

**Unique in the world:**

**New journal article showcases NWT's approach to assessing species at risk**

The unique approach to species assessment used in Northwest Territories (NWT) is being highlighted this month in a leading international journal.

Plants and animals that may be at risk of disappearing from the NWT are assessed to determine their biological status and recommend management actions. In 2021, the [Species at Risk Committee](#) (SARC) changed its [species assessment process](#) to better reflect Indigenous ways of knowing.

Two separate assessments are carried out—one based in Indigenous knowledge, and one based in science. This helps to ensure each knowledge system's autonomy, uniqueness and validity are represented and respected. From these two knowledge-specific assessments, SARC arrives at a final assessment based on a consensus among members and supported by criteria from either or both knowledge systems.

The [dual assessment process](#) adopted by SARC is unique in the world. Although Indigenous knowledge is sometimes 'integrated' into species assessments elsewhere, the strongly technical and quantitative nature of the process favours scientific knowledge, often to the exclusion of expertise from Indigenous knowledge systems.

The [new perspectives paper](#) published in the May 2023 edition of [Biological Conservation](#) provides a case study of how to meaningfully include Indigenous knowledge in decision-making and calls on others to reconsider how species at risk assessments are completed.

**For more information, visit [www.nwt-species-at-risk.ca](http://www.nwt-species-at-risk.ca) or contact:**

Species at Risk Committee  
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**Background:**

- SARC uses objective biological criteria to assess and categorize species as Extinct, Extirpated, Endangered, Threatened, Special Concern, Data Deficient or Not at Risk.
- From 2010 to 2020, species at risk assessment in the NWT was modelled on the processes established by the [International Union for the Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\) Red List](#)—with Indigenous and community knowledge integrated into the assessment.
- In 2021, a second set of criteria was added to reflect Indigenous and community knowledge as a system of knowing in its own right that does not need to fit within a model of, or be verified by, western science.
- SARC’s assessment process and objective biological criteria now differ markedly from those used by the [Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada \(COSEWIC\)](#) and the [International Union for the Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\)](#). This reflects SARC’s mandate to base its assessments on Indigenous, community and scientific knowledge.
- The new Indigenous and community knowledge criteria are used by SARC to assess species based on:
  - observations of change by knowledge holders;
  - the level of concern expressed by knowledge holders; and
  - relationships Indigenous communities have with wild species.
- Under the new criteria, a species can be assessed as at risk if Indigenous cultures or traditional ways are affected because of changes to the species or its habitat (for example, a species has declined so much that traditional harvesting activities are no longer possible).

**SPECIES AT RISK COMMITTEE**

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- When a species is assessed, all SARC members, regardless of the knowledge system from which their expertise is derived, attend and participate in both assessments. This allows experts in different fields to learn from one another and ensures the final status assessment is based on the best available information.
- The new dual assessment process was used successfully in the [reassessment of polar bear](#) in April 2021 and the reassessment of [boreal caribou](#) and [Peary caribou](#) in May 2022.
- *Biological Conservation* is a leading international journal that publishes peer-reviewed papers that advance the science and practice of conservation.

**Related links:**

- [Equal use of Indigenous and scientific knowledge in species assessments: A case study from the Northwest Territories, Canada](#)
- About the journal [Biological Conservation](#)
- [Species at Risk Committee \(SARC\) Species Assessment Process](#)
- About the [Species at Risk Committee](#)
- [NWT Species at Risk](#) website

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