certainly something we're looking at and monitoring.

Hon. John McKay: It's quite curious.

According to your observations, are there other species that experience such dramatic changes in composition, possibly not quite as dramatic as for the caribou, that have happened over relatively short periods of time?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: We haven't documented any changes like that. I did mention that we are seeing new species moving up, but we haven't yet seen drastic changes in any of our other species populations.

Hon. John McKay: I think I read somewhere that the grizzly population was moving north and actually interbreeding with polar bears. I don't know whether that's an observation within your sphere of observation, but I thought that was kind of curious. Is that true or is that not true?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: We have seen grizzly bears breeding with polar bears. According to Inuvialuit traditional knowledge, that's not new. Some of the hybrids we're seeing now are third and fourth generation.

There have always been grizzly bears that far north. There may be more of them, but it may also be that we are seeing them because we are more mobile and covering more area, but certainly they are interbreeding with polar bears.

● (0935)

Hon. John McKay: What about any other species—wolves, coyotes, that kind of thing?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: We haven't seen any. There's nothing documented yet in terms of hybridization.

Hon. John McKay: Your licensing regime, I assume, is entirely internal to the Northwest Territories. Is that correct?

Mr. Evan Walz: Perhaps you could explain what you mean by internal to the Northwest Territories.

Hon. John McKay: Well, when you issue licences for hunting, and presumably for fishing as well, are they exclusively for the NWT?

Mr. Evan Walz: Yes.

Hon. John McKay: What role, if any, does the federal government play in the issuance of licences or the management of any of these herds? I'm a little puzzled as to what role the federal government plays, given that there is a fairly substantial devolution of jurisdiction to the NWT.

Mr. Evan Walz: Recently there has been a devolution of authority to the NWT. However, the only real element of licensing in this area that the federal government is still involved in is for migratory birds. Licences for big game and small game are issued by the Northwest Territories government, and we administer fishing licences as well on behalf of the federal government.

The Chair: We'll go now to our five-minute round, beginning with Ms. Leslie.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): I'm going to pick up on the line of questioning that Mr. McKay started, around the federal piece here, because we are members of Parliament and this is a federal committee on the environment. We're legislators and, as a legislator, I'm looking for the policy solutions here or the policy asks.

I don't know who just answered about migratory birds. Was that Mr. Walz?

Mr. Evan Walz: That was me.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Okay, thank you, Mr. Walz.

You said that migratory birds is the only area in which you still have federal involvement. That's pretty interesting to us at this committee. What is our role here other than for migratory birds? Is there a role for the federal government?

Earlier there was some discussion by Cabela's. They were talking about structuring harvest reporting and ensuring a proper harvest. Maybe I'm wrong, but I imagine that is a provincial or territorial responsibility, and I'm trying to figure our the role here for us as federal legislators.

Maybe I'll start with the Government of the Northwest Territories, because I assume you'd be looking for an active federal partner. What does that active federal partner look like?

Mr. Evan Walz: I'll have to get Jamie to speak to the history of the holdover of migratory birds being under federal legislation. Everything beyond that is under our jurisdiction.

Jamie, can you speak a little to the federal involvement in migratory birds, or is that something we just sort of inherited?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: I can.

Mr. Jamie Chambers: Thank you, Lynda.

Ms. Lynda Yonge: The federal government still completely manages migratory birds and issues the licences because of the international Migratory Birds Convention Act. Canada and the United States have this agreement about how migratory birds are managed.

Because migratory birds are migratory and they pass through various parts of Canada and the United States, it's much bigger than any one jurisdiction. That's why the federal government still maintains control there.

Ms. Megan Leslie: I understand that. What is the federal role beyond migratory birds? How would you describe a partnership with the federal government when it comes to hunting and trapping, or is there a role for us here?

Mr. Evan Walz: Regarding the relationship we have with the federal government around hunting and trapping, as I said, the only real level of involvement that they have at this point in our NWT history is in relation to migratory birds. So they have a fairly narrow level of involvement.

Go ahead, Jamie.

● (0940)

Mr. Jamie Chambers: We work with Environment Canada when it comes to movement of wildlife across borders and stuff, with CITES and WAPPRIITA. I don't remember what the acronyms are exactly, but we do work with Environment Canada on those things when it comes to movement of things like polar bears, wolves, and other species across Canadian borders.

Ms. Lynda Yonge: I think, really, the role for the federal government isn't so much a regulatory one as one of support. There are hunters and trappers all across the country; it's a segment of our economy that is a little hidden. So I think we'd be looking more just for general support of that lifestyle, of participation in that, and not so much from a regulatory perspective.

Ms. Megan Leslie: I guess that's what I'm trying to get at here. Obviously there's a federal role with migratory birds. Obviously on first nations issues there's a federal role, so the federal cabinet will be involved when it comes to aboriginal harvest.

With regard to that support role, is that research? Do you need more coordination when it comes to habitat loss, or impacts of climate change, or what's happening in other jurisdictions?

Mr. Evan Walz: We have enjoyed federal support in a number of areas. We recently presented to the standing committee regarding the federal support received around biomass in association with climate change. That is something we certainly look to continue. As Linda said, we need general support for some of the actions and the lifestyles, but not necessarily from a regulatory perspective.

Ms. Lynda Yonge: Certainly from a research and monitoring perspective, we do work with Environment Canada on various aspects of wildlife population research and habitat research. In those areas we have found it a little bit difficult, because federal programs tend to focus on habitat loss and how to deal with that. I'm thinking particularly about species at risk programs and other Environment Canada programs, whereas in the north that isn't our big issue, so we often don't qualify for federal support.

We do a lot of work in the area of polar bears, and it's extremely expensive. Environment Canada has been involved in that work, and we would look for continuing support in that area.

I would say it's more wildlife research and support rather than actual hunting and trapping research.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Toet, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Thank you to our witnesses.

Just to pick up a little bit on the federal role in this, Mr. Walz and Ms. Yonge, would you not agree that some of the federal roles are actually or actively being played out? There's a lot of humane trapping research being done through Environment Canada in Vegreville, Alberta. The government also plays a very major role in the international marketing of furs and seal products and also does advocacy on the international front for that. So I think there is a major federal role in the hunting and trapping industries throughout Canada.

I just wanted to follow up with that, Mr. Walz. You talked about the fact that trapping is rarely seen as a full-time occupation anymore in the Northwest Territories. You also spoke about how critical and important it is for the sustaining of people's families because it's part and parcel of their ability to provide for their families on an ongoing basis.

We had a witness, at one point in time, from the Association for the Protection of Fur-Bearing Animals, and one of the NDP witnesses called for a ban on trapping. I just was hoping you could speak to the effect that would have on some of these families in the Northwest Territories and their ability to provide for their families on an ongoing basis.

Mr. Evan Walz: You're right. The ability of people, rights holders in NWT, to trap goes beyond something monetary. I did mention that it's not a primary source of income for most people, it's secondary or tertiary. It supplements income in other areas. It's part of an annual cycle of getting people out on the land. But more than supporting from a financial perspective, it supports from a cultural and spiritual perspective people's ability to link to the land, particularly those in small remote communities, so it goes beyond just economics. This is not solely about economics. This is about maintaining a way of life; it's about maintaining a culture. There's a very solid connection. With regard to your comment about banning trapping, that would have a detrimental effect on a great number of NWT residents, not only from an economic perspective, but also from a cultural perspective, from a perspective of maintaining a traditional lifestyle and maintaining essentials of cultural identity.

● (0945)

Mr. Lawrence Toet: Thank you for that, because sometimes we can get caught up in the dollars and cents and looking at numbers, and the whole cultural identity and the cultural aspect of it can be overlooked. It's appreciated that you would bring that forward.

Mr. Tramburg, you talked a little bit about your work. You can correct me on this, but you have an outdoor services or outdoor experience group at each one of your locations in the United States and Canada. Is that right?

Mr. John Tramburg: We have an outdoor services group located at our world headquarters here in Sidney, Nebraska, and they service hunters and anglers across the globe by helping them connect with various outfitters, whether it be in northern Saskatchewan or, quite frankly, southern Africa, or Arizona for that matter.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: When you're working through this process, is there an intent to also engage with any particular groups? I was thinking of new immigrants, urban people, to make sure we're having urban populations interacting. Is that part of what you're trying to accomplish through that process, to create a real sense and spirit of environmental stewardship to some degree?

Mr. John Tramburg: Very well said, sir.

In fact, in the very near future you will see this business unit begin to take a more prominent presence in all of our retail locations, so we can begin educating folks not only on what's out there but also in terms of what the future looks like, so that goes exactly to your point.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: One other thing that came up in your testimony, or in some of the questioning, was the involvement of women.

I think, Mr. Brecht, you spoke to this a little bit. We've heard from several witnesses about the growing involvement of women in hunting—especially in angling—but our study here is on licensed hunting and trapping. Is there anything you can put your finger on to attribute that growth to? Has Cabela's looked at this at all in any way, shape, or form to get a sense of what is driving this, and also what the upsides are from a conservation standpoint? We're looking at environmental stewardship here and at maybe having kind of a new group involved in it. How do you see this playing out?

Mr. Darin Brecht: Mr. Toet, were you talking about women in the outdoors?

Mr. Lawrence Toet: Yes.

Mr. Darin Brecht: For example, we sponsor a local women in outdoors program with the Manitoba Wildlife Federation. I'll speak from a corporate perspective. Women in the outdoors and specifically in hunting, fishing, camping, etc., is a very promising demographic for us. It's another way of getting families together.

It used to be traditionally a grandpa, a father, a son, an uncle. Deer hunting in my family was a male pastime. It's a way of bringing the family back together and doing something outdoors. It's as simple as that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to move to Mrs. Ambler for five minutes and then we'll come back to Mr. Bevington.

Mrs. Ambler.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again to our witnesses.

Mr. Tramburg, I'd like to ask you about Cabela's expansion into Canada. In particular, can you tell us why the company decided to expand into Canada? And what are some of the significant differences between the U.S. market and the Canadian market?

● (0950)

Mr. John Tramburg: They are very good questions, so thank you.

As we began to expand within our U.S. presence, we began building stores across the border. One that comes to mind is the one in Grand Forks, North Dakota, which is only a quick two hours from Winnipeg. We quickly began to realize that a variety of Canadians were crossing the border to shop in our U.S. locations.

Back in 2006 and 2007 we began to further understand this and we really tried to glean some knowledge about what they were shopping and looking for. We came to realize that traditionally a person in the outdoors has predominantly the same needs, wants, and desires, regardless of where they live, with some exceptions that I'll speak to shortly. That really was the spark that prompted the expansion into Canada, certainly with the opening of our locations in Winnipeg, then Edmonton and so on.

Specifically to the Canadian market, we segment our customer base into a number of profiles. One that we've actually added to those is based on the Canadian consumer, and Darin could speak to this as well. This is a customer profile that traditionally stems from everyone's heritage, which means that they're buying product, whether traps or hunting gear, that extends well beyond being for a pastime to fulfilling a physical need to sustain a lifestyle. We have a variety of customers who travel down from the Northwest Territories, as an example, to visit our locations a couple of times each year. They buy a significant amount of outdoor equipment simply because their needs extend beyond equipping them for recreation to physically maintaining their lifestyle and their heritage through this merchandise.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: I like to hear that. Thank you. I'm looking at your online web page right now, and you have a “family great outdoors days, our largest sale of the season”. We were talking about how families and youth and women are now taking up hunting and trapping.

So before I get on to my next serious question, I am curious: what's your best selling item today in Canada, and is it related to Mother's Day or turkey hunting season? I want a sneak preview of what I might be getting as a gift from my children on Sunday.

Mr. Darin Brecht: It's a pink camo vest.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: It's a pink camo vest? That's perfect. It's my colour.

It was a serious question. What is your top selling item in Canada?

Mr. John Tramburg: You'd be surprised, but of all things, water, propane, and some types of ammunition sell very well. Traditionally it's spread across product lines. I don't know if I could speak to any specifics.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: That's good to know. So you're talking about those necessities. So even though you sell fun, it's about quality of life as well. I appreciate that.

Mr. John Tramburg: Well said.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: In terms of selling, you mentioned selling a link to a different time. I like the fact that you were honest with us and said the reason you're appealing to youth is that they're your customers of tomorrow. In our previous studies in this committee, we looked at Canada's national conservation plan and the fact that we need to include urban Canadians. Mr. Toet focused part of his line of questioning on this as well. I think all of us here understand that children need links to nature and their quality of life is improved if they spend time outdoors and they appreciate the history and cultural importance of our outdoors.

What do you see as obstacles to urban Canadians getting involved and interested in hunting and trapping?

● (0955)

Mr. Darin Brecht: Once again I'll speak from a personal perspective. I have three young children.

Ms. Ambler, you said it better than I could. Right now when I get them out of bed on a Saturday, they go right to their electronics. The point is our youth have too many different preoccupations right now.

I'll go back to what I alluded to earlier. Our donation policy, from a corporate perspective, is first and foremost around youth in the outdoors. There's a young anglers association, for example, in my hometown here in Winnipeg that we donate to. We donate our time, products, and services. A lot of our outfitters, as we call our employees, donate their off-work time to these associations, as many of us do. We take it very seriously.

From a personal perspective, going back to urbanization, I firmly believe that if we can get kids off the electronics and off the couch and outdoors, we're probably going to solve some of the problems we have in our society.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ambler.

Mr. Bevington, please, you have five minutes.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: I just quickly want to give an infomercial for the family businesses in the Northwest Territories that sell camping and hunting gear. There are Kaeser's Stores in the Northwest Territories; Weaver & Devore, which has been in business for a hundred years in Yellowknife. We have Stanton's in Inuvik. I think in some ways these people provide products to those hunters and trappers who literally don't have credit cards and can't shop online. The local providers of hunting products are very important to us as well. Sometimes you wonder what's going to happen to those people when those stores can't afford to keep those products in because everything's being done online and the people who really are subsistence hunters and trappers don't have access to that.

So I hope that Cabela's recognizes the importance of that. You understand that hunting and trapping is a family business in the Northwest Territories. People do that. My favourite image of a person is somebody on a little bicycle on a back road in my hometown, with a .22 on their back and a packsack that they put the chickens in that they shoot. You can be sure that fellow there is actually going to eat those chickens that night, because that's what he does.

Many markets are perhaps not to be handled through online merchandising in the Northwest Territories, and I don't see how Cabela's is going to help those groups as much as they're going to take over the industry.

I'll get back to environmental issues now, because I'm tired of infomercials, and I'll speak to GNWT. When we talk about climate change, and we talk about greening up, Dr. Gunn identified the serious problems of changing weather conditions in the fall, freezing rain that prevents animals from getting hold of the feed that they require from the barren grounds. She talked about the changes in temperature creating situations where bugs are entering into the cycle earlier and upsetting the birthing, the calving of the caribou.

Could you talk to us about the whole variety of issues that come in when climate changes? Having lived in the north all my life, I know very well what's happened to the climate. So let's not start with the climate not changing, but let's talk about the actual impacts of changing climate on the animals.

Ms. Lynda Yonge: Thank you, Mr. Bevington.

We're certainly not in any way suggesting that climate change isn't a major factor here. It is. We are seeing changes. We don't know what the long-term effects of those changes will be. We're monitoring that, but we're not yet in a position to be able to say what they will be. There are lots of changes. You talked about the raining and freezing we're seeing in some years, and in the far north, that's a problem particularly for Peary caribou and Dolphin and Union caribou, because they're not able to get at their food. That's happened several times in the past. It looks as though it may happen more frequently, and that's an issue. Certainly bug harassment has always been an issue for barren-ground caribou and that's one of the reasons their behaviour is the way it is when they do their migrations.

It has been suggested that in some areas, bug harassment may increase and may cause problems. So it's something we're aware of and we're monitoring, but at this point it's not really clear-cut what those changes are going to be. I think some will be negative. Some will possibly be positive, but certainly there is change.

● (1000)

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Thank you for that. I just wanted to clarify that for the record here. This committee has sometimes avoided the discussion of climate change, but I think it's a very relevant discussion for the environment committee, and I'm glad to have any opportunity to point to it.

The Chair: Mr. Bevington, your time is up. You are waxing very eloquent, but your time is up.

We'll move to Ms. Leslie.

Ms. Megan Leslie: I would like to get back to the question about the federal role here. What will we end up with in the report from the committee? What will we as federal legislators report back?

Ms. Yonge, you started to get to somewhere I was hoping to go when you talked about habitat loss not being a big issue in the north. A lot of the federal funding, as you pointed out, has to do with habitat loss, so you are not able to tap into that. Then you started to touch on polar bears.

That's actually what I am looking for: what do you need? Is it access to funding for research? Is it research? Is it that we should stop talking about habitat loss in the north and start talking about other issues? That's exactly what I want to hear. I'll turn it back over to the three of you from the GNWT.

Ms. Lynda Yonge: It's assistance with funding for research, in some cases for baseline data. We are a really big territory. We do have a research program in place, but it's difficult. It is extremely expensive, because it is such a big territory. In some cases, we have a hard time getting funding even just to get baseline data so that we can monitor what's happening. Money for continuing to monitor would be really helpful.

It's not so much for research itself, because we do have researchers here, and we work with our comanagement partners here. We do have four settled land claim agreements. We have co-management boards set up in those areas that set our research priorities. They tend to be underfunded with respect to the work they can do with wildlife. Getting access to funding so that research could be done by the comanagement boards and the government here would be really helpful to us.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thanks. This is helpful.

Tell me a bit more about baseline data. Are we talking about specific animals, or the condition of lakes and rivers? What are you talking about?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: One of the areas that are most expensive for us and one in which we certainly need data is polar bears. The federal government has worked closely with us on polar bears, but we need funding to continue that work. Caribou work is extremely expensive, so we need things like funding and assistance with information to see what's happening on the land with respect to development. We have only very recently, with devolution, taken over responsibility for land management. Assistance with being able to get good information on what has actually happened on the land with respect to habitat change would also be really helpful.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thanks. Can you expand on monitoring?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: We do separate research, which is going out and getting new information and monitoring populations. Every three years we monitor the population of our caribou herds. This means doing aerial surveys, which are extremely expensive. For monitoring populations of polar bears, we go out and do mark-and-recapture studies to see how those populations are doing so we can see if there are trends there. That's what I mean by population monitoring.

● (1005)

Ms. Megan Leslie: When it comes to that baseline data gathering and monitoring populations, can you describe for us the status of that right now when you are doing it?

What gaps are there? Is it just full-on that you can't cover the land, or that you are not doing it as often as you'd like to, or that it is not being done at all?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: It varies by species. Every year we set up a research and monitoring program for the year, depending on what the highest priorities are at that time. Right now for us it's caribou. For the last two years, we will have spent over $1.5 million to monitor the caribou. Because it is a high-priority species, we do a lot of work there.

We work very closely with Canada on polar bears, and we do have a program in place through which we monitor one population at a time, because it is very logistically difficult and expensive.

We do some monitoring of boreal caribou. Assistance with that kind of work would be helpful. We monitor our bison population. We have monitoring programs in place for most harvested species.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Leslie.

We do have Mr. Sopuck on the list.

Ms. Leslie, we will come back to you if you have further questions, if we have time.

Go ahead, Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: I have a fairly simple and direct question I'd like each witness to take a stab at.

This is the first time the environment and sustainable development committee has ever undertaken a study like this about licensed hunting and trapping. Why is a study like this important?

The Chair: Let's proceed with the Northwest Territories answering first, and then we'll move down in the same order we had you do your opening statements.

Mr. Walz, you and any of your partners can start, and then we'll hear from Mr. Tramburg and Mr. Brecht.

Mr. Evan Walz: I think this is very important because of the place that hunting and trapping have in the Northwest Territories and the linkages that hunting and trapping have to aboriginal culture and to a way of life. We talked earlier about how sometimes we look only at the dollars and cents. Hunting and trapping in the NWT go well beyond that. You don't do this sort of work, certainly not trapping, to get rich. This is a way to maintain a lifestyle. It's a way to maintain a culture. It's even a way to maintain language, to a certain extent.

Earlier, Jamie talked about our Take a Kid Trapping program, and there was some interest in that. We can talk about some of the programs our department provides to help support and bolster that, but the Cabela's representative often spoke from a personal perspective. I too have a son here in school, and the exposure the students are given as a result of being close to this culture is amazing. It's really helpful. The exposure they're given and the knowledge they draw from that is really useful. That helps provide a perspective that we might not otherwise be able to offer. That is why this is so important to us, and I think the work of this committee is important.

One thing I would highlight, if I might, is the difference between our jurisdiction and others. I mentioned it earlier in my presentation. We have very few licensed trappers and licensed hunters in the NWT, because we view trapping and hunting as an aboriginal right. Our environment is a little bit different owing to the fact that half or more of our population is from an aboriginal culture.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Tramburg.

Mr. John Tramburg: I would sum it up in one statement: we hope that the federal government understands the need and critical nature of committing federal dollars to study and support wildlife conservation and continued education and advancement of outdoor activities across generations, specifically through youth programs. If this is important to us today, it has to be important for us tomorrow.

In answer to the earlier question on how the federal government could help, it would be through committing those dollars to conservation and education, particularly around our youth.

● (1010)

The Chair: I think maybe Ms. Yonge wanted to add a word, so we'll go to Mr. Brecht and then back to the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Darin Brecht: I'll follow the honourable witness from the Northwest Territories.

Dollars and cents aside, it's purely from a cultural perspective and from a family unit perspective. If the federal government doesn't pay more attention to this and move it up the slate, shall we say, there really is not going to be much left for all of us, let alone our kids and the next few generations. Going back to a personal perspective, hunting, trapping, and fishing are part of our history, our roots. There are too many distractions out there that lure us into a different way of life. We have the second-largest country in the world, with a diversity of land: forests, lakes, mountains, prairies, etc. Let's use it and let's keep it.

The Chair: Ms. Yonge, did you want to comment? I thought you might have wanted to jump in on that last question.

Ms. Lynda Yonge: I just wanted to make a similar comment, from a Canadian perspective. There's been a lot of talk about climate change. I mentioned that habitat loss wasn't as big an issue for us here, but that's only because we've been lucky so far. People only care about things they know, and if we want to make sure we maintain our wilderness areas and maintain viable ecosystems, people have to know what they are. Hunting and trapping and fishing are a way of getting people out there so they understand what's out there and how important it is. Then maybe people will care about it and make changes. From a national perspective, that's very important.

The Chair: We have one more Conservative member who'd like to ask a question or asked for a short statement earlier.

I do have time for that, and then we'll go back, because I let some of our others go over a bit.

Ms. Megan Leslie: I just wanted to offer the question around the federal role to both Mr. Tramburg and Mr. Brecht, but they've touched on it, so I'm good, thanks.

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Carrie.

I think you're sharing your time, Mr. Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Yes.

We've heard about and we've been talking about what the government's role is. I'd like to ask the witnesses from Northwest Territories a question, because I understand that hunting regulations were recently passed in the territory, which included lowering the minimum age for hunters and reducing the residency requirement.

I think you touched on the residency part of a hunting licence in your opening statement. I'm curious: Why did you deem these changes necessary and what's been the response? And actually, what is the minimum age now for hunters?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: Thank you for that question.

The change in the minimum age was driven by the desire of both outfitters and resident hunters to take their children hunting at an earlier age. The minimum age to get a hunting licence in the territories is now 12. You need to have parental consent and you have to be accompanied by an adult hunter when you're hunting. But we also made a change so that a licensed hunter or anybody who is authorized to hunt in the territories can take somebody who's under 18 out hunting with them. The youth does not have to have their own licence, but if there is a bag limit, they have to share the bag limit of the adult hunter. Those changes were made very specifically to remove the barriers to people being able to take their children out with them.

I'd also like to add that our new Wildlife Act, which came in last November, was developed through a collaborative process with our aboriginal partners, our comanagement partners. They had a strong desire to encourage people to get out on the land and to take their kids out with them, the same way aboriginal people can do here.

Mr. Colin Carrie: All right.

I was curious. How does your government educate hunters on best practices, and how do you engage local communities on the importance of hunting?

● (1015)

Mr. Jamie Chambers: We're working on a hunter education program right now. It's in the developmental stages. It is a requirement of our new Wildlife Act that new residents and first-time hunters take the training. More than that, we're trying to make it so that all harvesters, young and old.... It's shared across the territories. Even people who wouldn't have to take it by legislation have told us that they want the training for their youth, so we're developing the program collaboratively with our comanagement partners and aboriginal governments, and we're hoping it's going to be a very inclusive and well-received hunter education program. It's just in the developmental stage right now.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Okay.

How have past animal rights campaigns affected trapping in the Northwest Territories? Have there been lawsuits, or are campaigns a costly thing for the government or local people to have to fight? How have these animal rights campaigns affected trapping in the Northwest Territories?

Ms. Lynda Yonge: I think the biggest impact for us came from the changes in the EU and the requirement for humane trapping methods. That was a big expense. All of our trappers are now using humane traps. That meant a complete shift for people in how they carried out their trapping.

Other than that, there's been a lot of work done on marketing our furs. There was a question earlier about the role of the federal government in testing traps and marketing traps. They've been very effective in maintaining that market for us.

The Chair: I think that comes to the end of the questions by our committee members unless I see someone else wanting to ask a question.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing by video conference. You were very helpful witnesses indeed. Thank you very much for taking the time.

Mr. Evan Walz: Thank you.

Mr. John Tramburg: Thanks for the opportunity.

Mr. Darin Brecht: Thank you.

The Chair: The bells will be ringing shortly. The meeting is adjourned.