

Green Scene: Species At Risk

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(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, June 9, 2006)

[photograph]

[caption: A young barn owl, with its characteristic heart-shaped face, makes good use of a nest box at Minnekhada Regional Park.
Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Not enough done for at-risk species]

During Environment Week in June 2003, the federal government announced a strategy to save species at risk, called SARA for Species At Risk Act. After two previous attempts and a quarter of a century after the USA passed their own Endangered Species Act, SARA was felt by many to be long overdue. Nonetheless, as soon as the details were announced, naturalists feared SARA would be weak and ineffective. Now, three years later, we know this to be true.

Just over 500 species of plants and animals are currently listed as species at risk across Canada. Habitat for listed species is protected only on federal land or aquatic areas but not on provincial or private lands. So, someone needs to tell those spotted owls to fly straight to the nearest military reserve. Under SARA, the federal government can take emergency action if a province fails to act. Nonetheless, with only 22 spotted owls left in BC (and, thus, Canada), the provincial government continues to log in spotted owl habitat and the federal government refuses to take action. Thus, the main mechanism for saving species at risk under SARA falls to voluntary stewardship initiatives. Even here, the government gets a failing grade for providing less than a postage stamp per person in annual funds to support this.

The listing process is complex and confusing. Federally, there are three main categories of risk; “endangered”, “threatened” and “special concern”. There is a scientific list updated annually by a Committee of Scientists with the acronym of COSEWIC. However, the federal government is not adding all the new COSEWIC-listed species to the SARA list. To further confuse the issue, the provincial government also has a list of candidate species, their so-called “red” and “blue” lists of endangered/threatened or special concern species, respectively. The provincial government legally protects only four species at risk under the Wildlife Act; all others remain simply as “candidates” for such protection. On June 6, Minister Penner announced the addition of 45 new species at risk under BC’s Forest and Range Practices Act but the implication of such listing remains unclear. Simply trying to determine how the listing process works is enough to dampen most people’s enthusiasm to protect species.

The main reasons for species becoming at risk are impacts from people whether it be loss or pollution of their habitat or competition with us for food resources. Locally, we live in close proximity to several species at risk. Within the Coquitlam River drainage, endangered spotted owls and threatened marbled murrelets have been observed in the forested areas of the GVRD’s drinking watershed. The owls have not been sighted for several years but they did nest there in the mid 1990s when BC’s spotted owl population was five-fold greater than it is now. Within municipal boundaries, there have been several sightings of

the threatened Pacific water shrew as well as red-legged frogs, western toads, barn owls, rubber boa (a small non-poisonous snake) and peregrine falcons, all species of special concern. Along the dikes of Port Coquitlam, the highly endangered riverside lupine grows. Local species at risk on the provincial list include the great blue heron, tailed frog, short-eared owl, western screech owl, Townsend's big-eared bat and purple martin. In addition, the southern population of orcas is listed as endangered. Because these whales live in the Georgia Strait amongst the chemical brew of our inadequately-treated sewage, they have accumulated toxins that are thought to interfere with their ability to reproduce.

Local environmental stewards are engaged in trying to protect habitat for species at risk by monitoring wildlife and working with developers and municipalities to protect habitat. Some species at risk benefit through the provision of habitat such as nest boxes; we are more than pleased to provide them with some. As naturalists, we are enthralled by the beauty and biodiversity of the natural world. We want to ensure that future generations will also be able to enjoy a world full of wildlife. It sure would be nice if the government would step up to the plate, though.