

Green Scene: Species Remain at Risk without Gov't Action

by Elaine Golds

(published by the *Tri-City News* on January 16 2015)



Barn owls are a species at risk in the Lower Mainland, which is one of the few areas in Canada with suitable conditions for them. At Colony Farm and Minnekhada regional parks in Coquitlam, these owls use nest boxes provided by volunteer Kiyoshi Takahashi, who took this photo. *Kiyoshi Takahashi photo.*

Whenever surveyed about species at risk, a high percentage of people (typically greater than 90%) say they care about species at risk, believe they should be protected and that it is entirely appropriate for government to take action to protect them. Despite this, our federal government is failing miserably to protect species at risk while BC remains one of four provinces (the others are Alberta, Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island) without species at risk legislation. Species at risk are defined as the plants and animals undergoing such dramatic population declines that, unless effective action is taken, their disappearance is the mostly likely outcome. This, of course, presumes that someone, usually university- or government-based scientists, are keeping a tally on levels of abundance.

Decreasing populations of species go through a number of stages which are considered to be levels of endangerment. The worst outcome, of course, is extinction. We do have some extinct species in BC.

One of these is the Steller's Sea Cow, a dugong once found in coastal waters but which was hunted to extinction in the late 1700s. The other categories, in decreasing rank, include extirpated (a species no longer found in BC or Canada but found elsewhere), "endangered", "threatened" and "special concern" (formerly called "vulnerable"). To make matters more confusing, the provincial government, which does at least compile a list of species at risk, lumps endangered and threatened species into a so-called "red-list" while species of special concern are placed on a "blue list". In BC, our local great blue heron population is a unique non-migratory subspecies which appears on the blue list. In Canada, we have over 500 endangered and threatened species while in the Tri-Cities area we have approximately 150 species at risk in all categories.

Years ago, the main reason for species becoming at risk was typically due to over-hunting. Now, however, species are increasingly being placed at risk from a variety of impacts due to the ever-growing human population. Such impacts include the outright loss of habitat for some species or other causes such as profound alterations in their environment, climate change, pollution or the appearance of invasive species. For example, conversion of old growth forests to younger forests eliminates habitat for spotted owls. In addition, the inadvertent arrival of a new species, the barred owl, also poses a serious threat to the closely-related spotted owls. These days, species at risk usually face multiple threats which all contribute to their population decline.

Since 1973 in the USA, endangered species have been effectively protected by their Endangered Species Act which applies even to private land. The Canadian government did not pass our Species at Risk Act (SARA) until 2002. What's worse, our legislation is very weak because it only applies to federal lands. This led one prominent environmentalist to complain that, if spotted owls wanted protection they would have to fly to post offices. These days, of course, even post offices are under threat.

In Canada, we actually have two lists of species at risk. One list is compiled by scientists and is based on the biological threats faced by species. The other list (the SARA list) depends on the government adding the species recommended by scientists. The federal government has been failing to add species to the SARA list and is also failing to protect or even identify the critical habitat of species on the list. Since 2011, 67 species have been recommended to be added to SARA but no action has been taken by the Harper government. A recent analysis of the effectiveness of species at risk legislation between the USA and Canada indicated that, while the USA legislation has been impressively effective in improving the status of species at risk, very few such improvements have been noted for Canadian species at risk.

On the international scene, the recent record of the Harper government is truly abysmal. Internationally, species at risk are protected by the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES). This Convention, in effect since 1975, has been signed by most nations on earth; Canada was one of the first signatories. It currently protects about 36,000 species of plants and animals. In March 2014, 76 new species were added to CITES. Countries signatory to the Convention are then expected to give these species protection within their borders within 90 days. Shockingly, the government of Canada voted against adding all of these species to CITES. Never before in the history of CITES has any country voted in this manner. This action has raised international concerns about Canada's continued commitment to CITES. With blatant disregard for trade in endangered species, the Harper government last year allowed the shipment of whale meat from Iceland to Japan by rail across Canada. This meat, including some from whale species at risk, had been refused at several ports in Europe but apparently raised no such concerns in Canada. As a Canadian citizen, I am appalled at the recent record of the Harper government to fail to protect species at risk. On the international level, we should all be hanging our heads in shame.