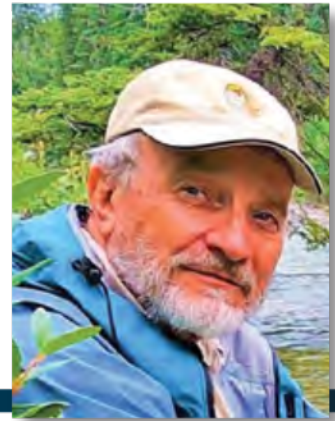


Op-Ed: Faltering Steps in Species Recovery

By Lorne Fitch, *P. Biol.*



Species at risk are those native plants, animals, and fish that are at risk of extirpation or extinction – most because of human action. In Alberta there are currently 41 species listed as *Threatened* or *Endangered* and more likely exist but have not yet been designated. At least five species are now missing from the Alberta landscape. To ensure that none of the current listed species at risk disappear, meaningful and immediate recovery actions are required.

To better understand species recovery as practised in Alberta, and Canada more broadly, consider the possibility of your house being on fire. Instead of the fire department immediately dousing the flames, they waste their time assessing the extent of the fire and whether it requires any action to begin with. A committee would then be assembled to debate the information gathered, and in the spirit of inclusiveness, even the arsonist receives an invitation. The relevant ministry would then assess the cost effectiveness of saving your home and any inconvenience their actions might accrue to your neighbours. This is just a small example of the bureaucracy of species recovery in this country based on my experience of participating in several species' recovery plans and waiting for real action. It leaves me outraged.

Like an ebb tide where water flows back to the ocean, caribou have steadily been pushed further and further north by habitats increasingly industrialized and fragmented in our busy Eastern Slopes. Declines in caribou populations were witnessed by Henry Stelfox in the Clearwater watershed in the 1930s. They were missing from most of the southern portion of the Eastern Slopes by the 1950s, and now the declines continue in

the northern extent of their ranges.

Issues with extensive, industrial-scale logging were noted in the early 1980s; a 1986 caribou restoration plan called for habitat protection, and a 1993 conservation strategy mentioned logging as the biggest threat to caribou survival. A recovery strategy was only completed in 2005, and the Government of Alberta chose not to follow the recommendation for a moratorium on land uses where caribou were known to be at immediate risk of extirpation. Some forty years later, we seem no closer to that essential rescue and the recognition it is a one-way tide in the case of caribou if we do not act now.

Fish species on the edge fare little better. Twenty-five years have passed since alarms first went off for Athabasca rainbow trout, 23 years for Westslope cutthroat trout, and 42 for bull trout.

Then there are plants, under-represented in the cauldrons of ecological catastrophe. Too few botanists, with too little time and money, struggle to identify, monitor, and assess risk. Charismatic megafauna, with large, plaintive eyes are the Cinderella species, commanding effort and resources. It's hard to relate to a plant – you can't look into its eyes. While it is probably true that few want to read about plants or insects, even in eloquent and urgent tones, we can't live without them. Yet both groups are in crisis because of climate change, habitat destruction, invasive species, and the overuse of agrochemicals.

The ponderous machinery of bureaucracy takes too long to set itself in motion. Multiple great wheels and levers and gears, once started, revolve with such a laborious, ponderous, and pained deliberation. When that work on the status of a species is finally

complete, with all its surety, firmness, and procedural completeness, then a recovery plan is initiated.

A recovery plan – however well-intentioned – does not, in and of itself, save a threatened species. It is the will, the intent, the resources, and the purposeful action of actually doing something that might have an effect. Ignoring the peril of a species and deciding not to follow evidence-based designations just to avoid a complex or costly response is a cop-out of our collective responsibility for the stewardship of our land and the species that make it their home.

When one adds up the procedural, bureaucratic, logistical, political, and economic steps and impediments it is a wonder anything ever gets done. Thankfully, a few dedicated individuals, working in spite of the system, struggle to implement recovery goals. Notable examples include Westslope cutthroat trout recovery in Banff National Park and bull trout habitat restoration in the Ram River watershed.

Beyond a few engaged conservationists, most of the public is blissfully unaware of species at risk. They might be more aware if there was recognition that species on the brink are a cautionary signal for our own survival. Give us a starlet's infidelities, the shopping channel, or the hockey series and we're all ears and eyes. Trivia takes precedent over tangible, superfluous over substance, and consumer crap over consequences. What will it take for you to be outraged?

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