



Satellite imagery reveals Alberta's woodland caribou and grizzly bear habitat heavily fragmented by industrial activities

EDMONTON, March 22, 2006 – Results of the most comprehensive survey to date of Alberta's remaining wild forest fragments were released today in Edmonton by Global Forest Watch Canada. The Alberta "case study" is a part of a Canada-wide project that used digital data and over a thousand satellite images to map Canada's remaining wild forest fragments. *Canada's Forest Landscape Fragments: A First Approximation* reveals that Alberta's forest landscapes have been heavily fragmented by logging and oil and gas activities. Woodland caribou and grizzly bear habitat, in particular, has been heavily fragmented and very little of it is protected outside of national parks.

"The project focused on Alberta for a case study because we were aware that Alberta's forests have experienced very substantial industrial logging and oil and gas activities over a very short time period. We wanted to know how much unfragmented forest is left and to begin to establish a link between what's left and important ecological issues, such as the health of woodland caribou and grizzly bear populations. Despite the fact that important data on public forests is extremely difficult to acquire from the Alberta Government and from Alberta forest companies, we've been able to conduct the most thorough assessment to date of how much of Alberta's forest landscapes are left as fragments, and which forest landscape areas are heavily fragmented," said Peter Lee, ecologist and executive director of Global Forest Watch Canada.

Large areas of forest landscape fragments - areas relatively untouched by industrial activity - remain in only a limited number of regions on earth – including the boreal forests of North America and Russia, and the rainforests of the Amazon, Central Africa and South East Asia. These areas are important for sustaining wildlife population and providing ecological services to human societies. In Canada, nearly 454 million hectares, or 70 percent of the area examined in the Global Forest Watch Canada study, remain as forest landscape fragments. In Alberta, less than 40 percent remain.

The vast majority (over 90 percent) of Canada's remaining forest landscape fragments (larger than 10,000 ha for the boreal and taiga forest regions and larger than 5,000 ha for the temperate forest regions) can be found in a broad belt of forests stretching across Canada's boreal and taiga regions. These boreal landscapes are a rich mosaic of forestlands, rivers, lakes, and wetlands. The vast majority of Alberta's remaining forest landscape fragments can be found in high elevation areas in the Rocky Mountains and in the far northeastern corner of Alberta where there are few commercial forests and few known oil and gas reserves.

Only 7 of the Alberta Government's 63 Forest Management Units have more than 50 percent of their area remaining as forest landscape fragments and less than half of the watersheds in the Alberta study area had more than 50 percent of their area remaining as forest landscape fragments. The study shows that, in Alberta, woodland caribou and grizzly bear ranges have been heavily fragmented by industrial activities.

"Woodland caribou are sensitive to human-caused disturbances. The Alberta government reports that 9 of the 12 woodland caribou herds in Alberta whose status has been determined are considered to be under immediate risk of extirpation or in decline," said Peter Lee. "The most serious threat to Alberta grizzly bear populations is human-caused mortality resulting from uncontrolled human access and activity, according to other Alberta government reports. The grizzly bear was once abundant in Alberta – estimates of the historic Alberta population range from 6,000 to 10,000 – but it is now extirpated from a large portion of its former range. There appears to be strong correlation between Alberta's declining woodland caribou and grizzly bear populations and the low amount of remaining forest landscape fragments."

Other important Alberta findings:

- In Alberta, protected areas (especially federally, as opposed to provincially, protected areas) are an important repository of the province's remaining forest landscape fragments.

- Alberta's Foothills forest region has the smallest proportion (7%) of the province's natural regions remaining as forest landscape fragments. This region has been historically important for both woodland caribou and grizzly bear.
- *Grizzly bear*: The total grizzly bear distribution area comprises approximately 36% (240,066 km²) of Alberta. Only 26% (62,597 km²) of the total grizzly bear distribution area in Alberta still contains forest landscape fragments and only 43% (26,796 km²) of all the forest landscape fragments that occur within grizzly bear distribution areas are within protected areas (primarily federally protected areas).
- *Woodland caribou*: The area of woodland caribou occurrence comprises approximately 26% (170,330 km²) of Alberta. 43% (73,181 km²) of the total woodland caribou occurrence area contains forest landscape fragments, yet only 14% (23,998 km²) of all the forest landscape fragments that occur within woodland caribou occurrence areas are within protected areas (primarily federally protected areas).

"These findings underscore the need for Alberta and Canada to manage our remaining wild forest landscape fragments in a precautionary manner," concludes Peter Lee of Global Forest Watch Canada.

The report, maps, photographs, and the forest landscape fragments GIS data layer are widely and freely accessible in electronic format on the Global Forest Watch Canada website (www.globalforestwatch.ca) in order to provide a baseline for practical planning and decision-making in Canada's forests.

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The Global Forest Watch Canada report, *Canada's Forest Landscape Fragments: A First Approximation*, and associated spatial datasets, photos, and maps are available for download on the GFWC website: www.globalforestwatch.ca

Global Forest Watch Canada was formed to provide access to more complete information about development activities in Canada's forests and their environmental impacts. We are convinced that providing greater information about Canada's forests will lead to better decision-making on forest management and use, which ultimately will result in forest management regimes that provide a full range of benefits for both present and future generations.