

For Species-at-Risk, the Ticking Clock is Relentless

An early August CBC story provided what I thought would be the perfect message for this editorial about species-at-risk. The story focused on sea otters, one of my favourite animals. It was a good news story.

Hunted ruthlessly for their fur since the 1740s, they were near extinction by the early 20th Century. In Canada, the last sea otter was shot in 1929. In the late 1960s and early 1970s sea otters from Alaska were reintroduced to the Pacific Northwest. Between 1969 and 1972, 89 sea otters were introduced to waters off of northwest Vancouver Island.

Thus began their road to recovery. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) designated *Ehydra lutris* as Endangered in 1978 and again in 1986. But, by 1993, at least 1,078 sea otters inhabited B.C. waters. In 2000 COSEWIC determined that, due to the steady increase in the otter population, sea otters were no longer in imminent danger of extirpation. Their status was changed to Threatened. The most recent federal otter census in 2017 put their population at approximately 8,000.

What is fundamental to understanding the ecology and the politics of recovering species-at-risk is the range of broader ecological implications that accompanies recovering populations. A blossoming otter population has delivered several important ecological benefits. Thanks to the otters, kelp forests have regenerated to the benefit of rockfish and salmon. For the climate, more kelp also means more carbon storage.

On the other hand, recovering some species may harm others. For example, the otter's appetite for sea urchins and other shellfish has posed a threat to Indigenous and commercial fisheries. The sea otter success story alerts us to this reality: there are tradeoffs to spe-

cies recovery and the challenge is deciding how to address them as we return species to the planet's lands and waters.

September's news on the species-at-risk front was more distressing. Its message was that, if we don't act very soon, we won't have to worry about making tradeoffs because we are losing species and biodiversity at an alarming, likely catastrophic, rate.

The United Nations published its fifth edition of its Global Biodiversity Outlook report in mid-September. Positively, virtually every country is now doing something to protect biodiversity and without such action the world's biodiversity would be even worse. "Even worse"...this means that none of the 20 objectives for 2020 (the Aichi Biodiversity Targets) set a decade ago by the U.N. have been fully met. Only six have been "partially achieved."

While governments take halting, baby steps to sustain biodiversity, they continue to open our wallets to subsidize the types of industrialization and economic activity that have put us at this crossroads. The amounts spent in the name of biodiversity are dwarfed by what is "spent on activities that are harmful to biodiversity, including some \$500 billion for fossil fuels, and other subsidies that cause environmental degradation."

The U.N. report came on the heels of World Wildlife Fund Living Planet reports. Globally, the average decline in wildlife populations since 1970 is a staggering 68 percent. In Canada, the populations of species that COSEWIC has assessed as at-risk nationally have declined by an average of 59 percent from their 1970 levels.

The time to act on this file was yesterday. In order to be in the position to have to decide what tradeoffs we make as we recover species-at-risk, we must take decisive, expeditious action now.

- Ian Urquhart, Editor