

Message from the Caribou Coordinator

As the new Caribou Coordinator for the Vuntut Gwitchin Government, I wanted to take this opportunity to introduce myself, my role, and share some of the work I have been doing since starting in this role.

Reporting to Councilor Cheryl Charlie, I will be responsible for coordinating the efforts of Vuntut Gwitchin as we seek permanent protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Liaising with our technical and political partners within Canada and the U.S, my focus will be on ensuring that we continue to be leaders in this work and on elevating the voices of the Vuntut Gwitchin. Ultimately, I want to continue the astounding efforts that the people before me have completed and to work with Councilor Cheryl, and the broader community, to identify what strategic steps we can take to achieve our common goal.

I first learned of the Porcupine caribou herd watching the documentary *Being Caribou*. Growing up on a small farm in rural Ontario, the size and spectacular migration of the herd left a lasting impression. Since that time, my continued interest in the herd, and love of the Yukon, had me monitoring things from afar, keeping up to date on activities with the potential to impact the herd. I was in my final year of my post-secondary studies when the Yukon government released their own land use plan for the Peel Watershed. This led me to do one of my final research papers on examining the potential impacts that development allowed for in the Yukon governments plan would have on the herd.

Since completing my studies, I had been working as a Consultant delivering major multidisciplinary infrastructure and social projects for Provincial and Indigenous governments in British Columbia. Working with technical experts, I managed the development of materials required to provide clients, regulators, stakeholders and media with the information necessary through all phases of a Project from planning to implementation. I was managing the environmental assessment and permitting processes for an infrastructure project in Metro Vancouver when the Supreme Court ruled against the Yukon government on their land use plan for the Peel Watershed.

When I first saw the Caribou Coordinator position posted, it felt meant to be. I knew that the skills I had developed as a Consultant and my interest in learning more intimately about the Porcupine caribou and Vuntut Gwitchin culture and way of life made me a good fit and I knew that I had found my way to get more involved with something that I have always felt very passionately about.

It has been a busy few weeks since I started as Caribou Coordinator and I am still grateful every day that I have been provided this opportunity.

My first week, I travelled with Cheryl Charlie and Lorraine Netro to Washington D.C. ahead of an important vote on H.R. 1146 *Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act* which would stop energy development in the Refuge by repealing language in the Republicans 2017 tax law which mandated oil and gas lease sales in the Coastal Plain. I witnessed first-hand the impact we can make by having Vuntut Gwitchin present during crucial times to provide a voice, and a face, to advocate our cause.

While in D.C. we met with other organizations from D.C., Alaska and across the U.S., who are also working tirelessly for protection of the Refuge, to further develop a coordinated strategy to guide this work moving forward. There are some truly amazing advocates representing all different aspects of the impacts that development in the Refuge would have and our work will benefit from coordinating our efforts and working together.

When attending Vadzaih Choo Drin I was humbled to be welcomed to the community to celebrate the return of the Caribou, to meet so many of you and to be given an opportunity to learn from your stories. It was a beautiful demonstration of the importance of the caribou and a true reflection of the importance of the work that we are doing. I had the opportunity to participate in the activities, speak with many of you, and even get out on the land to get a more personal understanding of the reason I am doing this work. I am sure that the next year will bring many more of these opportunities.

In recent weeks, I've had the opportunity to meet with Vuntut Gwitchin Government leadership and staff, representatives from the Porcupine Caribou Management Board, Yukon Government staff, Assembly of First Nations Regional Chief and staff, Yukon's Member of Parliament and many other non-governmental organizations to discuss the Caribou Coordination File and opportunities to collaborate going forward. These are critical relationships to maintain and gather support for our work.

Much of my time since starting this role, has been dedicated to understanding the history of the Caribou Coordination work to date, monitoring current activities and planning for the coming year. It is going to be a busy summer and an even busier year to come!

With the current US administration continuing to make statements that highlight the continued threat of development in the Refuge, there are various avenues that we are pursuing, alongside our partner organizations in Canada and the U.S., to ensure this does not happen.

From a technical perspective, we will continue to participate in all regulatory processes to ensure that our knowledge and our concerns form part of the public record. We will continue to insist that regulatory agencies in the U.S. acknowledge and engage the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation.

From a legislative perspective, we will continue to support work being done to introduce and progress various pieces of legislation to repeal the language in the 2017 tax act which calls for development in the Refuge. We will continue to use our voices to advocate for the progression of these pieces of legislation through the House and into Senate with the aim of permanent protection.

From a public awareness perspective, we will continue to increase general awareness of the Porcupine caribou, Vuntut Gwitchin way of life, and our efforts to ensure the survival of the herd through avenues such as public events, news media and social media. We will advocate for political leaders and corporations to take firm stances to oppose development in the region and further stress the importance of permanent protection. We recently launched a social media presence and encourage you all to follow developments on Twitter: @ACaribouPeople.

Every morning when I start work, my heart (and my inbox...) are full. I am humbled to be doing this work and to be sharing this journey with the community and I commit to doing my best work possible for each and every one of you. I am grateful for the shared knowledge and direction from leadership, staff, our partners, and each and every one of you.

I look forward to working with you all over the coming year.

Mahsi' Choo

Liz Staples
estaples@vgfn.net