



Photo: Jim Harris

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

WHY WE SHOULD CARE ABOUT HAIRY BRAYA

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Braya pilosa*

NWT LIST OF SPECIES AT RISK: *Threatened*

For more information on hairy braya, its distribution, and its status under the *Species at Risk (NWT) Act*, please visit

WWW.NWTSPECIESATRISK.CA

What is a hairy braya you ask? That's a good question. Hairy braya is a plant. It is very rare and occurs only in the Cape Bathurst Peninsula and Baillie Islands in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories (NWT).

In 2014, it was added to the NWT List of Species at Risk as a Threatened species (which means it could be gone from the NWT within our children's lifetimes if nothing is done). It was listed because of its very small range, shrinking habitat, and declining population. The biggest threat it faces is climate change – its habitat is being lost to rapid erosion on the coast, along with increased storm surges and sea spray, all of which are tied to reduced sea ice in the Beaufort Sea. This is expected to increase as sea levels rise due to climate warming.

But why should you care? As far as we know, no people harvest this plant. We don't know what role it plays in the ecosystem, although interestingly, disturbance from caribou hooves is thought to be important to creating and maintaining habitat for hairy braya. Its range is already protected where it overlaps with calving ground protections for the Cape Bathurst barren-ground caribou herd. Its extremely remote location means there is currently little human disturbance on hairy braya habitat.



To answer this, we need to think of hairy braya in the larger context of biodiversity conservation. 'Biodiversity' describes the variety of life on earth – ecosystems, species, and genetic diversity. This variety has arisen from billions of years of evolution.

Conserving biodiversity is in our interest – this web of life, and the interactions and processes that it produces, are the entire basis for making this planet of ours habitable. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This system provides us with a host of products and services, including food, clean water, breathable air, waste treatment, soil formation, and nutrient storage and cycling, to name just a few.

Every single extinction takes away from the earth's biodiversity, undermining the stability of the systems we rely on. Losing one species might not be a disaster, but each loss increases the chance of problems arising. In the face of biodiversity loss, the ability of ecosystems to provide essential services is impaired, especially with ever-increasing pressures from people. Ecosystems work best and are more resilient to change when their biodiversity is intact. Each species has a role to play, no matter how small it is.

The *Species at Risk (NWT) Act* was put in place as a tool to assess, conserve, and recover species that might be at risk of extinction in the NWT – those whose populations are declining, whose habitat is deteriorating, or that are facing threats from human activities. This is a made-in-the-north tool to help recover species that are at risk, and this plant is indeed at risk.

We don't yet know why hairy braya might be important, however, remember that hairy braya was not listed simply because of its rarity; it was listed because its very existence is threatened by people. Its coastal habitat is eroding at a rate of 10 meters *per year* because of human-caused climate change. Regardless of its importance, hairy braya is a symbol of the change humanity is inflicting on the earth and its biodiversity.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter that we don't yet understand why hairy braya is important. What matters is that we are pushing yet another species to the brink of extinction. That should concern everyone.



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