

Fourth Annual Aboriginal Networking Meeting for Species at Risk Recovery

Ellen Simmons

The South Okanagan–Similkameen is one of British Columbia's unique and ecologically fragile regions. At the 4th Annual Aboriginal Networking Meeting for Species at Risk Recovery, approximately 50 representatives from Aboriginal organizations, federal government agencies, independent and environmental interest groups, and consultants learned of the successes and challenges particular to the region's critical habitat projects. The collective drive of the attendees to engage and share priority activities related to wildlife conservation was evident and set a positive tone for the 3-day event, hosted by the En'owkin Centre in Penticton from March 15–17. This meeting was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through **Environment Canada**.

Richard Armstrong, Syilx Traditional Knowledge Keeper, offered the opening prayer and welcome on behalf of the Syilx Territory. **Blair Hammond**, Manager of Ecosystem Conservation with the Canadian Wildlife Service (Environment Canada), and **Dr. Jeannette Armstrong**, Executive Director of the En'owkin Centre, brought forward opening remarks and a sincere welcome to all of the meeting delegates. I then introduced the workshop agenda and commenced facilitation for the first day. A welcome circle was conducted, which was an excellent ice-breaker.

Robert Sterling and **Dave Caswell's** (Nicola Tribal Association) presentation on "Flammulated Owl (*Skelole*) and Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Spzoz'u*) on the Shackan, Nooaitch, and Nicomen reserves" outlined inventory work that has been completed for these two species and additional project work, including the identification of important habitat and the creation of management strategies to protect these values. **Stephen Hureau** of Environment Canada commented on how this work is an excellent example of proactive conservation.

Bryn White, Program Manager for the South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Program, spoke on the goals and strategies of the program and introduced the ongoing work of the Biodiversity

Conservation Strategy for the region. The "Keeping Nature in Our Future" biodiversity strategy is developing a landscape view of the region that promotes the "big picture" without any ownership boundaries.

Richard Armstrong and **Chad Eneas**, En'owkin Centre Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) co-ordinator, shared their expertise in the Syilx knowledge of conservation and restoration. They gave an overview of TEK and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge, speaking of the importance of the work they do, as it is necessary for the next generation of learners to be knowledgeable "Keepers of the Land."

Blair Hammond spoke about the application of the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA), its purpose and process. He also mentioned funding programs that are available to support Aboriginal communities in their work for species and habitat protection. Questions and concerns on funding issues and Aboriginal input into recovery strategies were raised.

Ron Hall, conservation technician from the Osoyoos Indian Band, gave the final presentation for day one. Ron talked about species at risk on the Osoyoos Indian Reserve and the work he has done with biologists on the reserve since the mid-1980s. He highlighted the need to work together to protect biodiversity by restoring off-reserve areas. First Nations involvement is a necessary requirement.

Later in the afternoon, **Richard Armstrong**, **Chad Eneas**, and myself conducted an optional outdoor interpretive walking tour. Approximately half of the delegates and presenters toured Ecommunity Place on the Penticton Indian Reserve to observe ongoing restoration and monitoring work for six identified species at risk. Ecommunity Place is a 55-ha parcel that includes the rare and threatened black cottonwood riparian ecosystem.

The second day of sessions began with a presentation by **Jeannette Armstrong** on "River Forest Lands and Syilx Culture." **Dr. Armstrong** discussed the cottonwood forest riparian systems that once supported wild hayfields, water birch stands, and red-osier ecosystems. Municipal

development and agriculture and flood control measures have now reduced these Okanagan riparian habitats to less than 4% of their original area. The recovery of the river system is required to preserve this critical habitat for species at risk. **Jason Price**, councillor for the Wei Wai Kum First Nation in Campbell River, examined the endangered deltoid balsamroot, which grows on estuarine habitat. This culturally significant plant was made into a tea and its seeds were used to keep evil spirits away. Through the Interdepartmental Recovery Funds program, the Wei Wai Kum First Nation has been able to gather and record traditional use information, create a recovery plan, identify critical habitat, remove invasive plants, and erect signage about balsamroot.

Jeannette Armstrong also presented on behalf of the Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge subcommittee for the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSWEIC). She explained the process and role of COSWEIC in protecting and managing traditional ecological knowledge. Questions were raised about who should be contacted on the subcommittee in order to bring issues forward.

George Desjarlais, West Moberly First Nations, highlighted the status and history of the Burnt Pine caribou herd. He stressed the seriousness of the decline in caribou numbers and the cumulative effects of hydro, mining, forestry, and petroleum development. The caribou, which once sustained the Dunne-za for generations, are now listed as a threatened species. **Marla Barker**, Nuuchahnulth Species at Risk Co-ordinator for the Uu-a-thluk Tribal Council (<http://uuathluk.ca>) Fisheries Management Team in Ucluelet, gave a talk on her work. In their territory, 50 species at risk are listed, with over 30 other species considered for designation.

Amanda Warman, fisheries biologist with the Okanagan Nation Alliance, discussed the Okanagan Chinook (*Ntytyix*) Salmon Recovery Project. She shared background information, future directions, and current research. She also noted that funding is difficult to obtain for species not listed under the SARA.

Troy Donovan, who opened day three, spoke as an individual citizen of the Ktunaxa. He talked about his work with mountain caribou, the importance of stewardship, and the need to ensure that Ktunaxa oral history is given equal weight with mountain caribou recovery plans and that Ktunaxa stewardship is included in all aspects of mountain caribou recovery. **Carrie Terbasket**, who presented on behalf of the National

Aboriginal Council on Species at Risk, spoke about its history, roles, and accomplishments. At the end of her presentation, a dialogue took place in which the audience offered recommendations on how the national organization might better engage Aboriginal people.

Dawn Morrison, from the Neskonalith community, closed the third day of sessions with a presentation on Indigenous food sovereignty. She was able to link the strong connections with species at risk and similar challenges with food sovereignty in protecting and maintaining Aboriginal relationships with the land and food systems.

Although the days were full and there were no breakout sessions, some time was allocated for networking. Comments made at the end of the meeting included the following.

- Ways were suggested to apply action to our work, such as the need for interactive breakout groups.
- More information is needed on critical habitat/*Species at Risk Act* policies from higher-level ministerial employees (as they shape policies without our input).
- A provincial government presence is needed at these meetings.
- Information is needed from the government of British Columbia on how they will implement the *Species at Risk Act*.
- International input is required on Indigenous species-at-risk issues.
- More input is needed from government decision makers (e.g., assistant deputy ministers and First Nations leaders).
- Giving presentations should be built into the Aboriginal Funds for Species at Risk.

This annual meeting was co-funded by **Environment Canada**, the **En'owkin Centre**, **Fisheries and Oceans Canada**, and **Parks Canada**. Additional sponsors included **Theytus Books**, **EZ Rock Sun FM**, and the **Town of Osoyoos**. **Geraldine Manossa** is to be commended on the excellent job of organizing this meeting. Selected presentations are available online at http://www.forrex.org/program/abo/species_at_risk.asp?AreaPkey=2

Contact Information

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