

Species at Risk Committee (SARC) and Conference of Management Authorities (CMA)
Meeting Minutes – October 4, 2017
Nunasi Conference Services, Yellowknife, NT

Attendance	Affiliation
Jody Pelleissey, CMA Chairperson	Wek'èezhì Renewable Resources Board
Leon Andrew, SARC Chairperson	Sahtú Renewable Resources Board and Species at Risk Committee
Leslie Wakelyn	Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board
Dawn Andrews	Environment and Climate Change Canada
Brett Elkin	Environment and Natural Resources
Lisa Worthington	Environment and Natural Resources
Norman Snowshoe	Environment and Natural Resources
Doug Doan	Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board
Sarah Lord	Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board
Tracy Davison	Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board
Deb Simmons	Sahtú Renewable Resources Board and Species at Risk Committee
Alestine Andre	Species at Risk Committee
Allice Legat	Species at Risk Committee
James Firth	Species at Risk Committee
Joanna Wilson	Species at Risk Committee
Kaytlin Cooper	Species at Risk Committee
Misty Ireland	Species at Risk Committee
Nic Larter	Species at Risk Committee
Suzanne Carriere	Species at Risk Committee
Tammy Steinwand	Tł'chǫ Government
Bradley Carpenter	Wildlife Management Advisory Council (NWT)
Charles Pokiak	Wildlife Management Advisory Council (NWT)
Rob Gau	Wildlife Management Advisory Council (NWT)
Allison Thompson (observer)	Margaret Ireland (observer)
Claire Singer	Species at Risk Secretariat

1. Introduction to assessment process (how SARC does an assessment) (*led by Joanna Wilson, SARC member*)
Review of steps that must be undertaken in an assessment.

Major points from Joanna's presentation:

- SARC's job is to assess the biological status of species in the NWT and how at risk of extinction/extirpation they are.
- SARC does this by considering information about the species and its status.

- SARC members are independent and don't represent the agencies that appointed them.
- During assessments, SARC is not permitted to consider the possible future consequences of listing.
- SARC's job is essentially to speak for the species.
- SARC can assess species as Extinct, Extirpated, Endangered, Threatened, Special Concern, Not at Risk, or Data Deficient (definitions included in the *Species at Risk (NWT) Act*; criteria for defining these terms included in SARC's *Assessment Process and Objective Biological Criteria* document).
- The assessment process is laid out in SARC's *Assessment Process and Objective Biological Criteria* document.
- There are seven steps to completing a species assessment.
 - 1 – Discuss whether the species is eligible for assessment and whether it should be assessed as a species, subspecies, or distinct population.
 - 2 – Approve the species status report. Approval of the status report prior to an assessment is a requirement of the Act. The status report will have undergone numerous reviews by this point.
 - 3 – Reconfirm eligibility and unit of assessment (species, subspecies, distinct population).
 - 4 – Apply the Objective Biological Criteria (OBC). The OBC provide guidance and objectivity. They were developed by SARC, based on national and international criteria for determining species status and modified to be relevant and meaningful in the NWT. The OBC are based on extinction-risk factors. It's possible that more than one criterion can apply to a species. The OBC can be supplemented by numerical thresholds to define Endangered and Threatened, which are included at the end of the document.
 - Question: How does SARC apply the 'small' population size? What is small?
 - Answer: There are no strict numerical definitions of the words 'small' and 'very small' that SARC uses. There are international numerical definitions though, which may influence SARC. The primary reason the numerical definitions have not been adopted by SARC is that people were uncomfortable applying those numbers to all species (e.g., COSEWIC's definition of 'very small' is a population of less than 100).
 - Question: Why are there differences between the legal definitions of status and the definitions in SARC's OBC?

- Answer: The differences are due to the fact that the legal definitions included terms that required additional definition.
- Question: SARC's OBC shows that the NWT is more risk-tolerant than other jurisdictions. Has there been any reaction from other jurisdictions about our level of risk tolerance?
 - Answer: No, other jurisdictions don't appear to be aware of the difference. National conversations on species at risk are more focused on recovery, not assessment or listing.
- 5 and 6 – After agreeing on an assessment status, SARC has to think about other factors that may be influencing extinction risk: (5) immigration from populations elsewhere (rescue effect) and (6) other biological characteristics.
- 7 – Review assessment status determined from steps 4-6 against the legal definition included in the Act to make sure the assessment makes sense.
- After these steps are completed and an assessment is agreed to by consensus, SARC works together to write up the assessment report. This essentially explains SARC's assessment, including rationale, threats, and positive influences.
- The approved status and assessment report is then submitted to the CMA, which starts the listing process.
- SARC also puts out a press release announcing the assessment results.

During today's workshop, the CMA is going to pretend to be SARC and complete a mock assessment. Verified that everyone participating had read the status report prior to beginning the mock assessment.

2. Mock assessment: Determine the status of northern leopard frog in the NWT (*led by Suzanne Carrière, SARC member*)
Presentation of key points from the final approved status report. Discussion of status using SARC's assessment process and criteria. Decide status.

Suzanne presented an overview of the key points from the northern leopard frog status report. Questions and answers that arose in the course of that presentation are as follows:

- Question: When you mean non-native species (referring to Interactions and Threats), do you mean in relation to plants or other frogs?

- Answer: Plants. There are currently no non-native invasive aquatic species in the NWT.
- Question: Why did the northern leopard frog disappear from the South Slave area?
 - Answer: No one knows.
- Question: If habitat isn't limiting but there has been a range contraction, and it's not known if there are population effects, how do you address that through the assessment?
 - Answer: That is largely an opinion-based response that would need to be considered and answered by the group as a whole.
- Question: When you're doing the distribution, and there's no sightings in the Slave River, is that what it's based on?
 - Answer: That's why there are two numbers. One since 1995 and one including all records.
- Question: Is there an organized effort to find the northern leopard frog in the Slave River?
 - Answer: A frog researcher has gone into this area as part of disease monitoring work. She didn't find the frog in the areas of historical distribution, but she did find them in some other places. This work contributed to the assessment, but it wasn't done explicitly for this reason. No targeted work has been done since then.
- Comment: It would be nice if we did something with the schools in the area to encourage them to look for the frog. They could take pictures and send them in.
 - Response: There is funding given out on an annual basis under the Stewardship Program that can be accessed by schools. If surveys were undertaken, disease transmission prevention protocols would need to be followed.
- Question: How many species of frogs are there in that area?
 - Answer: 3 species of frog and 1 species of toad.
- Question: With respect to climate change, is it possible for the resiliency of an animal to change? The species isn't coming further north so perhaps there's been a biological change. Acclimatization.
 - Answer: Our population of northern leopard frogs is the northernmost occurrence in North America. The species is known to have a minimum temperature tolerance of approximately -1.5°C. Unlike the wood frog (another NWT frog species), they cannot survive freezing temperatures. This creates a functional northern limit to the species' range. Climate change may possibly increase the northern limit of the range.

- But prior to 1995, the species used to be found further north. Maybe the species has become less resilient to colder temperatures.
 - This is unlikely. It's more likely that a disease affected that portion of the range. However, the status report doesn't contemplate the reason for the range contraction.
- Question: Did the scientists measure the ground temperature since the frog just occurs in a small area?
 - Answer: The frog will occur where it can survive. It's really about finding good microclimates in the winter. Shield country is likely difficult for this frog because there are fewer underground warm microclimates. The species is really an east of the Rockies species and as the glaciers moved away it made it into the South Slave. Many species are like that.

Following the presentation, the CMA and SARC moved on to the mock assessment:

Step 1: Confirmed northern leopard frog is eligible for assessment. It is wild by nature and indigenous to the NWT. It is a species.

Step 2: Approved the species status report.

- Even though there's no traditional/community knowledge component in this report, quite a bit of effort was made to integrate and use community and traditional knowledge.
- Question: Looking at the technical summary, population trends are unknown. Is that not going to be a bit of a handicap in undertaking the assessment?
 - Answer: Population is not the only criterion than an assessment can be based on. Range, threats, and habitat are also considered.
- This step is to confirm that the report contains all the best available information about the species in the NWT. If, after this step, you still feel that you can't assess, then assessing as Data Deficient is appropriate.
- Question: There are isolated populations in other jurisdictions. Is there any information about how those jurisdictions are dealing with this species?
 - Answer: We have to put blinders on a bit in that this is about assessing the species in the NWT. If you were sitting at the SARC table, this is something you may have brought up earlier in the

process and information would have been included in the status report.

- Question: Would there be comparisons with other parts of Canada in this report?
 - Answer: The report typically doesn't include information that isn't relevant to the assessment of our population. This question might be more appropriate at the management/recovery phase.
- Keep in mind that by the time SARC reaches this step in an assessment, at least 2 years of work has gone into writing, reviewing, and revising the status report. Those 2 years are used to make sure SARC can pass this step.

Step 3: Reconfirmed eligibility and level. Why reconfirm? It's because as you're writing the status report, there's always the possibility of changes in information.

Step 4: Mock assessment –

- EXTINCT and EXTIRPATED were both eliminated immediately because there is clear evidence that the species can still be found in the NWT. NOT AT RISK and DATA DEFICIENT were also eliminated mid-way through the discussion; Not at Risk because it became clear participants felt the species was either Endangered or Threatened, and Data Deficient because the assessment could be based on criteria other than population decline, which was felt to be insufficient.
- ENDANGERED (a), THREATENED (a), ENDANGERED (c), and THREATENED (c), all focusing on evidence of population decline/change, were eliminated following extensive discussion.
 - Participants felt that none of these assessment criteria could be used because there is very little available information on abundance or population trends in the approved status report. Further, considering traditional knowledge that suggests there are fewer frogs now than in the past, participants felt that they were unable to tie this information to probability of extinction.
 - Participants also noted that the status report clearly states that restricted distribution is the primary reason for conservation concern and that despite the disappearance of the northern leopard frog from the Slave River area, their distribution, and presumably density, is otherwise stable. If everything that we understand about the population is actually an extrapolation of range-related points, then all population criteria should be eliminated.

- ENDANGERED (b) and THREATENED (b) both focus on declines in range, population, or habitat. Ultimately, Endangered (b) was eliminated because a 50% probability of extinction within our human lifetime (50 years) was felt to be unrealistic. Threatened (b) became the assessment by majority vote (no time to work towards consensus).
 - Potential adverse impacts from disease were felt to be particularly important to the future well-being of northern leopard frog in the NWT. The diseases of concern are already in the NWT, but the probability of a disease outbreak is still quite low. Conversely though, the consequences of an outbreak could be severe (i.e., losing the whole population). Risk tolerance therefore becomes an important conversation during assessments and is ultimately up to the people doing the assessment to decide.
 - Probability of extinction became the deciding factor here. A 10% probability of extinction (Threatened) is much easier to justify than a 50% probability of extinction (Endangered).
- ENDANGERED (d) focuses on a very small population size AND identified threats. This criterion was eliminated because participants felt that it was unlikely, given the limited population information, that the NWT population of northern leopard frogs was very small.
 - One point of clarification that arose was the reason why this criterion directly considered threats, which the others do not. Ultimately, threats are implied all criteria. A small population plus a decline suggests threats are present, contributing to the decline. However, sometimes a population can just be naturally small. It is important to avoid catching naturally small populations in the species at risk process.
- THREATENED (d) focuses on a small population size OR limited range + identified threats – this was the second most-preferred option by vote. Participants felt that this criterion could also apply because even if you don't have a decline in population, you can still emphasize the presence of important threats. It also seemed to more appropriate given that the population/range are now considered stable.
- SPECIAL CONCERN – All four Special Concern criteria were eliminated. It was felt that being assessed as Special Concern was dependent upon not meeting criteria for Threatened. Since Threatened (b) and/or (d) were felt to be most appropriate, the species could therefore not be Special Concern.

3. Review of mock assessment and recommendations for moving forward (*led by Jody Pellissey, CMA Chairperson*)

Participants were happy to have had the opportunity to conduct a mock assessment. It helped decision-makers understand the process that SARC uses and the discussion and background information that goes into completing an assessment. Some expressed difficulty reconciling the minimization of risk to species while not stopping activities and development in the NWT. The interpretation of the criteria, especially the idea of 10% or 50% probability of extinction, was at times felt to be subjective.

For all parts of the mock assessment, if you have any additional comments that you would like the CMA or SARC consider, please forward them to the Secretariat.

4. Review and discussion of SARC's status report instructions (*led by Jody Pellissey, CMA Chairperson*)

SARC member provided overview of SARC status report guidelines and timelines to the completion of status reports.

Earlier, the CMA had asked SARC to include a new section on the ecological significance of the species in the status report. SARC indicated that this kind of information is already included in the status report, under the section heading Interactions. SARC suggested changing this section heading to Interactions and Ecological Significance.

Discussed the merits and drawbacks of using threats calculators during assessments. Concerns raised about their use included the time and work that goes into completing a species threats calculator, whether additional experts would be invited, who those additional people would be, and the perhaps prohibitively technical nature of them. Conversely, using a threats calculator makes the recommendations included in status reports more defensible and provides ranking and probability information for the threats.

Given the pros and cons, it was felt that something in between nothing and threats calculator could be employed. A few extra sentences in every status report providing more information on threat scenarios and probability/consequences of threats would likely be sufficient.