Horizontal evaluation of the Species at Risk Program

Final Report
January 2025

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Accessibility statement

As of the date of publication, the document has been verified for accessibility.

If you have any questions about this document, please contact us at: audit-evaluation@ec.gc.ca

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CESD

Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development

DFO

Fisheries and Oceans Canada

ECCC

Environment and Climate Change Canada

PC
Parks Canada

1. Introduction

In 2022, Canada hosted the United Nations Biodiversity Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. During that meeting, governments from around the world agreed on a new framework to drive action to halt and reverse nature loss (United Nations, 2022a). The resulting Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework recognizes that biodiversity is "fundamental to human well-being [and] a healthy planet", but despite this, biodiversity is "declining faster than at any time in human history" (United Nations, 2022b, p. 4). The Global Biodiversity Framework (PDF) calls on national governments to:

> "Take urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss to put nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of people and planet by conserving and sustainably using biodiversity" (United Nations, 2022b, p. 8).

One of the ways in which Canada protects its biodiversity is through the federal *Species at Risk Act* (2002). The federal *Species at Risk Act* exists to prevent wildlife species from becoming extinct, and to provide for the recovery of wildlife species that are threatened by human activity (Government of Canada, 2002). The federal *Species at Risk Act* is administered by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC). It is delivered jointly by ECCC, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), and Parks Canada (PC). The department or agency's responsibility for species is based on where the species are found. The Minister of the Environment is competent with respect to all terrestrial species (other than individuals in Parks Canada managed lands or waters), the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans is competent with respect to aquatic species (other than individuals in Parks Canada managed lands or waters) and the Minister responsible for Parks Canada is competent with respect to individuals in or on federal lands and waters administered by that Agency. Collectively, at the start of the evaluation, these organizations, along with their provincial, territorial, Indigenous, and other partners, were responsible for the protection of 640 species identified in the Act (see Appendix A) [1].

Since the federal *Species at Risk Act* is such an important piece of legislation, the administration and delivery of the Act, through the Species at Risk Program, has been subject to several audits and evaluations in recent years (see Appendix B).

The Horizontal Evaluation of the Species at Risk Program aims to complement the findings of past audits and evaluations and is conducted in accordance with the requirements of the 2016 Treasury Board Policy on Results.

1.1. Recovery Documents

There are four key recovery documents required once a species is listed under the federal *Species at Risk Act*: recovery strategies, management plans, action plans, and implementation reports. For species that are listed as threatened, endangered, or extirpated, these documents identify whether the recovery of a species is biologically and technically feasible, and, if so, outlines and reports on the activities that should be undertaken to help recover and manage species at risk. Provinces and territories, management or conservation boards, Indigenous organizations and communities, and private citizens or organizations are included in the development of these documents as applicable.

The requirements of each type of recovery document are identified in the federal *Species at Risk Act*, as follows:

Figure 1: Requirements of Recovery Documents Under the Federal *Species at Risk Act*

Recovery Strategies (s.37-46)

If recovery is feasible: The competent minister(s) must prepare a recovery strategy for all extirpated, endangered, and threatened species, which includes:

- a description of the species and its needs;
- an identification of the threats to the survival of the species and a description of the broad strategy to be taken to address those threats;
- an identification of the species' critical habitat, examples of activities that are likely to result in its destruction;
- a schedule of studies to identify critical habitat, where available information is inadequate; and,
- a statement of the population and distribution objectives that will assist the recovery and survival of the species.

If recovery is not feasible: The government must prepare a recovery strategy which includes:

- a description of the species and its needs;
- an identification of the species' critical habitat to the extent possible; and
- the reasons why its recovery is not feasible.

Action Plans (s.47-55)

The competent minister(s) must prepare an action plan to support a recovery strategy, which includes:

- an identification of the species' critical habitat (in addition to what is identified in the recovery strategy) and examples of activities that are likely to result in its destruction;
- a statement of the measures that are proposed to be taken to protect the species' critical habitat;
- an identification of any portions of the species' critical habitat that have not been protected;
- a statement of the measures that are to be taken to implement the recovery strategy, as well as an indication for when these measures are to take place;
- the methods to be used to monitor the recovery of the species and its long-term viability; and,
- an evaluation of the socio-economic costs of the action plan and the benefits to be derived from its implementation.

Management Plans (s.65-72)

For all species of special concern, the competent minister(s) is required to prepare a management plan.

The plan identifies the species and its habitat and includes measures for the conservation of the species that the competent minister considers appropriate.

Implementation Reports

The government must report on the implementation of the recovery strategies and management plans within five years of its first publication, and every five years after that, until the objectives are achieved, or it is no longer feasible to recover the species.

The government must report on the implementation of action plans within five years of its first publication.

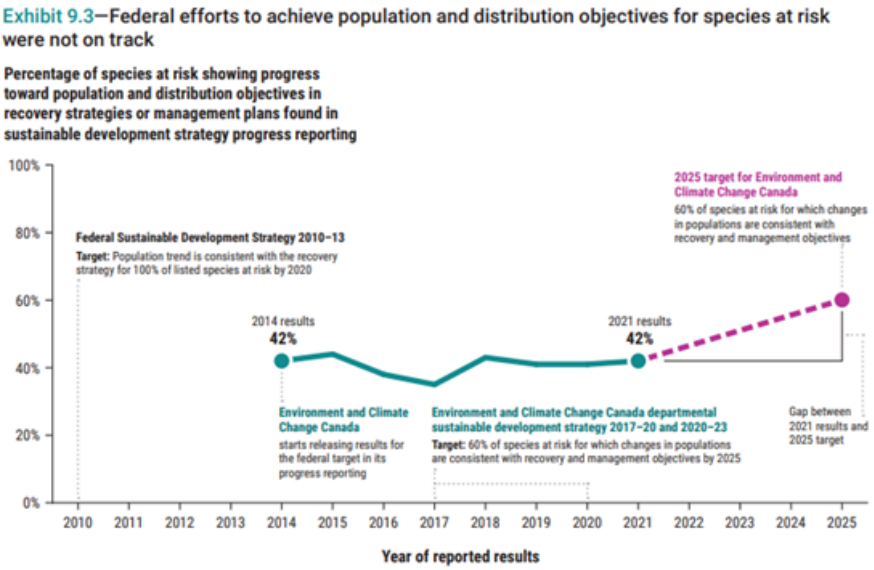
Recovery strategies and action plans are important because they identify the critical habitat and population distribution objectives for each species. Recovery strategies, action plans and management plans can also help support stakeholders and partners to identify important recovery actions, research areas, coordinate their activities and set priorities.

A recent audit by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development (CESD) found that, as of 2022, the government has completed 90% of the recovery strategies and management plans required to support species at risk (566 out of 627 required documents). However, the government only completed 43% of the required action plans (111 out of 257 required documents) (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023b, p. 11).

1.2. Species at Risk in the Context of Canada's Biodiversity Goals

Canada has made strong commitments to biodiversity. The government set a target of having "60% of species at risk for which changes in populations are consistent with recovery and management objectives by 2025" (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023b). However, the CESD found that, as of 2021, such population trends had been achieved for 42% of species (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023a, p. 15).

Figure 2: Canada's Progress Towards its Species at Risk Recovery Goals (as identified by the Office of the Auditor General)



▶ Long description

Notes:

- The 2013 to 2016, 2016 to 2019, and 2019 to 2022 federal sustainable development strategies did not include a percentage for the species at risk target.
- Environment and Climate Change Canada's 2017 to 2020 and 2020 to 2023 departmental sustainable development strategies both set a target of 60% to be achieved by 2025.

Source: Data from Environment and Climate Change Canada's departmental sustainable development strategy progress reports.

Within the context of the CESD reports' findings, this evaluation aims to identify the underlying activities taking place within ECCC, PC, and DFO to recover species at risk. While the CESD reports clearly found challenges with meeting the legislative timelines for recovery documents, this evaluation explores how ECCC, PC and DFO work together to recover species at risk, whether they can track their results to date, and if the information they collect about species at risk is being used effectively to make decisions about what actions to take in the future.

2. Methodology

The Horizontal Evaluation of the Species at Risk Program is part of ECCC's Audit and Evaluation Plan 2022 to 2027. This summative evaluation covers the five-year period from 2017-2018 to 2021-2022. The evaluation examines the program's governance, its ability to monitor progress, and its effectiveness. It should be noted that DFO recently completed its Evaluation of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Activities in Support of Aquatic Species at Risk (2021) which covered the efficiency and effectiveness of DFO's efforts to protect aquatic species at risk. Therefore, DFO only participated in the governance section of the evaluation.

The monitoring progress and effectiveness sections of this evaluation are focused solely on the activities undertaken by ECCC and PC. The evaluation matrix for this evaluation can be found in Appendix C.

To better understand the program's ability to monitor its progress towards species recovery, and to assess its effectiveness, the evaluation took a case study approach. Ten species were selected to provide a more focused analysis of the program's activities. [2]

The case study species were selected to allow the evaluation team to assess a variety of factors impacting species at risk in Canada. Species were chosen for their geographic representation, risk status and the availability of recovery documents, among other factors. Since recovery documents are developed by regional specialists, the exact species selected are being withheld to protect the anonymity of participants. More information on the selection of case study species can be found in Appendix D.

The evaluation conducted a document analysis on the recovery documents publicly available on the Species at Risk Public Registry for each case study species, as well as a review of internal program documents.

Interviews were conducted with the ECCC and PC practitioners in different regions across Canada who are responsible for drafting recovery documents for the case study species, as well as with senior management from ECCC, PC and DFO. Finally, a survey of the external

partners, including provincial and territorial governments, academics, and non-governmental organizations, was conducted to gather information about the government's ability to support the implementation of the recovery documents.

3. Findings

3.1. Governance

Key findings: The Species at Risk interdepartmental governance is functioning adequately to meet the needs of each organization to facilitate communication and resolve problems. Responsibilities are clearly understood between ECCC, DFO, and PC; all organizations agree interdepartmental forums are working well; and information is shared between the organizations at both the working level and executive level. That said, these forums operate reactively and there is an opportunity and desire to expand the focus of these forums to introduce proactive identification of issues and interventions.

Governance refers to the way the program organizes itself to make decisions. Governance can include committees or decision-making forums; data collection, use and management; criteria for making decisions; the management of risk; and the allocation of resources. The evaluation focuses on how ECCC, DFO and PC interact and make decisions. It takes a narrow view of governance, and is primarily concerned with decision-making forums, collaboration, and the use of data to inform decision-making.

The evaluation does not consider how each individual department or agency governs its program, and it does not consider the interactions each department and agency has with Parliament or other levels of government.

Within Evaluation Scope

- Methods and processes that ECCC, DFO and PC use to work together
- Data and information management
- Decision-making forums
- Evidence of collaboration

Outside Evaluation Scope

- Methods or processes used to make decisions in any one department or agency
- Grants and contributions funding
- Reporting relationships to Parliament or other governments

ECCC, DFO and PC have effective working relationships. There are clear criteria for determining which department or agency is responsible for the development of recovery documents for each individual species at risk, and these criteria are consistently applied. Further, information about individual species is shared on an as-needed basis at the operational level. None of the interviewees indicated major problems sharing information with a practitioner in a different department or agency, although some noted that the volume of species requiring recovery documents created challenges for providing feedback in a timely way.

A review of interdepartmental meeting forums, in particular the federal *Species at Risk Act* Portfolio Meetings and Assistant Deputy Minister Monthly Trilaterals, shows that departments are addressing issues collectively as they arise. The document review identified several instances in which interdepartmental collaboration helped improve the administration of the program. For example, the common recovery strategy templates were developed and approved in these interdepartmental forums and are consistently applied by practitioners in ECCC, DFO and PC.

Across the 10 case study species examined, the format and quality of the recovery documents remained consistent, both between the species and between the lead department or agency. It should be noted that the three organizations have not developed a common approach to implementation reports, as PC and DFO are further advanced in the federal *Species at Risk Act*'s reporting cycle. However, we found a lack of formalized documentation to support the governance structures.

Formal terms of reference were unavailable for many of the interdepartmental committees, and while a review of annotated agendas demonstrated that the program was discussing a wide range of pertinent issues, records of decision were not available. As such, it is difficult to assess whether and how risks are being addressed, challenges and opportunities are being identified, or lessons learned are being shared between ECCC, DFO and PC. Interviewees indicated that the interdepartmental meetings react to issues and challenges as they arise.

To make decisions in a more strategic and coordinated way these forums should consider incorporating proactive planning on their agendas. Access to timely data would help the program identify challenges and opportunities, prioritize their activities, and make more proactive decisions. To do this, the program will require adequate performance information gathered by monitoring the progress of their actions/decisions.

3.2. Effectiveness

Key findings: While ECCC has a significant backlog of action plans and implementation reports (including 138 outstanding action plans), it is experimenting with new approaches to address the backlog. For example, the use of multi-species action plans and joint recovery strategies

and action plans are reducing the consultation timelines. However, due to the lack of action plans, ECCC misses opportunities to articulate and coordinate recovery actions among partners and stakeholders. Furthermore, ECCC and PC should work to develop stronger guidance on how to conduct meaningful socio-economic analysis to ensure that the costs and benefits to society derived from the implementation of the action plans are known. Finally, while the program is beginning to work more closely with Indigenous partners, progress in this area has been slow.

Effectiveness refers to the program's ability to meet its objectives. The effectiveness theme focusses on the day-to-day activities undertaken by the program, and how effectively these activities are carried out. Practitioners in ECCC regional offices and PC field units are responsible for certain elements of the federal *Species at Risk Act*, including writing the recovery documents (i.e., recovery strategies, management plans, and action plans) as well as consultations with stakeholders and partners. The evaluation also considered activities being undertaken to implement the actions outlined in the recovery documents.

Within Evaluation Scope

- Activities undertaken by the program to produce recovery documents
- Implementation of actions outlined in recovery documents
- Communications with Canadians
- Support for community actions
- Collaboration with Indigenous Partners

Outside Evaluation Scope

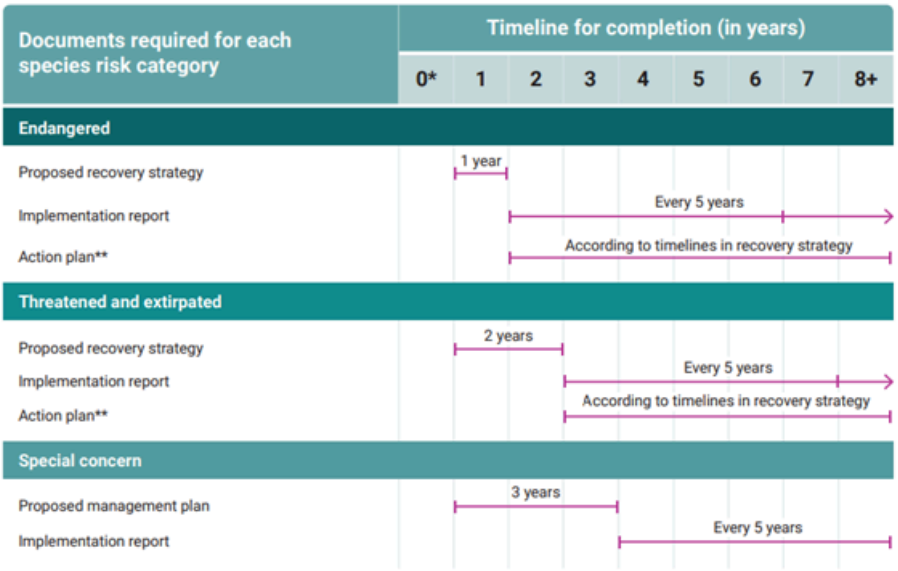
- Analysis of grants and contributions funding
- Assessing the number of recovery documents completed
- Priority species, priority places and priority sectors initiatives
- Outcomes identified in the performance information profile

Timely Development of Recovery Documents

In its 2023 Follow-up on the Recovery of Species at Risk report, the CESD focused on the Species at Risk Program's ability to produce recovery documents in a timely manner. The federal *Species at Risk Act* sets out very specific timelines for the development of recovery documents (Figure 3) (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023b, p. 3), but the CESD found that the program suffered from significant delays in the production of recovery documents, in particular action plans, of which 57% were overdue (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023b, p. 11).

Figure 3: Timelines for the Production of Recovery Documents under the Federal *Species at Risk Act* (as identified by the Office of the Auditor General)

Exhibit 2.1—Recovery planning and implementation reporting timelines under the *Species at Risk Act*



▶ Long description

Notes:

- *Year 0 is the date when the species is listed in the *Species at Risk Act*, Schedule 1.
- **The Act requires completion of the action plans according to the timeline in the recovery strategy of endangered, threatened, and extirpated species.

Source: Based on information from the federal *Species at Risk Act*.

It is important to note that these delays were not equally distributed across all organizations. The CESD found that ECCC was responsible for 94% of the missing action plans (or 138), while DFO [3] was responsible for eight missing action plans and PC had completed all its action plans (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023b, p. 11).

The evaluation identified a few key challenges to the timely development of action plans, through interviews with the practitioners: limited resources devoted to drafting documents, lengthy consultation timelines, and challenges with socio-economic analysis.

One of the key challenges that was repeatedly mentioned throughout the evaluation was the lack of qualified personnel to draft recovery documents. The drafting of recovery documents is done by practitioners in regional offices, who leverage their personal and professional networks to build rapport with the stakeholders and partners that supply the data required to complete the documents. The practitioners interviewed indicated that it can take several years before a new biologist has the knowledge and the network required to be an effective drafter of recovery documents. Furthermore, when practitioners change positions or retire, it can have a lasting impact on a region's ability to produce recovery documents.

A second source of backlog in the production of recovery documents stems from the legal requirement to consult on these draft plans. While practitioners did not indicate issues with the consultation process, some indicated that the volume of recovery documents is overwhelming for both the practitioners drafting the reports and the stakeholders and partners who need to respond to consultation requests. ECCC and PC have been experimenting with new approaches to drafting recovery documents to try and address this challenge.

Parks Canada uses multi-species action plans to address recovery needs for all the species at risk within a PC place in a single document, allowing them to identify recovery actions that can benefit multiple species at once and reduce the need for multiple consultations for individual species. This approach has been highly effective in allowing PC to meet legislated timelines for action planning of many species that occur in PC places.

This approach is more difficult to undertake at ECCC, as there are no pre-defined geographic boundaries, but a few interview participants indicated an openness to adopting this approach in areas where it makes sense. Although not directly studied in this evaluation, the Evaluation of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Activities in Support of Species at Risk (2021) also identified a growing interest in taking multi-species approaches to recovery documents for aquatic species (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2021). The use of multi-species action plans has already been recommended as an acceptable solution by the CESD and continues to be explored by the program (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023b, p. 12).

ECCC and DFO are also experimenting with planning documents that combine a species' recovery strategy and action plan. This approach could decrease consultation time, by reducing the number of documents from two to one, without sacrificing the quality of the consultations. Furthermore, much of the scientific information in a recovery strategy and action plan is the same, which means that combining the documents reduces the amount of duplication. This innovative approach has been used a limited number of times in the past by PC and ECCC but appears to be gaining momentum. The same benefits can be had by combining progress reports on the implementation of a recovery strategy and of an action plan for the same species. This approach is being taken for boreal caribou and is being considered for other species.

Socio-economic analysis

The requirement under the federal *Species at Risk Act* Section 49 (1)(e) to conduct socio-economic analysis is an area that seems to impact the production of action plans. Practitioners interviewed at ECCC and PC consistently identified the requirement to include an evaluation of the socio-economic costs of the action plan and the benefits to be derived from its implementation as a major challenge. [4] Practitioners at ECCC and PC are primarily biologists

and may not have formal training in economics. Practitioners report that they do not feel they can assess the socio-economic impacts of the actions they put forward with confidence, given limited in-house expertise. ECCC and PC have both expressed that they are developing new approaches to tracking socio-economic impacts in upcoming action plans.

PC has developed a standardized narrative describing the immediate impacts of the actions identified in multi-species action plans on society. This is often transferred verbatim between action plans, as the impacts are occurring in areas protected and managed by a federal department and are, in general, common across many PC places and are being mitigated. However, this approach is unlikely to generate meaningful information for decision making and does not work in the context of ECCC's multi-jurisdictional efforts. PC is improving their analysis and will be piloting their approach over 2024.

The Economic Analysis Directorate at ECCC works with the program to conduct socio-economic analysis in the context of regulatory impact analysis statement development required to list species under the federal *Species at Risk Act* or protect the critical habitat of a species at risk found on federal lands. However, this analysis does not extend to the entirety of the species' habitat (i.e., provincial jurisdictions), unless relevant portions of the Act are triggered (e.g., s.80 or s.61). To date, the Economic Analysis Directorate has focused its capacity on assessing socio-economic impacts directly related to the scope of the federal *Species at Risk Act* regulatory proposals being proposed by the Canadian Wildlife Service.

The Canadian Wildlife Service's analysis is more ad hoc, and practitioners do not seem to have a consistent understanding of the scope and purpose of the socio-economic analysis section of the action plans. Practitioners report that the department has not provided a clear definition or outline of what would meet the requirement under the federal *Species at Risk Act*.

Program documentation shows that several approaches to socio-economic analysis were under consideration by ECCC in the 2010s, but no decision was made on an appropriate approach, and advice does not appear to have been communicated to the regions.

A consistent approach to socio-economic analysis is important, as the information generated by this analysis can help to ensure that actions included in the action plans are both meaningful and feasible. Without a clear understanding of the benefits and costs of the proposed actions, it is very difficult to determine the resources required to implement the action plans, and the likelihood that the actions will be implemented in a timely way.

Interviewees have indicated that, while no decisions have been made, ECCC intends to use 2024 to develop an approach to action plans and define the socio-economic assessment requirements. It will be important to develop a change management plan to ensure regional

practitioners are informed and supported in their implementation of the recommended approach. This could also be an opportunity for proactive problem solving and sharing lessons learned through improved interdepartmental governance.

Implementing Recovery Actions

Writing action plans is not enough to recover species at risk; the plans inform actions on the ground. PC's mandate and structure enable its staff to implement their single and multi-species action plans on the ground at PC places, in collaboration with partners (when appropriate). PC focuses a large proportion of its federal *Species at Risk Act* budget on implementing recovery actions on the ground. However, at ECCC, implementation is more complex.

Since ECCC does not have jurisdiction over much of the habitat required by species at risk, it must work with provincial and territorial governments, Indigenous partners, and stakeholders like non-governmental organizations and private landowners to protect the habitat of, and implement recovery actions for, species at risk. ECCC provides conservation funding delivered through grants and contributions programs to encourage partners to act. The federal government may also use the federal *Species at Risk Act* to issue emergency orders to protect species or critical habitat on non-federal lands, or emergency orders to provide for the protection of species. It is important to verify that partners and stakeholders understand their role in protecting species at risk. Since implementation is so reliant on partners, it is especially important to have clear and effective action plans, which serve as a centralized place identifying a species' needs and coordinating actions.

The ECCC backlog of recovery documents negatively impacts the federal government's ability to direct and coordinate species at risk recovery actions among partners and stakeholders, impacting its overall goals on species recovery. When surveyed, the majority of participants indicated that they consult the existing recovery documents when deciding what actions to take. While ECCC does provide a number of funding programs to support the protection of critical habitat and species at risk, recovery documents would help stakeholders to better understand how these funding opportunities could be leveraged to support species at risk.

The federal *Species at Risk Act* Section 49 (1)(d) requires a "statement of the measures that are to be taken to implement the recovery strategy, including those that address the threats to the species and those that help to achieve the population and distribution objectives, as well as an indication as to when these measures are to take place." However, the average survey participant only slightly agreed that recovery documents "identified a clear plan for the recovery of species at risk."

Failing to complete action plans in a timely way means foregoing the ability to direct conservation actions. Furthermore, the action plans set out concrete measures and targets, which the program is required to report on in five-year implementation reports. Well written action plans can also help improve the Program's ability to monitor progress towards species recovery.

Working with Indigenous Partners

The federal *Species at Risk Act* requires recovery documents to be "prepared in cooperation with" Indigenous peoples (Government of Canada, 2002). Through the case study species, the evaluation aimed to understand how Indigenous peoples are engaged, and their input incorporated into recovery documents. It should be noted that the Horizontal Evaluation of the Species at Risk Program conducted in 2018 recommended that the program "seek ways to enhance…the effectiveness of consultation and engagement of Indigenous peoples in the conservation and protection of at-risk species" (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2018, p. 39). Therefore, the evaluation expected to find evidence that Indigenous Knowledge was being appropriately included in recovery documents.

The case study approach revealed that Indigenous engagement in the Species at Risk Program varies by species. Regional offices and field units are responsible for engaging with local Indigenous communities, and the level of Indigenous engagement is often dependent on the capacity of the regional offices or field units to facilitate engagement activities, and the capacity and interest of the local Indigenous communities to participate. In some cases, PC places are co-managed with Indigenous communities, which allows for clear, agreed upon approaches for Indigenous consultation and cooperation. While some regions can support more proactive engagement activities, for most case study species, engagement consists of the formal consultation process. Most interviewees recognized that Indigenous engagement was an ongoing effort and a work in progress.

The evaluation found that some measures implemented under the previous management action plan had since lapsed. For example, the previous evaluation indicated that the National Aboriginal Council on Species at Risk should be re-established and meetings reconvened, which was completed as of 2018. However, when the evaluators asked to speak with the committee, we were told that membership was still being established. Similarly, while the 2018 evaluation management action plan committed to "guidance and tools for [Canadian Wildlife Service] staff outlining a nationally consistent approach for meeting [federal *Species at Risk Act*] engagement and consultation obligations more effectively", practitioners still reported opportunities to improve engagement with Indigenous partner. In this context, it is

fundamental for the program to continue its efforts to improve Indigenous engagement. It should be noted that, since the completion of the evaluation, some progress has been made including the reconvening of the National Aboriginal Council on Species at Risk.

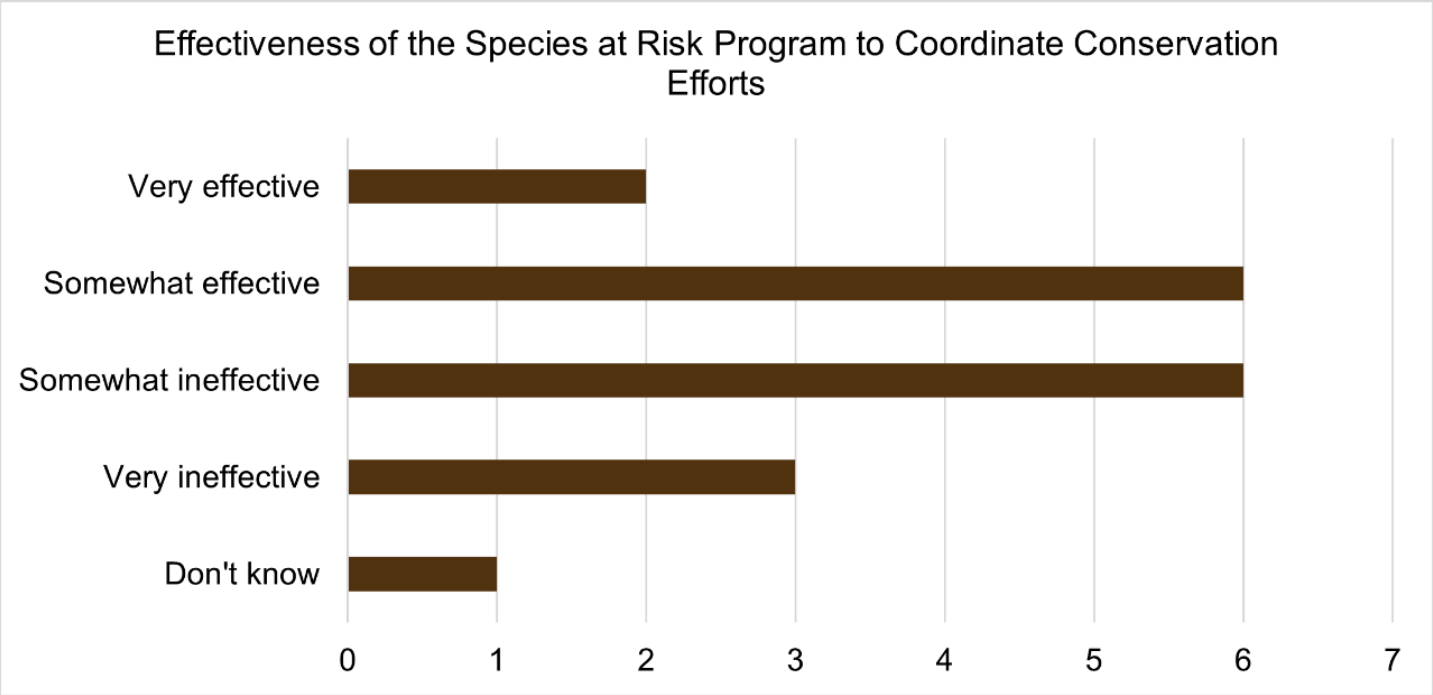
The evaluation acknowledges that although early engagement is beneficial, it is not always possible given the number of species requiring action plans. However, when done well, it can have more rewarding results as indicated in the case studies. For example, the soon to be published Multi-species Action Plan for Prince Edward Island National Park is being co-developed with Indigenous partners, and focuses on deeper engagement, full collaboration, and co-decision making to build a more inclusive plan. [5] This is also important because the Government of Canada is responsible for ensuring all of its legislation is compliant with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which the 2023 action plan says must be implemented by 2028 (Department of Justice Canada, 2023). Proactive planning by the Species at Risk Program would help them be better prepared to ensure the program is consistently compliant with the Government of Canada commitments to reconciliation.

Proactive Communication with Partners and Stakeholders

The level of stakeholder engagement and processes for communicating with stakeholders varied by species and seemed dependent on the capacity of regional staff. PC's efforts to communicate with partners and stakeholders were somewhat further advanced, likely due to its long-term relationships with partners and stakeholders and its processes for completing action plans (Parks Canada, 2023). However, at ECCC the evaluation found that much of the information sharing and collaboration was due to the networking and connections of the regional staff, rather than formalized institutional relationships.

Stakeholders, including provinces, territories, and non-governmental organizations, had mixed opinions about the effectiveness of the Species at Risk Program to coordinate their conservation efforts, with respondents being almost evenly divided between positive opinions (n=8) and negative opinions (n=9).

Figure 4: Survey Respondent Opinions on the Effectiveness of the Species at Risk Program to Coordinate Conservation Efforts



▶ Long description

Respondents were equally conflicted about whether the recovery documents clearly identified the group responsible for implementing recovery actions, with some respondents believing that recovery documents needed to be clearer about who was responsible for the required action (n=5), while others believed that recovery documents should be vague enough to give people the flexibility to contribute as they see fit (n=4).

In the past, recovery efforts were coordinated by dedicated recovery teams, which would meet on a regular basis (usually annually or biannually) to discuss past activities and identify new areas of focus. While recovery teams have been officially discontinued, some species still used legacy recovery teams or working groups to coordinate stakeholder efforts. Interestingly, both PC and ECCC indicated that they had better work relationships with partners and stakeholders for species that were covered by an ECCC-led working group or recovery team.

Given the importance of partners and stakeholders in the implementation of the Species at Risk Program, it is important to consider the ways in which communication could be improved. It is critical to address the backlog of recovery documents, as identified by the Auditor General, but also to consider re-establishing effective ways of communicating with stakeholders (such as using recovery teams).

3.3. Monitoring Progress

Key findings: ECCC and PC have different approaches to monitoring species populations and tracking the implementation of recovery actions. While this is in part due to the different jurisdictional and operational nature of their responsibilities, there is an opportunity to share

information management best practices, informed by PC's success in this area, to ensure that the information collected informs decision making.

Improved monitoring of species populations allows for better prioritization of limited resources and enables future strategic decisions to be adequately targeted.

Monitoring progress refers to the ways in which an organization identifies the data needed to make decisions, collects and analyzes that data, and applies it to address challenges, mitigate risks, or leverage opportunities. Monitoring progress is part of a larger process of performance measurement, in which the government tracks its activities against the expected results (or outcomes) of those activities. Performance information profiles, departmental plans, and departmental results reports are all tools used to identify, present, and share results achieved with Canadians.

Being able to effectively monitor progress allows a program to understand if its current actions are on track to meeting its long-term goals. It can also identify whether outside influences, such as climate change, are impacting the program's ability to achieve its expected outcomes. Lastly, monitoring progress supports evidence-informed decision making about the use of program resources. Without a solid understanding of the current state of species at risk in Canada, it is difficult to properly prioritize the use of limited resources and future strategic decisions may not be adequately targeted.

The Species at Risk Program has its own expected outcomes, related to the recovery of species at risk. However, species recovery is not a short-term goal. It can take many decades for a species population to recover and even detecting trends in species recovery takes a long time. Therefore, this evaluation did not consider the program's performance information profile since it is still too early to determine trends for many species. However, it is important for the program to understand whether it is on track to meet its expected outcomes. Therefore, the evaluation looked for evidence that the program was monitoring progress towards its expected outcomes, since it was not able to evaluate the outcomes.

Within Evaluation Scope

- How do we know how the program is currently performing?
- Is there quality information available to decision-makers?
- Processes used to collect and share information
- Communications with Canadians on progress
- Collaboration with Indigenous Partners

Outside Evaluation Scope

- Performance information profile
- Grants and contributions data

There are key differences in the way information was managed and used to support decision making between PC and ECCC. [6] These differences are partially explained by the different operating environments of each organization. However, there are still important lessons to learn by comparing the two organizational approaches.

Monitoring Progress to Make Informed Decisions

Under the federal *Species at Risk Act*, PC is responsible for individuals of all species at risk that occur in or on land and waters that PC administers (i.e., Parks Canada places, such as national parks, national marine conservation areas, national historic sites, etc.). For those species only found in PC places, PC has full control over its recovery planning, implementation actions, and monitoring activities outlined in their recovery documents.

When species recovery documents are led by ECCC or DFO for species that occur on PC managed lands and waters, PC participates in recovery planning, and implements and monitors recovery actions in PC places. This facilitates monitoring progress towards implementing the recovery activities and contributes to the species population data available for species found in PC places.

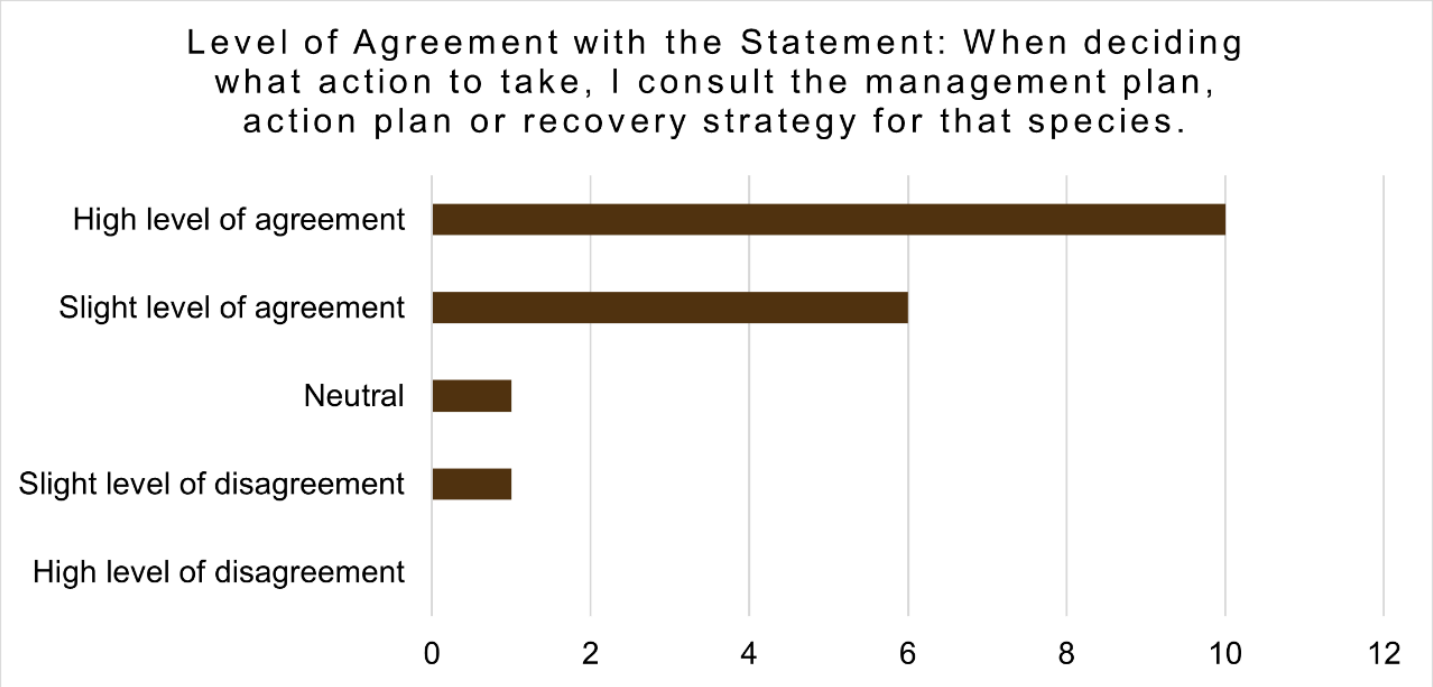
ECCC is responsible for the recovery of all terrestrial species at risk that are not in or on land PC administers. [7] However, terrestrial species' habitats are often not limited to federal crown land, and rather extend across jurisdictions. ECCC only has direct legislative authority for migratory birds. All other terrestrial species listed under the federal *Species at Risk Act* are primarily the responsibility of provinces and territories. Therefore, it is necessary for ECCC to work with partners and stakeholders, including provincial or territorial governments (many with their own species-related legislation), Indigenous communities, municipalities, non-governmental organizations, and/or private landowners. This limited control over the implementation of its recovery planning, implementation actions, and monitoring activities creates reporting challenges since ECCC must rely on its partners to collect and share species data.

The limited control over the implementation of action plans makes it difficult for ECCC to meet its obligations with respect to the *Species at Risk Act*. To that effect, we understand that ECCC is currently working to address a recent recommendation from the CESD with respect to recovery strategies, management plans and action plans, and publish implementation reports. ECCC also committed to building the plan to prioritize actions that have the greatest potential conservation outcome, and that will respect the need for meaningful collaboration and engagement with Indigenous communities and groups, stakeholders and other partners.

Setting clear, feasible and measurable directions and expectations is important to foster timely implementation of action plans by partners and could better support ECCC in meeting its obligation as per the *Species at Risk Act*. When surveyed, stakeholders indicated that the

recovery documents were a key source of direction they used when deciding what recovery actions to take.

Figure 5: Level of Survey Respondent Agreement with the Statement: When deciding what action to take, I consult the management plan, action plan or recovery strategy for that species



▶ Long description

The federal *Species at Risk Act* Section 49 (1) (d1) specifies that action plans must include "the methods to be used to monitor the recovery of the species and its long-term viability." It is important that the information management systems and practices under development at ECCC align with monitoring requirements in the action plans to allow for the creation of effective implementation reports.

Access to monitoring data about species at risk is critically important to decision making. A clear understanding of the population health of a species can help to identify trends, threats and possible interventions with greater speed and accuracy. This data can also help to better direct limited resources to the most effective conservation efforts and interventions. An internal review conducted by the program in 2015 found that the Species at Risk Program is managed across multiple data sets and tools (e.g. Excel spreadsheets, SharePoint sites, emails, etc.) that do not easily link with each other and are often reliant on unreliable infrastructure, making the management and tracking of information difficult and labour intensive. To address these findings, the program has been developing a Data Management and Tracking System to improve data consolidation and information sharing. The new Data Management and Tracking System is being implemented in three phases.

Phase 1 was completed in 2019, and resulted in an updated and searchable inventory of program documents posted on the Species at Risk Public Registry. The second phase of the project, expected to be completed in 2024, would improve the program's analytic and reporting capabilities. The third phase of the project aims to fully integrate the Species at Risk data into a new system to create an authoritative dataset that can support end-to-end analytics, tracking, reporting and managing legal risks.

The complementary Information and Data Management Strategy for the Canadian Wildlife Service highlights a number of goals for improving biodiversity data, including the development of an Indigenous lens on data, and processes for incorporating data sharing agreements into Nature Agreements. A proactive approach to knowledge sharing can help to ensure that recovery actions are undertaken in a way that respects Indigenous Knowledge Systems and weaves Indigenous knowledge into species monitoring.

The Horizontal Evaluation of the Species at Risk Program (2018) recommended that the program seek ways to enhance "the integration of available Indigenous Knowledge into species assessment and recovery planning" (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2018, p. 39), and this finding remains relevant.

ECCC and PC both identified the challenge ECCC faces to coordinate the wide range of partners and geographic areas. PC's information management practices work well because employees working in PC places can collect data from staff and partners to report on species data and the status of recovery actions within their administrative areas. Species population distribution objectives and actions taken are centrally tracked in PC's internal Information Centre on Ecosystems (ICE) database while occurrence data are tracked in the Biotics database. [8] These systems allow decision-makers to generate dashboards to monitor progress on recovery actions, and population and distribution objectives.

While ECCC is working to develop new data and information systems, interviewees believed a lack of resources was a key barrier to effective species monitoring. Once completed, the Data Management and Tracking System will only be as effective as the data available to support it. Regional offices are generally responsible for accessing data collected by provinces, territories and other regional partners and sharing information on species at risk, and often have primary responsibility for sharing this information with decision makers in the National Capital Region.

Despite the existence of departmental guidance on the creation of data management plans, the uptake of these tools varies between regions and across the Canadian Wildlife Service's portfolio. As such, the time it takes for decision makers to receive information about a species can vary depending on the species.

The Canadian Wildlife Service has developed guidance to improve data quality and standardization; however, practitioners still indicated a number of challenges. Interviewees indicated challenges identifying who is responsible for providing information on species at risk, as some species cross regional boundaries and therefore involve more than one ECCC regional office. Further, much of the information collected by regional offices is done informally, depending on personal relationships rather than formalized agreements between institutions. This creates a risk that access to key species data could be lost as employees change positions or retire.

Regional practitioners responsible for developing the recovery documents reported that they did not have the mandate, time or resources to conduct monitoring activities. However, a review of ECCC's annual reference level update for fiscal years 2018-2019 to 2021-2022 found that the program underspent its planned allocation by an average of $3.8 million annually. Given the discrepancy between perceived resources available and actual spending, program officials need to have access to robust species data to prioritize their interventions on what will achieve the greatest expected outcomes while optimizing the use of their budget. A more robust understanding of species populations can help the federal government better understand when additional protections for critical habitat are needed. Clearer performance data can help to make more sound decisions.

Although not considered as part of this evaluation, a separate evaluation of Fisheries and Oceans Canada Activities in Support of Aquatic Species at Risk (2021) found similar challenges regarding effective monitoring for aquatic species. Their evaluation report highlighted that "a lack of knowledge regarding many species can prevent the implementation of more concrete recovery measures" (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2021, p. 23). The DFO report concluded that many of the recovery measures identified in recovery documents drafted by DFO focused on data gathering rather than on actions to recover the species.

Effective monitoring could help prioritize the assignment of resources used to achieve better outcomes for species at risk. In some instances, species have been reassessed to a lower risk level (e.g., from endangered to special concern), not due to the implementation of recovery documents, but because upon further monitoring, the species population was more plentiful than initially believed. This process, colloquially referred to as "recovery by discovery" indicates that the program may be using their limited time and resources in an inefficient manner. Better monitoring data, for example through data sharing agreements with provinces and territories and other partners, would provide more complete information for decision makers, enabling the prioritization of actions (in a proactive manner) and the assignment of limited resources.

Communicating Progress to Canadians

The evaluation also considered the ways in which ECCC and PC communicate information about species at risk to the Canadian public. ECCC and PC have different mandates when it comes to interacting with the public, and their communication approaches reflect this.

In alignment with its mandate statement to "present nationally significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage, and foster public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment" [9] PC takes a more direct approach to communicating about species at risk, incorporating information about conservation and species recovery into its regular programming at PC places and on their public facing website.

Information-sharing at ECCC was primarily conducted via the Species at Risk Public Registry, where recovery documents are posted for public consumption. The Species at Risk Public Registry was up to date for all case study species; however, more proactive communication approaches varied by region and species. For example, ECCC has developed an interactive website to better convey conservation results and raise awareness about the six priority species, offering the public photos, videos and maps of the species' range, habitat, and priority action areas. [10] However, this style of presenting information is less readily available for other species.

Overall, proactive monitoring would allow the government to be able to share good news stories about efforts to recover species, as well as to better demonstrate the challenges facing species at risk. For example, due to their monitoring efforts, PC was recently able to share information about the actions taken to support caribou populations in Jasper National Park, including a new conservation breeding program and the ongoing challenges of keeping populations stable and growing. This type of proactive communication helps to educate Canadians and could be leveraged to inspire Canadians to act.

4. Looking Forward

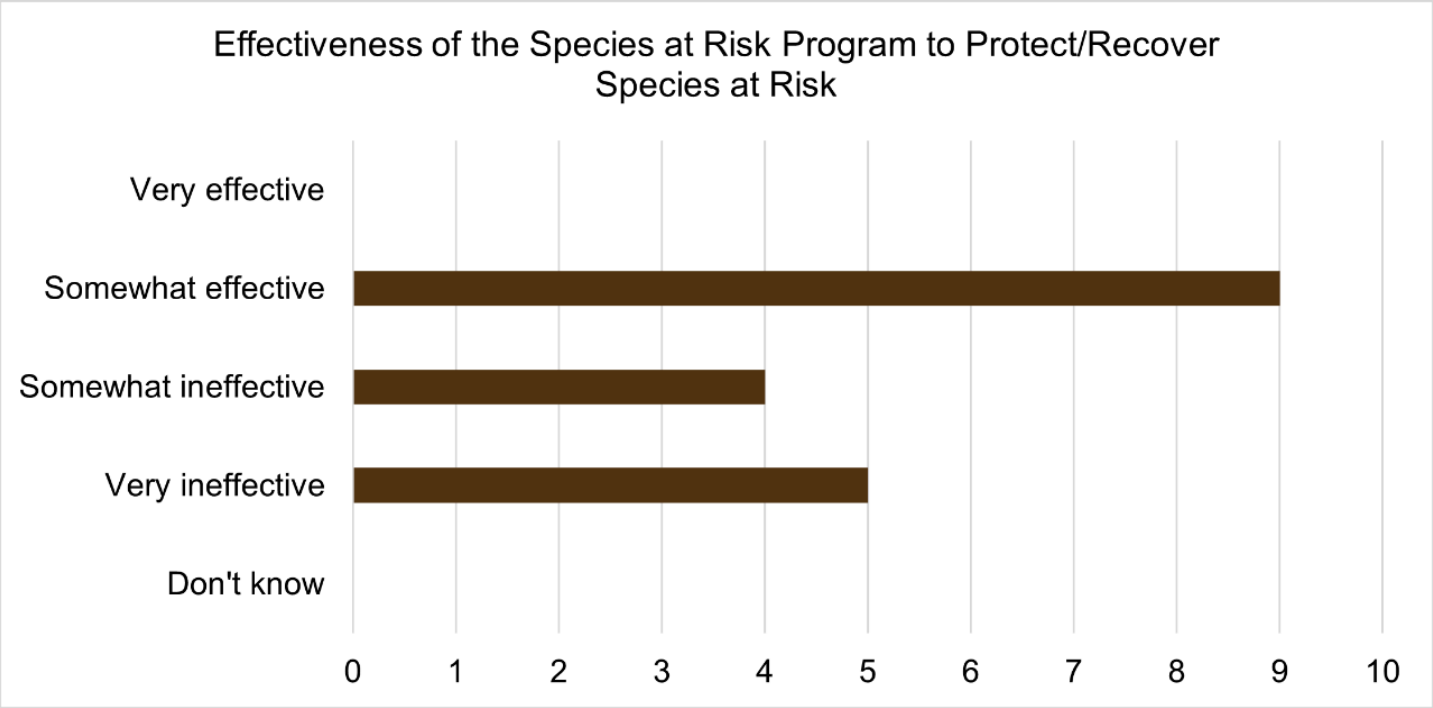
Protecting and recovering species at risk is a critical part of Canada's efforts to address the global biodiversity crisis. It complements the efforts underway to develop Canada's 2030 National Biodiversity Strategy, and the Government of Canada's commitment to protect 25 percent of our lands and oceans by 2025, while working toward 30 percent by 2030.

The purpose of the federal *Species at Risk Act* is "to prevent wildlife species from being extirpated or becoming extinct, to provide for the recovery of wildlife species that are extirpated, endangered or threatened as a result of human activity and to manage species of special concern to prevent them from becoming endangered or threatened" (Government of Canada, 2002, p. Section 6). However, species at risk need more than just effective recovery documents; they require a safe place to live if they are going to thrive.

The efforts underway across the Government of Canada to protect habitat will have a significant impact on the ability to recover species. A future evaluation on the Habitat Conservation and Protection Program will provide more insights into select ECCC contributions to area-based conservation in Canada.

When surveyed, stakeholders were divided about whether the Species at Risk Program was effective at protecting or recovering species at risk, with half believing it was somewhat effective (n=9), and half holding a negative skewed opinion (n=9).

Figure 6: Survey Respondent Opinions on the Effectiveness of the Species at Risk Program to Protect/Recover Species at Risk



▶ Long description

Written comments reveal that many stakeholders believe there is no clear link between the recovery documents and real-world results achieved (n=6). It should be noted that survey participants also identified differences between the level of specificity within recovery documents produced by PC and those produced by ECCC. As discussed previously in this report, jurisdictional differences between PC and ECCC may be in part responsible for the discrepancy.

The belief that there is no clear link between recovery documents and real-world results could be reflective of the lagging number of action plans, which lay out specific strategies for recovering species, as well as the challenges the program has with monitoring progress.

However, this could also be reflective of a broader shift in thinking about biodiversity.

The federal *Species at Risk Act* was passed in 2002, with the goal of protecting individual species at risk. Since then, ecosystem science has evolved, and we now recognize that many species are co-dependent and the measures that protect and recover one could benefit many. This is the added benefit of the multi-species action plans produced by PC, and which ECCC is employing in a limited way.

The federal *Species at Risk Act* is highly prescriptive, and in some cases, it makes it more difficult to recognize co-benefits between species. Under the right circumstances with proper partner and stakeholder consultations, it may be worth exploring future opportunities to modernize the federal *Species at Risk Act* to better address future risks to species.

5. Recommendations

Recommendation 1

It is recommended that the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Canadian Wildlife Service at ECCC, the Vice President of Protected Areas Establishment and Conservation at PC and the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Aquatic Ecosystems Sector at DFO review the current interdepartmental governance forums to ensure their terms of reference are up to date, support the proactive identification of issues and interventions, and ensure decisions are made in a timely manner and documented.

Management Response: The Assistant Deputy Minister of the Canadian Wildlife Service agrees with the recommendation.

Action 1: Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) with Parks Canada (PC) and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) will work together to review, update and/or develop terms of reference for the Director General and Assistant Deputy Minister Portfolio Committees to align, to the extent possible, the forums and to support within these structures proactive identification of issues and interventions, such that decisions can be made in a timely, transparent and documented manner.

Deliverables	Timeline	Responsible
ECCC will meet with PC and DFO to discuss approaches to review and update the terms of reference as appropriate, and to use these forums for greater program alignment and decision making. Meeting minutes from this meeting will be produced.	December 31, 2024	Director General, Wildlife Management Directorate

Deliverables	Timeline	Responsible
ECCC will lead in revising and finalizing the terms of reference for both the Director General and Assistant Deputy Minister Portfolio Committee, with support from PC and DFO, ensuring both process and accountability for records of decision are included.	March 31, 2025	Director General, Wildlife Management Directorate

Recommendation 2

It is recommended that the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Canadian Wildlife Service at ECCC work with PC and DFO, as appropriate, to ensure that meaningful socio-economic analysis is included in each action plan, as required in the federal *Species at Risk Act*. This analysis supports decision making with respect to recovery actions included in the action plans.

Management Response: The Assistant Deputy Minister of the Canadian Wildlife Service agrees with the recommendation.

Action 1: The Wildlife Management Directorate will be committed to working internally with our Economic Analysis Directorate at ECCC, as well as tri-departmental collaboration on socio-economic analysis. ECCC will develop internal plans and guidance for advancing the completion of Action Plans, which will cover the evaluation of the socio-economic costs and the benefits to be derived from its implementation.

Deliverables	Timeline	Responsible
ECCC's management response to the CESD Audit Report, Follow-up on the Recovery of Species at Risk, committed: "Environment and Climate Change Canada will continue to deliver on obligations under the federal *Species at Risk Act* by publishing recovery strategies and management plans. By 31 December 2024, the department will develop a plan indicating the time frames and resources required to advance the completion of recovery strategies, management plans, and action plans and publish implementation reports."	March 31, 2025	Director General, Wildlife Management Directorate

Deliverables	Timeline	Responsible
Tri-departmental and internal methodologies on socio-economic analysis, and guidance on the use of socio-economic analysis as part of the development of internal planning to recover species at risk will be developed subsequent to the completion of the Action Plan Response to the CESD audit.	June 30, 2025	Director General, Wildlife Management Directorate

Recommendation 3

It is recommended that the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Canadian Wildlife Service at ECCC ensure action plans set clear and feasible directions and expectations for partners and stakeholders, including targeted and measurable actions that address the threats to the species and help to achieve the population and distribution objectives.

Management Response: The Assistant Deputy Minister of the Canadian Wildlife Service agrees with the recommendation.

Action 1: The Canadian Wildlife Service will develop internal plans and guidance for advancing the completion of Action Plans which will cover the measures that are to be taken to implement the recovery strategy, including those that address the threats to the species and those that help to achieve the population and distribution objectives. The Canadian Wildlife Service will provide information on the Species at Risk Registry to notify Canadians when this information is available in Action Plans.

The federal government, in collaboration with the provinces and territories, agreed to the implementation of the Pan-Canadian Approach to Transforming Species at Risk Conservation in Canada (Pan-Canadian Approach) in 2018. This approach shifts from a single-species approach to conservation to one that focuses on multiple species and ecosystems.

The Pan-Canadian Approach is already making significant headway in addressing the delivery of targeted and measurable actions for species through Enhanced Nature Legacy and Nature Legacy for Canada investments. This includes implementation of conservation efforts, contribution agreements, and Nature agreements aimed at protecting and recovering species at risk, in collaboration with Provinces and Territories, Indigenous partners, and stakeholders.

Deliverables	Timeline	Responsible
Tri-departmental and internal guidance on the development of Action Plans, which will include targeted and measurable actions to address the threats to the species and to achieve the population and distribution objectives, will be developed. Additionally, ECCC's management response to the CESD Audit Report, Follow-up on the Recovery of Species at Risk, committed: "The department will continue to explore options for multi-species and place-based approaches for recovery planning and action planning, and will consider this as appropriate for implementation reporting. Environment and Climate Change Canada will build the plan to prioritize actions that have the greatest potential conservation outcome, and that will respect the need for meaningful collaboration and engagement with Indigenous communities and groups, stakeholders and other partners."	June 30, 2025	Director General, Wildlife Management Directorate
Notification on Species at Risk Registry when new action plans are posted which contain section on statement implementation of action plan measures.	First notification will be sent starting by June 30, 2025; subsequent notifications will follow as documents are completed.	Director General, Wildlife Management Directorate
ECCC's management response to the CESD Audit Report, Follow-up on the Recovery of Species at Risk, committed: "Environment and Climate Change Canada, in collaboration with Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Parks Canada, will periodically report on compliance with the obligations related to recovery planning and reporting under the *Species at Risk Act*."	June 30, 2025	Director General, Wildlife Management Directorate

Recommendation 4

It is recommended that the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Canadian Wildlife Service at ECCC prepare for the transition to new information management systems by encouraging the development of data management plans for species population data, including how the data will be used to support performance monitoring and reporting, and communicating these expectations to regional practitioners.

Management Response: The Assistant Deputy Minister of the Canadian Wildlife Service agrees with the recommendation.

Action 1: This recommendation is being addressed through the Species at Risk Data Management Tracking System which is designed to track information on species lifecycle, i.e., assessment, listing, recovery and protection. The Species at Risk Data Management Tracking System will enhance reliability, accuracy, and reporting of information on species at risk.

Deliverables	Timeline	Responsible
The Species at Risk Data Management Tracking System team is working on the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada and listing modules of the species at risk data management tracking system. Planning for the Recovery and Protection modules is ongoing.	June 30, 2025	Director General, Wildlife Management Directorate Director General, Wildlife Assessment and Information

6. Conclusion

The Government of Canada is committed to protecting Canada’s biodiversity, recovering species at risk, and meaningful reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

The Species at Risk Program has the potential to meaningfully contribute to these commitments. However, the program continues to struggle to meet its legislative timelines, prioritize its efforts, and allocate its limited resources.

This evaluation suggests that taking a more proactive approach to the program’s governance, informed by adequately collected program data, and supported by innovative approaches to completing program documentation, could help the Species at Risk Program fulfill its obligations, and contribute to broader Government of Canada priorities and commitments.

7. References

Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. (2023a). *Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies - Species at Risk* (PDF). Ottawa: Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Appendix A – Roles and Responsibilities of Competent Ministers under the Federal *Species at Risk Act*

As of April 20, 2023, the CESD describes the responsibilities of each organization as follows (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023b):

ECCC

- Lead responsibility for the administration of the act and supports the Minister of the Environment as the competent minister
- Responsible for all terrestrial species at risk that occur on federal lands (other than those that occur on Parks Canada lands) and on non-federal lands

- Responsible for recovery planning and related implementation reporting for all listed species that do not fall under the responsibility of Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Parks Canada
- Responsible for 489 wildlife species at risk

DFO

- Responsible for supporting the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, the competent minister for aquatic species other than those individuals in or on federal lands administered by Parks Canada
- Responsible for administering the provisions of the Act related to aquatic species, planning the recovery for listed aquatic species at risk (unless they fall under Parks Canada's responsibility), and producing related implementation reports
- Responsible for 140 wildlife species at risk.

PC

- Responsible for species at risk when they occur in or on federal lands administered by Parks Canada
- Responsible for leading recovery planning and related implementation reporting for 11 wildlife species at risk that occur wholly or almost exclusively in the protected heritage areas it administers
- Participates in recovery planning and related progress reporting led by Environment and Climate Change Canada and Fisheries and Oceans Canada for the more than 240 wildlife species at risk that regularly occur on Parks Canada's lands and waters

(in 2021) transferred the lead responsibility for recovery planning and protection for 68 wildlife species at risk to ECCC, as effective protection of critical habitat and range-wide action planning for these species were beyond the lands that PC administers.

8.2. Appendix B – Previous Audit and Evaluation Coverage of the Species at Risk Program

Since the federal *Species at Risk Act* is such an important piece of legislation, the administration and delivery of the Act, through the Species at Risk Program, has been subject to several audits and evaluations in recent years. This Horizontal Evaluation of the Species at Risk Program aims to complement the findings of past audits and evaluations by focusing on the outcomes of actions taken to protect species at risk. This summary of past audits and evaluations

demonstrates that all aspects of the Species at Risk protection process (species assessment, listing, protection, enforcement measures, alternative measures, and monitoring and evaluation) have been covered comprehensively.

Discretionary Powers to Protect Species at Risk (CESD, 2023)

Key Findings

ECCC did not proactively use readily available information about threats to wildlife species and their habitats, declining species population trends, and the lack of protection of critical habitat on non-federal lands to inform decisions on whether to advise the Minister of Environment and Climate Change on the use of the safety net and emergency order provisions.

Scope of Coverage

- Federal *Species at Risk Act* s. 11, 34, 35, 61 and 80
- Assessment Process, Protection, Monitoring and Evaluation

Implicated Departments

- ECCC

Follow-up on the Recovery of Species at Risk (CESD, 2023)

Key Findings

ECCC, PC, and DFO efforts to plan and report on the recovery of wildlife species at risk under the federal *Species at Risk Act* and to contribute to Canada's commitment to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 were lacking. The 3 organizations did not complete all the key documents needed for the management and recovery of a growing list of wildlife species at risk.

Scope of Coverage

- Federal *Species at Risk Act* s. 11, 34, 35, 61 and 80
- Protection

Implicated Departments

- ECCC
- PC
- DFO

Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies - Species at Risk (CESD, 2022)

Key Findings

ECCC, PC and DFO contributed to the federal species at risk target under the Healthy Wildlife Populations goal in the 2019–2022 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy by identifying in their individual sustainable departmental strategies actions that they planned to take and aligning those intended actions with the federal strategy. However, these actions did not fully support meeting the federal species at risk target because the organizations' strategies did not include some conservation and recovery activities that are needed to track and demonstrate progress in these areas. Progress reporting by the 3 organizations on their planned actions missed some aspects of conservation and recovery activities that are needed to provide a complete picture. Moreover, none of these organizations reported how their actions helped to achieve the United Nations' Goal 15 (Life on Land), even though they are asked to provide this information in their corporate reporting.

Scope of Coverage

- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Implicated Departments

- ECCC
- PC
- DFO

Protecting Aquatic Species at Risk (CESD, 2022)

Key Findings

DFO's approach to protecting aquatic species assessed as being at risk under the *Species At Risk Act* contributed to significant listing delays and decisions not to list species with commercial value. It also had knowledge gaps for some species that directly affected the actions needed to protect them. Fisheries and Oceans Canada focused its knowledge-building primarily on species of commercial value.

Scope of Coverage

- Fisheries Act
- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- Gender-based Analysis Plus

- Federal Species at Risk Act s.29
- Assessment Process, Listing Process, Enforcement, and Alternative Measures

Implicated Departments

- DFO
- ECCC

Evaluation of the Canada Nature Fund (ECCC, 2021)

Key Findings

The Canada Nature Fund aligns strongly with federal objectives and priorities including environmental protection, habitat conservation and the protection of species at risk and biodiversity, and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The evaluation found that there is limited integration and coordination between the Spaces and Species Streams of the Canada Nature Fund and that there is a need for better communication and coordination across Canada Nature Fund streams and components. The evaluation evidence indicates that progress is being made toward the expected results of the Canada Nature Fund.

Scope of Coverage

- Canada Nature Fund Spaces and Species Streams
- Alternative Measures, and Monitoring and Evaluation

Implicated Departments

- ECCC
- DFO
- PC
- Natural Resources Canada

Evaluation of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Activities in Support of Aquatic Species at Risk (DFO, 2021)

Key Findings

Overall, the Species at Risk Programis working toward the protection and recovery of aquatic species at risk, but not without challenges. The complexity of delivering *Species at Risk Act*, as well as the number and diversity of partners across the department needed to deliver this

uniquely decentralized program, make for a complex and challenging operating environment. The Species at Risk Program has worked extensively with internal and external partners to contribute to the protection and recovery of aquatic species at risk.

Scope of Coverage

- Habitat Stewardship Program for Aquatic Species at Risk
- Canada Nature Fund for Aquatic Species at Risk
- Aboriginal Fund for Species at Risk
- Alternative Measures

Implicated Departments

- DFO

Horizontal Evaluation of the Species at Risk Program (ECCC, 2018)

Key Findings

The Species at Risk Program remains relevant because there is a continuing need to protect at-risk species and biodiversity. The evaluation found that overall, the program is contributing at least somewhat to its expected results. Some non-regulatory tools, such as conservation agreements (mentioned in the *Species at Risk Act),* industry certification and land use management plans could be beneficial in the appropriate circumstances. However, the Species at Risk Program has seldom used these tools. 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.

Scope of Coverage

- Species at Risk Act
- Assessment Process, Listing Process, Protection, and Monitoring and Evaluation

Implicated Departments

- ECCC
- DFO
- PC

Figure 7: Summary of Coverage of Species at Risk Protection Processes by Audit

and Evaluation

Audit or Evaluation Report	Assessment	Listing	Protection	Enforcement Measures	Alternative Measures	Monitoring and Evaluation
Discretionary Powers to Protect Species at Risk (CESD, 2023)	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Follow-up on the Recovery of Species at Risk (CESD, 2023)	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies - Species at Risk (CESD, 2022)	No	No	No	No	No	No
Protecting Aquatic Species at Risk (CESD, 2022)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Evaluation of the Canada Nature Fund (ECCC, 2021)	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Total Coverage	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**

Audit or Evaluation Report	Assessment	Listing	Protection	Enforcement Measures	Alternative Measures	Monitoring and Evaluation
Evaluation of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Activities in Support of Aquatic Species at Risk (DFO, 2021)	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Horizontal Evaluation of the Species at Risk Program (ECCC, 2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Total Coverage	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**

8.3. Appendix C – Evaluation Matrix

Governance

Questions

- Does the program governance operate efficiently?
- Was information collected by the program used effectively to make decisions and communicate with stakeholders and partners?

Indicators

- Evidence of an efficient governance structure, horizontal coordination and roles and responsibilities
- Evidence of clear accountability and processes to make decisions
- Internal perspectives on clarity of roles and responsibilities, efficiency of internal collaboration in delivery
- Decision-making processes

- Evidence of information-sharing between National Capital Region and regions/field units in the regions
- Evidence of information-sharing between ECCC, PC and DFO

Sources and methods

- Case study
- Document review
- Analysis of administrative data
- Key informant/stakeholder interviews
- Group interviews

Effectiveness

Questions

- To what extent are the recovery strategies, action plans and management plans being implemented effectively?
- How could the Species at Risk Program be improved to better support species at risk?

Indicators

- Evidence of achievement (or progress towards) the expected outcomes in the recovery strategies, action plans and management plans.
- Evidence that stakeholders and partners are supported in the implementation of their responsibility is outlined in recovery documents.
- Evidence that stakeholders and partners understand the actions that ECCC and PC are taking to recover species at risk.
- Evidence that implementation progress is tracked against expectations.

Sources and methods

- Case study
- Document analysis
- Key informant interviews
- Survey

Monitoring Progress towards Species Recovery

Questions

- To what extent does the department(s) or office(s) of primary interest have quality program information available to decision-makers (accessible, sufficient, and reliable)?
- Was data and information about the affected species collected by the program on an ongoing basis, and was the information used to inform implementation actions or updates to the plans?
- Was the data or information collected on species at risk shared with Canadians to keep them informed of progress to date or ways to help protect species at risk?

Indicators

- Evidence that performance information is accessible, sufficient, and reliable for decision-makers
- Information available to support the development of action/management plans and progress reports
- Alignment between the performance information of the new Pan-Canadian Approach to Species at Risk and the Canada Nature Legacy
- Evidence of communication with Canadians on progress or actions taken to protect species at risk (including but not limited to progress reports)
- Evidence that Indigenous knowledge has been incorporated into the development of management/recovery plans

Sources and methods

- Case study
- Analysis of administrative data
- Key informant interviews

8.4. Appendix D – Approach to Case Study Selection

The case study species were selected to provide the evaluation team with a range of recovery documents to review. The species were all identified as having completed action plans, management plans, recovery strategies or implementation reports. The case study species each meet at least three of the selection criteria listed below, and together cover all the selection criteria.

- Geographic coverage: to ensure the selected species covered a diverse range of habitats and jurisdictions across Canada
- Urban v. rural: to understand the impact of cities on the recovery of species at risk
- Taxonomy: to identify a range of species types (e.g., mammals, birds, plants, etc.)
- Jurisdiction: to ensure the selected species were worked on by employees at both ECCC and PC

- Threat Assessment: to cover a variety of species assessment levels (endangered, threatened, special concern) and therefore a mix of action plans and management plans
- Indigenous component: species of specific interest to Indigenous communities
- Industry: species whose habitat overlaps with industry-related concerns
- Pan-Canadian Approach to Species at Risk: species that are identified as priority species, or species that occur in priority places
- Comparisons: pairs of similar taxonomies of species were selected to be able to better compare whether actions taken were similar for similar species

Scoping interviews were then conducted with Canadian Wildlife Service, and their team put forward a list of species they considered to be good case studies. The Canadian Wildlife Service species were cross-referenced with the list developed by the Evaluation team to identify species of interest to all parties.

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1 As of December 2023, they are now responsible for 662 species.

2 For findings about the Species at Risk Program more generally, see the CESD report: Follow-up on the Recovery of Species at Risk (PDF).

3 For more info on DFO see its report Evaluation of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Activities in Support of Aquatic Species at Risk (dfo-mpo.gc.ca).

4 DFO's role in conducting socio-economic analysis was not considered as part of the evaluation, but it is acknowledged that this work is being done at DFO as well.

5 PC reports that this approach was well received and will be considered a model for future efforts.

6 Information on the collection and use of performance information at DFO can be found here: Evaluation of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Activities in Support of Aquatic Species at Risk.

7 The Minister of the Environment has legal responsibility for the administration of the *Species at Risk Act*, supported by the actions taken by provincial and territorial governments within their jurisdictions.

8 The Biotics system is connected to NatureServe, a network of organizations and scientists that share biodiversity data across North America (NatureServe, 2023). The data reports produced by the Biotics system are available on their website: Biodiversity reports.

9 The Parks Canada Mandate and Charter.

10 The Pan-Canadian Approach and Priority Species.

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