

## How does the environmental state keep nature cheap?

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Nature's devaluation – its treatment as cheap, or disposable – is a key strategy of capitalist accumulation. This point is by now axiomatic within critical environmental scholarship. But how exactly is nature devalued? What institutions and mechanisms deliver cheap natures? And especially, how is cheap nature maintained within increasingly “environmental states” – that is, states with ostensibly protective environmental laws and regulations? Towards an answer, we look to woodland caribou in Canada, a species undergoing runaway defaunation in an era of expanding formal protections. Scientists are clear that woodland caribou declines stem from proliferating industrial development: mines, forestry, and oil and gas activities and infrastructures. All these developments must be approved by the state, which is also responsible for protecting and recovering caribou, which are a designated species at risk in Canada. So how does this environmental state keep caribou cheap? Answers can be found in state and financial records. A forensic analysis of coal mining approvals and financial flows in endangered Central Mountain Caribou habitat in British Columbia reveals three ways the state devalues caribou in service of capital accumulation (for some).

- 1) The state heavily subsidizes caribou-destroying developments – between 2000 and 2011, tens of millions of dollars of public funds were funneled to three coal mines operating in Central Mountain Caribou habitat.
- 2) The state allows companies to “idle” their mines when coal prices drop, prolonging the period of caribou habitat disturbance.
- 3) The state justifies its approval of these mines based on promised social benefits, but does not track whether these benefits materialize (and our research suggests they don't).

In these ways, the state delivers cheap caribou and facilitates capital accumulation for the beneficiaries of caribou decline: namely, company owners and shareholders located in Australia, the US, and Japan.