



## Horizontal Evaluation at a Glance Species at Risk Program

Canada must protect and conserve at-risk species, to maintain and protect biodiversity. The [Species at Risk Act](#) (SARA) provides the legal framework for protecting species listed as extirpated, endangered and threatened and their critical habitat, and for managing species of special concern.

Under SARA, the federal government is responsible for the protection of migratory birds and aquatic species wherever they occur and listed species on federal lands.

### About the program

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The implementation of SARA through the Species at Risk (SAR) Program is a shared responsibility of Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) and the Parks Canada Agency (PCA), collectively referred to as the “competent departments”. These competent departments implement the SAR Program through a range of interconnected activities that occur over the five stages of the SAR conservation cycle: assessment, protection, recovery planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Program expenditures over the five-year period totalled about \$444 million.

### What the evaluation found

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The SAR Program remains relevant because there is a continuing need to protect at-risk species and biodiversity. As well, the program is aligned with federal government priorities, roles and responsibilities.

The SAR Program’s performance was evaluated against expected results for each of the five stages of the conservation cycle. The evaluation found that overall, the program is contributing at least somewhat to its expected results. The following are some of the key findings.

- The SAR Program’s end goal is the recovery of species. However, the process to reach this long-term objective can take decades for some species. According to assessments by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, 10 years after listing, most species (65%) remain at the same listing status. For 16% of assessed species, there is evidence of progress towards meeting objectives, and 6% of assessed species that were previously listed are no longer at risk.
- Protection of the critical habitat of listed terrestrial species and, to a lesser degree, aquatic species, is occurring in federal protected areas. On other federal lands, required protection of critical habitat is being met to a limited degree by using protection assessments, protection statements and orders. On non-federal lands, the government has issued



emergency protection orders for two species. Some non-regulatory tools, such as conservation agreements (mentioned in SARA), industry certification and land use management plans could be beneficial in the appropriate circumstances. However, the SAR Program has seldom used these tools.

- Success in addressing the recovery planning backlog will create new pressure to develop and publish action plans. Early attention to this step in recovery planning may help prevent future backlogs. Also, while partners appeared to have an improved understanding of the objectives of species conservation through recovery planning, those not involved with program delivery at the national level appear to lack this understanding.
- While some required reporting is occurring in the SARA annual reports, resource constraints negatively impact the ability to adequately monitor all listed species, as well as the ability of the program to quantify the effectiveness of recovery actions.

The SAR Program is appropriately designed and is generally well managed. However, there are areas for improvement regarding program efficiency and delivery.

- Despite recent improvements, better integration of the stages of the conservation cycle and an increased use of multi-species or ecosystem-based approaches could improve efficiency.
- Limited resources impact the ability to fully implement the program and ensure compliance with the requirements of SARA. This is particularly the case as program workload builds; certain mandatory activities, such as regulatory approaches for protection, are resource intensive. This also impacts the implementation of recovery activities by partners and stakeholders, who view grants and contributions programs under the SAR Program as underfunded. Greater flexibility in the funding of projects would allow SAR Program managers to direct funds to address capacity issues and to better support multi-species or ecosystem-based approaches.
- There is collaboration between federal, provincial and territorial partners, as well as engagement with other partners. However, there are opportunities to improve collaboration between the federal and provincial and territorial governments, to encourage seamless protection of species at risk across federal and non-federal lands. In addition, increased engagement with Indigenous peoples is needed to ensure that their views are heard and incorporated into the stages of the conservation cycle.

## Recommendations

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Based on the nature of this evaluation, which focused on the overall SAR Program, and the varying responsibilities of the three competent departments, the recommendations reflect observations that were common to all or most federal partners. As such, the recommendations are broadly worded. They generally apply across the three departments, but the management responses specify



the actions each applicable federal partner can take to best contribute to addressing each recommendation.

The following recommendations are directed to the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) of the Canadian Wildlife Service (ECCC), the ADM of Aquatic Ecosystems (DFO) and the Vice-President (VP) of Protected Areas Establishment and Conservation (PCA). They agree with the recommendations and have developed management responses that appropriately address them.

**Recommendation 1: take steps to address the backlog that is developing related to commitments for publishing action plans and accumulating protection requirements for critical habitat for federal species and species on federal lands (SARA section 58).**

**Management response:** The Departments and the Agency will move forward with action planning and protection, in line with the strategic direction and priorities set out in the Natural Legacy for Canada initiative proposed in Budget 2018, including advancement of multi-species, ecosystem approaches for priority places, species, threats and sectors, where applicable.

**Recommendation 2: seek ways to enhance (a) the effectiveness of consultation and engagement of Indigenous peoples in the conservation and protection of at-risk species and (b) the integration of available Indigenous Knowledge (IK) into species assessment and recovery planning.**

**Management response:** The Departments and the Agency recognize the value of building internal and Indigenous capacity, to better meet SARA's consultation and co-operation obligations across the program cycle (assessment, listing, recovery, protection, permitting and reporting). An important part of this is supporting Indigenous peoples in achieving capacity to participate meaningfully in SARA implementation. ECCC, in co-operation with DFO and PCA, will enhance its efforts in this regard, as set out in the Natural Legacy initiative.

Many PCA places are managed with Indigenous Cooperative Management Boards. PCA will continue to work collaboratively with Indigenous representatives on the management of species at risk in protected heritage places. PCA also regularly consults on multi-species action plans and will continue this best practice. DFO will augment existing programming related to Indigenous partnering in species conservation through further investments in capacity building. DFO will also facilitate the involvement of Indigenous groups in recovery implementation efforts in priority areas, for priority species and with respect to priority threats. ECCC will lead engagement with the recently re-established National Aboriginal Council for Species at Risk (NACOSAR) and bilateral committees in place or to be created with each of the three National Indigenous Organizations, to ensure that initiatives are aligned with the needs and interests of Indigenous communities. A key objective will be to work towards ensuring that species at risk are protected on Indigenous lands considered as federal lands under SARA, including self-administered arrangements where First Nations agree.



The conservation and recovery of species at risk depend on having the best available science, traditional and local knowledge and information on species when the status of species is assessed and as recovery and action plans for a species are articulated. COSEWIC, via the Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Sub-Committee, prepares annual work plans that articulate priorities related to IK gathering. The Departments and the Agency will work with Indigenous peoples to discuss how IK can be better incorporated into all processes under SARA.

**Recommendation 3: clarify and communicate to stakeholders the role and use of non-regulatory tools in supporting conservation outcomes for at-risk species, including the related resource requirements.**

**Management response:** The Departments and the Agency recognize that non-regulatory tools provide opportunities to generate conservation outcomes. Agreements and stewardship funding initiatives have been in use for many years with organizations and landowners, for the conservation and recovery of species at risk. To date, ECCC has signed over 40 Section 11 conservation agreements with either First Nations or agricultural producers. ECCC will consider lessons learned from these agreements as additional agreements are advanced. In addition, policy statements and guidance materials will be completed to guide decision making and implementation of approaches related to the use of certification programs, codes of practice and other alternative measures to achieve conservation outcomes. DFO will continue to pursue the use of non-regulatory tools to advance conservation and recovery objectives.

Progress in developing additional agreements for some specific purposes depends on the availability of appropriate financing. In this regard, Budget 2018 highlighted the government's commitment to a Nature Fund, which supports partnerships with corporate, not-for profit, provincial, territorial and other partners. Among its goals, the Fund will make it possible to secure private land, support protection of species at risk and their critical habitat on other non-federal lands, and help build Indigenous capacity to conserve land and species.

**Recommendation 4: address the capacity challenges to support the Species at Risk Program in meeting its legislated requirements.**

**Management response:** On February 27, 2018, the Government of Canada announced funding of \$1.3 billion over five years to support Canada's biodiversity and protect species at risk. Implementation plans will be developed to ensure that capacity challenges are addressed to the extent possible, with particular emphasis placed on achieving conservation outcomes related to priority areas, threats and species. Additional capacity will also be invested in core functions required to maintain compliance with legislative and regulatory requirements, including to support consultation and co-operation with Indigenous peoples.



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## About the evaluation

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The evaluation examined the SAR Program over a five-year period, from fiscal year 2011 to 2012 to fiscal year 2015 to 2016, and incorporated information for fiscal year 2016 to 2017, where available. Multiple lines of evidence informed the evaluation results, including: a review of documents, literature and administrative data; 64 interviews with internal and external stakeholders; an online survey of 38 partners and stakeholders; and three case studies of SAR Program implementation.