

Policy Brief Series

Species at Risk Act

Provincial and territorial governments and the federal government signed the Accord for the Protection of Species at Risk in 1996 to establish national goals for conserving biological diversity. The Species at Risk Act (SARA) was passed in 2002 to assist the federal government with implementing the goals of the Accord. SARA aims to prevent wildlife species from becoming extinct and aid in the recovery of at risk species.

Methods

Species to be listed under SARA are first assessed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), an independent group of government and non-government experts. COSEWIC uses scientific information, including status determinations by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, as well as community and aboriginal traditional knowledge in evaluating the species. COSEWIC submits an annual report of all assessments to the Minister of the Environment.

Any species listed by COSEWIC as “at risk” must be considered for federal legal protection and recovery under SARA. The Minister makes a recommendation to the Cabinet to federally list the species in one of the categories defined by SARA (Figure 1). The federal listing decision, which is made by the Cabinet, must consider economic, social, and cultural implications and benefits that may occur if a species is listed.¹

The Minister is charged with administering SARA, while three federal government organizations are responsible for implementing SARA— Fisheries and Oceans Canada is in charge of aquatic species, Parks Canada is in charge of species found in national parks, and Environment Canada is responsible for all other species. SARA requires management plans to be developed for all species listed as special concern. Recovery strategies must be developed for all species listed as threatened, endangered, or extirpated. If the recovery strategy shows that restoration is feasible then an action plan must be developed, usually within one to five years. SARA prohibits the destruction of listed species’ critical habitat in addition to harming or killing the species.

Results

SARA currently lists 521 plants and animal species as “at risk.”¹ The government has denied 30 recommended species listings since 2004.²

Discussion

Although COSEWIC may list a species as “at risk,” the government can choose to not federally list the species under SARA, even if COSEWIC provides sound scientific backing for their listing decision.

Environment Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and Parks Canada have fallen behind in developing recovery strategies and management plans for listed species as stipulated by SARA. Over 100 recovery strategies have not been completed as of 2013 and only seven out of the 97 required action plans are in place.³ While the lack of strategies and plans does not prevent recovery activities from occurring, organizations may lack the necessary tools for identifying, directing, and coordinating recovery efforts without them.

Implications for Wildlife Professionals

SARA empowers wildlife professionals to research and protect species at risk of extinction. Wildlife professionals are essential to the development and management of the recovery and action plans created under SARA.

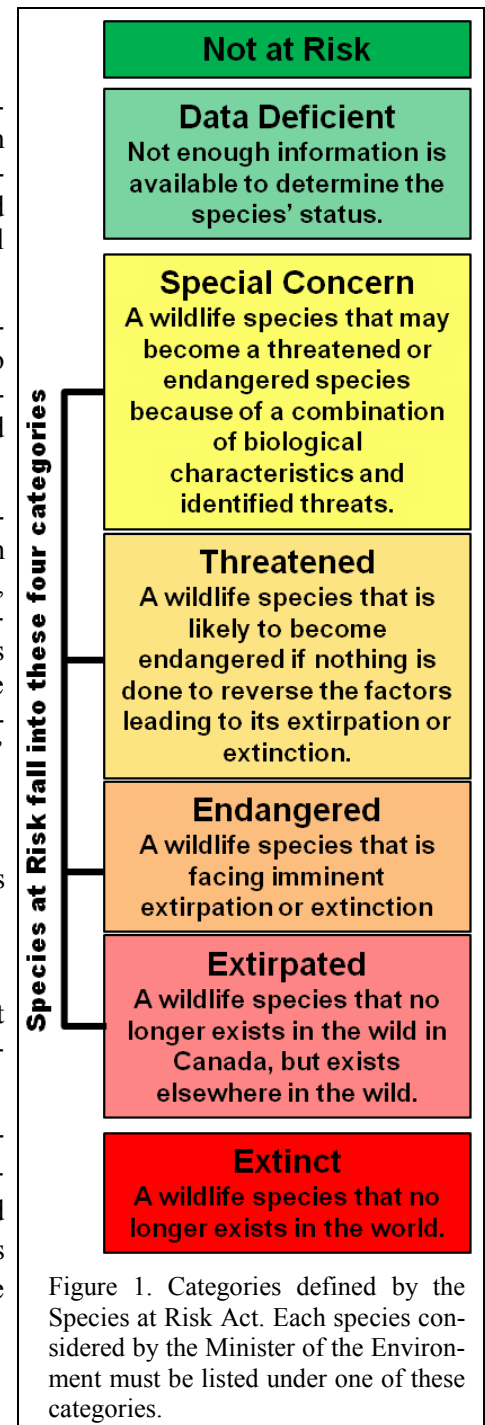


Figure 1. Categories defined by the Species at Risk Act. Each species considered by the Minister of the Environment must be listed under one of these categories.

Species at Risk Act: Features



Sprague's Pipit (Credit: Bob Gress, USFWS).

Sprague's Pipit Recovery Strategy⁴

Sprague's pipit (*Anthus spragueii*) was listed as threatened under SARA in 2003. The recovery strategy for the species was released in 2008 and amended in 2012. The recovery strategy aims to increase and maintain the population size at or above the 1980-1989 levels throughout the bird's historic range. The plan outlines the need for grassland conservation initiatives, increased education, research, and monitoring to achieve the goal. Identification of important breeding areas and critical habitat has been partially achieved, but will need to continue in order to ensure remaining critical habitat is conserved.

Mountain Beaver Management Plan⁵

The mountain beaver (*Aplodontia rufa*) was reassessed as a species of special concern under SARA in 2012. The Mountain beaver is found in British Columbia, but its range has decreased by 29% in the last 50 years due to habitat loss. Habitat destruction has been caused by soil compaction and disturbance by heavy machinery during forestry activities and urbanization. Federal and provincial governments created a management plan for the mountain beaver in 2013 to improve the abundance of the species in British Columbia. This will be achieved through the implementation of best management practices for timber harvesting in areas occupied by mountain beavers and conservation of other mountain beaver habitat. The goal is to prevent the mountain beaver from being listed as threatened under SARA.



Mountain beaver (Credit: British Columbia, Ministry of Environment)

Sources

- 1 Government of Canada. 2012. Species at Risk Public Registry <http://www.sararegistry.gc.ca/about/faq/default_e.cfm> Accessed 12 May 2015.
- 2 Ecojustice. 2012. Failure to Protect, Grading Canada's Species at Risk Laws.
- 3 Office of the Auditor General Canada. 2013. 2013 Fall Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development. <http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_cesd_201311_06_e_38676.html> Accessed 15 Oct 2014.
- 4 Environment Canada. 2012. Amended Recovery Strategy for the Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*) in Canada. Species at Risk Act Recovery Strategy Series. Environment Canada, Ottawa. vi + 46 pp.
- 5 Environment Canada. 2013. Management Plan for the Mountain Beaver (*Aplodontia rufa*) in Canada. Species at Risk Act Management Plan Series. Environment Canada, Ottawa. III pp. + Annex.



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