

Progress and achievements

In our first sustainability report produced for summer 2004, we identified 14 specific goals that would move us toward a more sustainable operation. Here we report on our progress to date and share stories of how our people are leading the way.

Protecting wildlife, forests and plant communities

CMH exists to share the beauty and majesty of western Canada's mountain ecosystems with guests from around the world. We have a deep commitment to ensuring the protection and vibrancy of the places where we operate.

Goal

1. At least once per year, work with government and consulting biologists to review and up-date staff training and field operating procedures to be consistent with new information and research results.

Progress to date

- We worked with external consulting wildlife biologists to review and enhance our wildlife operating procedures, particularly around species at risk such as Mountain Caribou. Wildlife biologists in the BC government reviewed our procedures, and a presentation was made to the Kootenay-based environmental group Wildsight and to staff from the provincial Species at Risk office. Based on their input, our wildlife operating procedures and computer tracking systems were revised in January 2005.
- Dave Butler, our Director of Land Resources provided sessions on species at risk, Mountain Caribou, and wildlife operating procedures for all our heli-ski guides. This resulted in immediate and dramatic changes. In the winter of 2004, for example, we saw closures amounting to 281 run-days (# ski runs x # of days closed) for wildlife reasons. In 2005, this increased to 2,946 run-days.
- We supported (through cash and in-kind contributions) a wildlife inventory project with the provincial government in the Cariboo region and a university research project on wolves in the Kootenay region.



Protecting wildlife, forests and plant communities



Goal

2. Work with credible external partners to conduct an annual review of our wildlife practices and data.

Progress to date

- We hired external wildlife experts Dr. Steve Wilson and Dennis Hamilton to review our operating procedures and the information collected from the winter of 2004/05. This resulted in additional changes to our operating procedures, and was the focus of training sessions for heli-ski guides and pilots in December 2005.
- We worked with HeliCat Canada (formerly the BC Helicopter and Snow cat Operators Association) and the province's Species at Risk Office to develop and implement wildlife operating procedures for the entire heli- and snow-cat sector. In fact, our own operating practices became the foundation for a memorandum of understanding signed in November 2005 between the BC government and HeliCat Canada and training sessions for pilots, guides, and snowcat operators throughout the industry in 2006.

Goal

3. Collect data from ABLE (Applying Backcountry Landscape Evaluations) study plots in 2004 and continue to refine operations as required.

Progress to date

- Two summer students collected information from ABLE study plots during the summer of 2004 and published a report in 2005. This report is part of an on-going study to monitor the impact of our hiking program on plant communities over five-year cycles and is available on our website at www.CanadianMountainHolidays.com/stewardship. Although the strength of the study will result from analyzing data over the long term, the results have shown for example that alpine heather communities are intolerant to trampling by humans and even 75 passes in a season will result in visible damage. Accordingly we have provided this information to our pilots and guides to help them make more informed decisions when choosing their hiking routes.

CMH prioritizes species at risk: mountain caribou

Caribou are a familiar sight to Canadians – just look on the back of the 25-cent coin. Unfortunately the Mountain Caribou population is declining in the wild and they are considered a “species at risk” in need of special protection in British Columbia. Mountain Caribou live in many of the regions where CMH operates. Our goal is to ensure that our skiing, flying, and hiking occur in a way that does not cause animals to move from the mountain habitats in which they choose to reside.

SnowBase goes wild

In 2004, caribou experts Dennis Hamilton and Dr. Steve Wilson helped us adapt our internally-developed SnowBase database (which is used by our mountain guides to track and utilize snow, weather and slope stability data) to set digital warning flags on our daily run-lists in places where we have potential for overlap with mountain caribou, or other key species such as mountain goats or wolverines.

Now, our area managers proactively place digital “alert” flags on our ski run lists – even before the season starts – to identify specific areas where wildlife are expected to be during the season. If we actually see the animals or their tracks during the season or if we get up-to-date information from other sources about animal locations, the ski run or group of ski runs are closed or we significantly change the way in which we operate in the area. We are confident that this is a unique and leading edge system to address the needs of wildlife, but we will be carefully monitoring its effectiveness in future winters.

Leading an industry-wide change

In response to the shrinking caribou population numbers, the BC government recently embarked on a comprehensive species recovery planning process. The entire helicopter and snow-cat skiing sector takes this issue very seriously because many of our operations are located in or near the alpine and sub-alpine forests that Mountain Caribou call home in the winter.

CMH President Walter Bruns serves as the volunteer Past-President of HeliCat Canada (HCC), the helicopter and snow-cat skiing association. On behalf of HeliCat Canada, Walter signed a Memorandum of Understanding with BC's Ministers of Environment, Agriculture and Lands, and Tourism, Sport and the Arts in December 2005. The agreement sets some over-riding principles about Mountain Caribou recovery and it lists specific operating practices to which all members of HCC will adhere. Much of the intent and content of the agreement is based on the innovative work that CMH has done in research, inventory and operating practices over the last five years.

This new agreement is important not only because it is a proactive approach to a significant environmental issue but also because it recognizes the unique realities and opportunities offered by helicopter and snow-cat skiing in addressing wildlife issues. With this agreement in place, we recognize that there may be increased scrutiny of our sector's activities by government, local communities, other tourism operators, recreational users and conservation groups; we welcome that scrutiny.



“CMH is a model of what tourism operators in the province can be doing to showcase the industry's ability as stewards in environmental protection and on-site research.”

~ Mary Mahon-Jones, Chief Executive Officer,
Council of Tourism Associations
February 2006