

NEW SPECIES ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Frequently Asked Questions – March 2021

What is the new assessment process?

The Northwest Territories Species at Risk Committee (SARC) recently adopted a new species assessment process for determining the status of species that may be at risk in the NWT.

The new process provides two sets of criteria for the assessment: one based in Indigenous and community knowledge, the other based in scientific knowledge. This approach allows both knowledge systems to be considered as equals in determining the status of a species.

How is the new assessment process different from the old one?

Previously, NWT species were assessed primarily based on scientific knowledge, with Indigenous and community knowledge incorporated into that framework. Under this “science-based” structure, Indigenous and community knowledge are more likely to be misinterpreted or taken out of context—or even disregarded entirely.

By using two separate sets of criteria, types of knowledge about the species are considered one at a time, allowing SARC to focus on each knowledge system in turn. All members of SARC, regardless of the knowledge system that best represents their expertise, participate throughout the process, allowing experts in different fields to learn from one another, while working towards a species assessment supported by all best available information. This reflects strong cross-cultural respect among SARC members and a willingness to work through difficult topics together.

The final species assessment can be supported by criteria from either (or both) knowledge systems, as appropriate. Where sufficient information does not exist to allow for consideration of both kinds of knowledge (i.e. lacking either Indigenous and community knowledge or scientific knowledge), then the assessment is completed using criteria from the available knowledge system.

What is the reason for the new process?

The adoption of these new criteria reflects SARC’s responsibility to base its assessments on Indigenous, community and scientific knowledge equally and respectfully. While expanding the role of Indigenous and community knowledge in species assessments has been contemplated elsewhere (i.e. by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or IUCN), the use of western science in species assessments has generally been considered necessary to maintain scientific credibility.

However, it is SARC’s position that science-based assessments can make it difficult for Indigenous and community knowledge holders to participate on an equal footing with scientists. Understandings of abundance, for instance, do not often translate well into percentage decline over time. The use of two distinct sets of criteria allows for a more holistic and eco-centric approach to species assessment.

SPECIES AT RISK COMMITTEE

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Indigenous and community knowledge is context-specific – not objective. How can it be used alongside scientific knowledge?

Indigenous and community knowledge is strongly linked to people and place. As a result, it is not a 'single' knowledge, but varies within and among regions. This does not make this kind of knowledge any less valid in species assessment; rather, it provides a complementary perspective that is often more long-term and ecosystem based than western science. By understanding and reflecting both ways of knowing, SARC can achieve a more holistic and realistic view of a species that is better than what either knowledge system can capture on its own.

What happens if the results of the Indigenous and community assessment and the scientific assessment are different?

It is ultimately up to SARC to determine how to weigh the outcomes of the assessments based in Indigenous and community knowledge and scientific knowledge. The objective biological criteria to assess and categorize species are tools, not hard and fast rules. They are a way for SARC to explain how it determined the status of a species. The effectiveness of the new assessment criteria will be reviewed regularly by SARC.

Where can I see an example of the new assessment process in practice?

The new assessment process will be applied for the first time to the re-assessment of polar bear in April 2021.