
Parks and Protected Areas: A Very Important Piece of Ontario's Species at Risk Recovery Plan

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Abstract:

Many changes and enhancements have occurred within Ontario's Species at Risk program over the past four or five years. New policies and programs have been established by the province, and agreements between the provincial and federal governments regarding cooperative management of species at risk have been signed. The Ministry of Natural Resources' new strategic direction, "Our Sustainable Future", as well as Ontario's new Biodiversity Strategy, include commitments for the maintenance of natural biodiversity. This paper summarizes some of the important areas of focus within the program at the present time, as well as the linkage between the program and the protected area system in Ontario.

Keywords: *species at risk, protected areas, conservation reserves, Ontario Parks, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, biodiversity, Carolinian Canada, recovery planning.*

Introduction

A formal focus on species at risk in Ontario began with the proclamation of the *Endangered Species Act* in 1971 (Government of Ontario, 1990). Since the initial regulation of four species under that Act in 1973, there have been an additional 36 endangered species regulated. From the 1970s to the early 1990s, species at risk were included within the mandate of the Non-game Wildlife program in Fish & Wildlife Branch. In 2000, a significant expansion in staff and financial resources occurred, as part of the implementa-

tion of “Ontario’s Living Legacy” Land Use Strategy (OMNR, 1999). This increased effort roughly coincided with the increased focus on species at risk at the national level, catalyzed by the passage of the *Species at Risk Act* (Government of Canada, 2002). Thus, since about 2000, considerable effort has occurred in status assessment, policy and guideline development, regulation, recovery planning, stewardship, and communications. This increased effort has extended to the protected area system, where an increased focus by park zone ecologists, park biologists, and natural heritage education staff has been placed on monitoring the occurrences and habitat of species at risk, recovery planning, and increasing the profile of species at risk in protected area planning and public education. Also, some policy development with regard to the conservation of species at risk in protected areas has occurred. From 2000 until early in 2005, the Species at Risk program was part of Ontario Parks Branch. However, in 2005, it became a unit within the newly created Biodiversity Section in Fish and Wildlife Branch.

The Species at Risk Unit is responsible for status assessment, regulation, recovery planning, and associated policy and guideline development and communications relating to species at risk in Ontario. Staff specialists are associated with each of these activities. The Unit maintains a close liaison with other parts of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, including Ontario Parks, and also with federal counterparts in Environment Canada. The *Accord for the Protection of Species at Risk*, signed by the Canadian wildlife ministers in 1996 (Environment Canada, 1996), is an agreement between the provinces and the federal government to share responsibility for the conservation of species at risk.

Recently, the Government of Ontario released its *Biodiversity Strategy* (Government of Ontario, 2005). This strategy includes numerous actions that call for the conservation of all native biodiversity, including species at risk. It places the onus for this task on all citizens and sectors of society, including, but not restricted to, government departments and public agencies. “*This Strategy is not about nature versus people. It is about living sustainably as part of nature. If we deplete or disrupt our natural capital to the point where it is no longer self-renewing or it is simply gone and cannot be recovered, we risk Ontario’s future economic and social viability, as well as our health and quality of life*” (Government of Ontario, 2005). Internally within the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, the new strategic direction (Our Sustainable Future) also provides support for the conservation of species at risk, using the best available science (OMNR, 2005a).

Species at Risk in Ontario

Presently, there are 40 species regulated under the *Endangered Species Act* in Ontario. In 2004, the *Species at Risk in Ontario* (SARO) list was officially endorsed. In addition to the species regulated under the *Endangered Species Act*, it lists 32 endangered species that are not regulated, 44 threatened species, and 46 species of special concern. It also lists species that are extinct and extirpated, those for which information is insufficient at the present time, and species which have been assessed but have been found not to be at risk. In addition to the species contained on the SARO list, there are hundreds of species that are provincially rare, but for which no status reports have been written. Ontario's Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC) tracks these additional provincially rare species, as well as those on the SARO list. Thus, there are 172 species with official "at risk" status (including those that are extirpated) and hundreds of additional provincially rare species that are found in Ontario.

As one would expect, the greatest number of these species occurs in the area with the highest species diversity overall, but also with the greatest level of threat to their well being, namely, the Carolinian ecoregion in the southwestern portion of the province (151 of 172 listed species at risk). This area has the highest population density and the most intensive land-use in the province. Most of the land is privately owned, and land-use planning is under municipal mandate. Policy-based protection for species at risk is achieved through the municipal planning process, as guided by the Planning Act, and more specifically, the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS). The PPS states that municipal planning documents must be consistent with the protection of endangered and threatened species and their significant habitat. Other mechanisms contained within the PPS, such as provincially significant wetlands, areas of natural and scientific interest (ANSIs), woodlands, and valleylands, and significant wildlife habitat, also potentially can protect the occurrences and habitat of species at risk. Habitat is the key!

A key component in the conservation of species at risk is recovery planning. In order to use planning tools and stewardship incentives effectively, one must determine where are the most important and viable existing occurrences and suitable habitats for a species or set of species. Then, efficient and sensible plans for habitat restoration, management, and securement, as well as other recovery actions, can be developed. Many recovery planning efforts (over 70) are underway in Ontario at the present time. The early efforts were focused on the recovery of individual species or species pairs [e.g., piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) (Prairie and Atlantic Piping Plo-

ver Recovery Teams, 2002), Acadian flycatcher (*Empidonax vireescens*) and hooded warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*) (Acadian Flycatcher and Hooded Warbler Recovery Team, 2000)]. However, given the large number of species for which recovery plans are required, and also the need to focus on habitat protection and recovery, more and more recovery planning teams are dealing with the recovery of ecosystems that support multiple species at risk. Some examples of ecosystem or multi-species recovery planning efforts include those for the Sydenham River (Sydenham River Recovery Team, 2003) and for tallgrass prairies (Rodger, 1998).

The Role of Protected Areas

Ontario's protected area system serves as a fundamental building block in the conservation of species at risk in the province (OMNR, 1997). In particular, provincial parks in the most protective classes (Nature Reserve, Wilderness, Natural Environment, and Waterway), conservation reserves, and national parks are central components in the maintenance and recovery of species at risk. Steps have been taken to ensure that this happens by enhancing the policy on the protection of species at risk in provincial parks to extend the same level of protection to all risk categories, including endangered, threatened, and special concern (with rare exceptions allowed only for species of special concern where explicit justification can be shown).

In the past, provincial park management plans rarely made explicit mention of species at risk, so it was difficult to determine whether or not the proposed zoning and other management direction mentioned in the plans had taken account of species at risk, without going back to the original life science inventory reports. This situation has now changed, with zone and park staff putting considerable effort into determining the status of species at risk within their parks, estimating population sizes or determining the limits of occurrence, assessing habitat, and ensuring that these species are protected through the tools available in the management planning process. Park superintendents and their operational staff are gaining an increasing appreciation for the species at risk within their parks and are taking steps to ensure that their day-to-day operations do not affect these species detrimentally.

Although conservation reserves have few staff directly associated with them, OMNR biologists in the district and area offices contribute significantly to determining the status of species at risk in these areas. They also contribute to the management planning process for these areas within their districts, along with their district planners.

National parks have a direct mandate through the federal *Species at Risk Act* to protect all species listed in Schedule 1 under that Act. Thus, they have been very active in protecting the species at risk on their properties in Ontario. Furthermore, often their staff lead or participate in recovery planning for species that occur in their parks.

Thus, in the more northern parts of the province (on and north of the Precambrian Shield, from Ecoregion 5E northward, as per Crins, 2002), regulated protected areas fulfill a central role in the conservation of species at risk; although even in this part of the province, the intervening, managed land base contributes significantly to the provision of critical habitats for species at risk and, therefore, must be managed with the conservation of species at risk in mind.

However, regulated protected areas such as provincial parks, conservation reserves, and national parks are few and far between in southern Ontario, and especially in southwestern Ontario. Only a very small proportion of the total land base is contained within regulated protected areas in this part of the province. Thus, reliance must be placed on additional mechanisms for conservation of species at risk and their habitats (OMNR, 1997). Components of the PPS (mentioned above) are important in this regard. In addition, stewardship by private landowners is critical. Tax incentives are available to assist landowners in the protection of the habitat of regulated endangered species on their properties. Also, the substantial land holdings of the conservation authorities are extremely important in biodiversity conservation, in general, and the protection of species at risk, specifically. Also of great importance are the conservation lands held by environmental conservation groups, clubs, and land trusts. Together, these lands constitute the nucleus of a protected area network, in the broad sense (Crins, 2005).

These building blocks, along with ecological restoration efforts that are tied in to conservation planning efforts such as the *Bigger Picture 2002* (Nature Conservancy of Canada and Natural Heritage Information Centre, 2003), the *Great Lakes Conservation Blueprint* (Henson and Brodribb, 2005; Wichert *et al.*, 2005), the *Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan* (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2002), the *Greenbelt Plan* (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2005), the *Natural Spaces* initiative (OMNR, 2005b), as well as recovery plans for species at risk, will play an increasingly large and crucial role in the conservation of these species in the increasingly stressed southern Ontario environment. The Species at Risk Unit provides support for these planning initiatives. As noted above,

habitat is the key! Without suitable habitat in cores and connections on the landscape, recovery of species at risk will not be possible.

Summary

The Species at Risk program within the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources has undergone a significant expansion and increase in profile over the past four or five years. Large amounts of work on regulation and listing of species, recovery planning for species and ecosystems, guideline development for conservation of these species, and communications relating to species at risk have led to greater public awareness and concern for these species. In conjunction with this increased emphasis, the custodians of the regulated protected area system have increased their efforts to conserve species at risk within their properties, through policy development, resource management planning, and on-the-ground conservation actions. Furthermore, increased activity with regard to ecosystem protection and restoration has occurred within the broader 'protected area system', including those conservation lands that are held by conservation-oriented groups, citizens, municipalities, and conservation authorities. All components of the broader 'protected area system' will be essential for the successful recovery of species at risk and their habitats in Ontario.

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