



COSEWIC
Committee on the Status of
Endangered Wildlife in Canada

COSEPAC
Comité sur la situation des
espèces en péril au Canada

Polar Bear and other Species at Risk Assessed by Independent Canadian Science Body:

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) met in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories from April 20 to 25, 2008.

Polar Bear Future Uncertain

COSEWIC reassessed the Polar Bear as a species of Special Concern. “The Polar Bear was one of the most challenging species ever assessed by COSEWIC” said Dr. Jeff Hutchings, Chair. Extensive inventory, research, a wealth of Aboriginal traditional and community knowledge and the emerging threats posed by climate change and northern development were considered. In some areas, the bear appears to be increasing; in others it is declining. The reduction of sea ice, a consequence of increasing temperatures, is a threat to the species, especially in the southern part of its range. Future stresses on the population mean that harvest will have to be managed particularly carefully in coming years.

Shrinking habitat: a leading cause of species decline

The Western Chorus Frog, a harbinger of spring, was previously assessed as Not at Risk across its range. It is now considered as Threatened in Quebec and southeastern Ontario. This quarter-sized frog has suffered rapid declines due to increasing development and the loss of wetlands.

Similarly, the Eastern Foxsnake, about the length of an average person, is Endangered due to loss of wetlands and habitat fragmentation.

Canada’s largest hawk, the Ferruginous Hawk, was assessed as Threatened due to fragmentation and degradation of native prairie grasslands.

There are fewer than 20 Spotted Owls remaining in Canada. Their decline is due largely to the loss of old-growth forests.

Number of Endangered species grows; some still Endangered after 30 years

One of the first species assessed by COSEWIC was the endemic Vancouver Island Marmot. Thirty years later, its population has further declined and remains at critically low levels.

COSEWIC assessed a dragonfly for the first time. The Endangered Rapids Clubtail, which requires clean, fast-flowing streams, is restricted to two locations in southern Ontario both of which are subject to increasing pressures of urban development.

Formerly numbering in the millions, the Fawnsfoot, an attractive freshwater mussel, is now facing extinction in southern Ontario. The Fawnsfoot has declined drastically in number due to invasive alien species.

Increasing winter storms threaten species on both coasts

Many climate change models predict an increase in the intensity and frequency of winter storms. The Beach Pinweed, a plant known from coastal dunes in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, is at risk from high storm surges. The Seaside Bone, a lichen which grows on pines, occurs only on the southern tip of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. It is Threatened by the loss of host trees during winter storms.

About COSEWIC

COSEWIC assesses the status of wild species, subspecies, varieties, or other important units of biological diversity, considered to be at risk in Canada. To do so, COSEWIC uses scientific, Aboriginal traditional and local or community knowledge provided by experts from governments, academia and other organizations. Summaries of assessments are currently available to the public on the COSEWIC website (www.cosewic.gc.ca) and will be submitted to the Federal Minister of the Environment in August 2008 for listing consideration under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). At that time, the full status reports will be publicly available on the Species at Risk Public Registry (www.sararegistry.gc.ca).

There are now 565 species in various COSEWIC risk categories, including 235 Endangered, 143 Threatened, 152 Special Concern, and 22 Extirpated Species (i.e. no longer found in the wild in Canada). In addition, 13 are Extinct and 45 are Data Deficient.

COSEWIC comprises members from each provincial and territorial government wildlife agency, four federal entities (Canadian Wildlife Service, Parks Canada Agency, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and the Federal Biodiversity Information Partnership, chaired by the Canadian Museum of Nature), three non-government science members, and the co-chairs of the species specialist and the Aboriginal traditional knowledge subcommittees.

Definition of COSEWIC terms and risk categories:

Wildlife Species: A species, subspecies, variety, or geographically or genetically distinct population of animal, plant or other organism, other than a bacterium or virus, that is wild by nature and is either native to Canada or has extended its range into Canada without human intervention and has been present in Canada for at least 50 years.

Extinct (X): A wildlife species that no longer exists

Extirpated (XT): A wildlife species no longer existing in the wild in Canada, but occurring elsewhere

Endangered (E): A wildlife species facing imminent extirpation or extinction

Threatened (T): A wildlife species likely to become Endangered if limiting factors are not reversed

Special Concern (SC): A wildlife species that may become a Threatened or an Endangered species because of a combination of biological characteristics and identified threats

Not at Risk (NAR): A wildlife species that has been evaluated and found to be not at risk of extinction given the current circumstances

Data Deficient (DD): A category that applies when the available information is insufficient (a) to resolve a wildlife species' eligibility for assessment or (b) to permit an assessment of the wildlife species' risk of extinction.

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Further details on all species assessed, and the reasons for designations, can be found on the COSEWIC website at:

www.cosewic.gc.ca