

Caribou

Caribou are the deer of the far north, covering enormous areas in their migrations and searches for food, when alarmed running pell mell across the barren ground with a sharp clicking of the tendons which can be heard for miles around.

In a 1972 study of the Kaminurial Herd for the Canadian Wildlife Service, Gerald Parker concluded that "the caribou has survived because it has evolved marvellously to fit its environment. They seem to seek out the cold—the Porcupine Herd of the Yukon winters in the coldest spot in North America, Ogilvie Range, where the temperature often drops to 80 degrees below for a month".

They are indeed remarkably resilient, surviving howling winds, scant food, clouds of summer insects, Inuit hunters and swarms of scientists, but fifty years ago their survival appeared threatened. Their primeval population may have been two and a half million, but intensive hunting, forest fires, and high calf mortality had conspired to reduce them to some 200,000 by the 1920s.

The animals were protected from most

Canadians by strict game laws, but Inuit and Indians were allowed to continue hunting them at will. The caribou was part of their life in much the same way that the cow is part of British life. In this case therefore, *wildlife* management soon came to consist primarily of *people* management. Indians and Inuit were given fishing nets and encouraged to feed their sled dogs on fish. The annual caribou hunts were organised and supervised to avoid over-kill, and a temporary wolf control programme was instituted. Today the caribou is back up to 900,000 and steadily increasing.

At present, conservationists are concerned with the possible effects on the caribou of gas and oil pipelines and the increasing presence of man. When a two-mile simulated pipeline was constructed across migration paths, out of 5,600 animals approaching the pipe only 1,800 crossed over by the gravel ramps or underpasses provided. About 2,500 eventually found the end of the pipe and went around, but fully 2,000 turned back altogether. That's not conclusive, but it is disturbing.

