



Species at Risk Act

The Species at Risk Act (SARA) was passed in 2002 to help implement the Canadian Biodiversity Strategy, which was developed at the 1992-1993 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity.¹ SARA is federal legislation that serves three main purposes: 1) to prevent wildlife species from becoming threatened, endangered, extirpated, or extinct; 2) to provide for the recovery of wildlife species that fall under these categories as a result of human activity; 3) to prevent species of special concern from falling under these categories.¹

Methods¹

Species considered to be potentially “at risk” 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 the best available science, IUCN status determinations, and both stakeholder and indigenous knowledge in evaluating the species.

If a species is determined to be “at risk” by the COSEWIC, then the Minister of Environment and Climate Change makes a recommendation to the Cabinet, a group of policy and priority advisors that, to federally list the species in one of the risk status categories defined by SARA (Figure 1). The Cabinet’s federal listing decision must consider economic, social, and cultural implications and benefits that may occur if a species is listed.¹

Four governing bodies are charged with administering SARA: The Minister of Environment and Climate Change (oversight of implementation), Fisheries and Oceans Canada (aquatic species), Parks Canada (species found in national parks), and Environment Canada (all other species). SARA requires Management Plans to be developed for all species listed as special concern, and recovery strategies for all species listed as threatened, endangered, or extirpated. Recovery strategies are designed by the federal government in consultation with relevant stakeholders, and must include a description of major threats to the species and its critical habitat, population objectives, and required actions to stop or reverse species decline. SARA prohibits the destruction of listed species’ critical habitat in addition to directly harming or killing the species.

Regulations under SARA largely apply only to federal lands and aquatic systems unless orders are issued explicitly stating otherwise. Some provinces and territories have their own regulations affecting management and recovery of at-risk species. However, dedicated species at risk legislation does not exist in BC, AB, SK, PEI, YK, and NU despite agreements made to enact such legislation at Canada’s 1995 National Accord for the Protection of Species at Risk².

Results³

SARA currently lists more than 800 plants and animal species as “at risk.”¹ Of these species, 363 are classified as endangered, 190 as threatened, 235 as special concern, and 22 as extirpated. About 65% of Canada’s native biodiversity are considered “not at risk.”¹

Discussion³

Species determined to be at risk by the COSEWIC may be denied SARA listing by the federal government even if the decision is backed by the best available science. This could negatively impact species that need federal protection for recovery.

SARA administrators have historically fallen behind on developing management and recovery plans for listed species, but administrators of the act instituted a systematic plan to address the backlog; this plan has proven to be successful. In 2013, 25% of all SARA listed species did not yet have management or recovery plans posted. In 2014, Environment and Climate Change Canada introduced their expedited 3-year plan to post proposed recovery strategies and management plans in a prioritized manner. As of 2022, only 7 listed species (less than 1% of all SARA listed species) do not have management or recovery plans posted. Timely management or recovery plans are important to providing managers with the necessary tools for identifying, directing, and coordinating recovery efforts.

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.

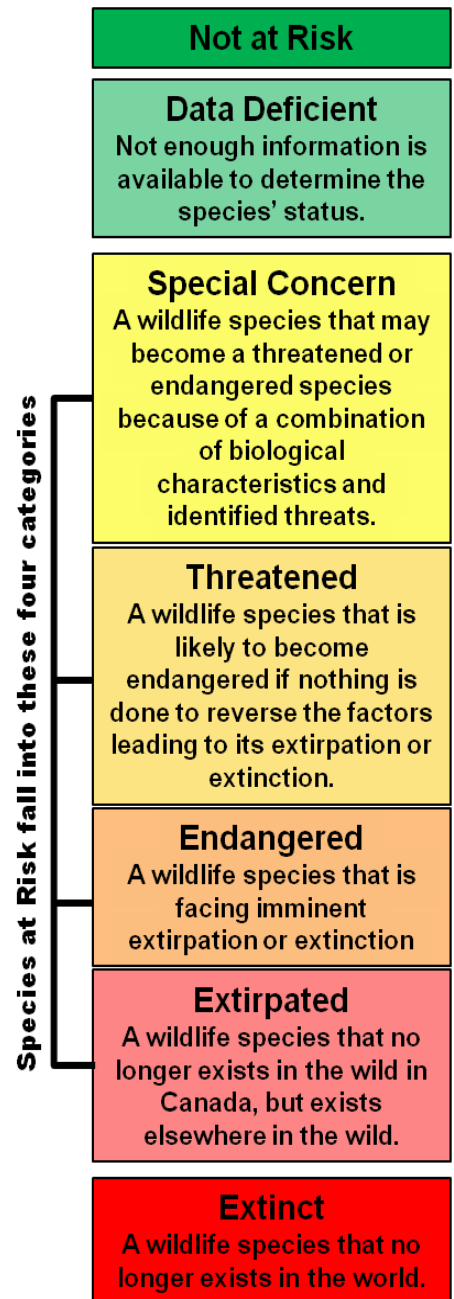


Figure 1. Risk status categories defined by the Species at Risk Act. Each species considered by the Minister of the Environment must be listed under one of these categories.



Species at Risk Act: Features

SARA: Annual Report & Wild Species Assessment⁴

Each year, it is the responsibility of the Minister of Environment and Climate Change to prepare an annual report summarizing the administration's activities related to SARA, including assessments of the COSEWIC; enforcement and compliance actions taken; implementation of recovery strategies; regulations and emergency orders made; and any other matters that the Minister considers relevant. This report is in addition to the Wild Species report, also required under SARA. The Wild Species report is prepared once every five years and provides a general status assessment for a broad cross-section of nearly 30,000 native species.



Western Chorus Frog (Credit: Patrick Feller)



Sprague's Pipit (Credit: Bradley Hacker)

Sprague's Pipit Recovery Strategy⁵

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 this 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 Plan⁶

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 harvest 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)

1. Government of Canada, Justice Laws [website]. 2022. Species at Risk Act (S.C. 2002, c. 29). Accessed 8 Feb 2022.
2. Ray, J.C., Grimm, J., and A. Olive. 2022. The Biodiversity Crisis in Canada: Failures and Challenges of Federal and Sub-National Strategic and Legal Frameworks. Facets <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2020-0075>
3. Government of Canada [website]. 2022. Species at Risk Act Public Registry. Accessed 8 Feb 2022.
4. Environment and Climate Change Canada. 2019. Species at Risk Act Annual Report for 2019. Accessed 8 Feb 2022
5. Environment Canada. 2012. Amended Recovery Strategy for Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*) in Canada. Species at Risk Act Management Planning Series.
6. Environment Canada. 2013. Management Plan for the Mountain Beaver (*Aplodontia rufa*) in Canada. Species at Risk Act Management Plan Series.

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