

## Northern Seminar in Mushuau-nipi : True moment for The House of Caribou and the Innu Culture

Baie-Comeau – 24th August 2012 – Gathered together on the shore of the George River for the 8th Northern First Nation Seminar organized by Amis du Mushuau-nipi, Innus from every corner of Québec and Labrador, québec scientists, environmental group representatives, civil members and government representatives had something to say about the subject « A caribou in precarious situation, how to put together conservation and first nation knowledge »

An obvious fact emerges : The survival of the migratory caribou it's closely related to the vitality of the traditional Innu culture. This animal is effectively in the centre of the traditions, the spiritual life, the knowledge and the ancient and actual way of living of Innus from Québec and Labrador. Said this, the mythical Mushuau-nipi, cultural center where the seminar took place, turns into a privileged contact ground with this lifestyle.

During the Seminar, the participants found out the number thrown by the last caribou inventory on the George River handled by the Ministry of Fauna and Natural Resources. The George River herd, that counted with near 800.000 individuals twenty years ago, 385.000 in 2001 and, 74.000 in 2010, it's getting dramatically smaller and today counts only with 27.000 individuals. « This number will continue to go down and, even if it's cycle is historically natural, nowadays conditions, considering the growing impact of the human being on the caribou habitat, makes it hard to predict when will it restore or if it will ever do » quotes Serge Couturier, specialist in caribou's studies and participant of the Seminar.

The migratory caribou populations are known for being cyclical, showing natural ups and downs in the numbers of a herd. Thus, there were very few migratory caribou in Quebec-Labrador between 1900 and 1950, after that the numbers of caribou began to increase rapidly to become the largest herd in the world in the late 1980s. The difference today is that the major development facing Northern Québec, combined with commercial, recreational and aboriginal hunting much stronger than in the past, have the potential to affect in a very decisive way the recovery of the species when it is in a period of low numbers. Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador have recently banned the recreational and commercial hunting among the George River's herd.

One of convergencies between scientific and first nation's knowledge that has emerged during the seminar is the presence of a large territory known as the main reproducing area for the George River herd for scientists, or as Atikassi (House of caribou) for the Innu, where caribou tends to retreat during the difficult decades as it is the case right now. This large area, covering approximately 75 000 km<sup>2</sup>, is located in the extreme north-eastern Quebec and includes Mushuau-nipi and part of Labrador.

The House of Caribou now deserves our entire attention and becomes a key territory for the conservation of the species and the preservation of an entire lifestyle. The Northern First Nation Seminar participants have also observed on site a few hundreds caribou within the last weeks, reflecting the presence of the species in its retreat region.

Following this observation, the Seminar participants agreed on the fact that the House of Caribou deserves more recognition in terms of interprovincial and intergovernmental planning concerning the preservation of caribou, defined in a strict code of practice for the economic development and hunting activities.

Jacques Gauthier, Innu hunter and former chief of Matimekush Lac-John, spoke at the seminar "The priority should be given to a reduced first nation hunting, as a cultural sampling while preserving the herd and also preserving and developing traditional skills among the Innu and especially among our youth. In this sense, I might have here in Mushuau-nipi, hunted my last caribou. "

Ashini Serge Goupil, Innu hunter and advisor in sustainable development, states, "The situation is critical. Decisions must be taken fast and require a particular leadership from first nations on this issue from the perspective of cultural responsibility on the management of the land and the species that live there. For there to be a change in the individual practice of caribou hunting, it will require a very determined and patient leadership from community leaders and hunting leaders, in addition to a better information on the situation throughout the first nations communities in Quebec and Labrador. "

The seminar participants hoped as a conclusion that the issue of preserving the House of Caribou would be a link between all the Innu of Quebec and Labrador to mobilize and take position unanimously.

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Amis du Mushuau-nipi allow civil society, governments and First Nations to develop a knowledge of the world of First Nations. They promote cultural sharing and involvement in the territory in order to see the emergence of future leaders.

The Mushuau-nipi (lake of land without trees) is located on the migratory trail of the George River caribou herd (56th parallel), 250 kilometers northeast of Schefferville. Real cultural center of the Innu Nation for thousands of years, it is not a coincidence that this area is also part of the House of Caribou. The Mushuau-nipi is considered an archaeological site of national importance and a vital place in the history of the Innu and Naskapi of Quebec and Labrador, regarding the hunting of caribou.

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