

SARA REVIEW - POLAR BEAR CASE STUDY

Incorporating Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge

Introduction

This case study provides a brief overview of the use of Aboriginal traditional knowledge¹ (ATK) under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) in the case of the Polar Bear.

The Polar Bear is an iconic symbol of Canada, and Canada is home to approximately 15 000 of the estimated 20 000 to 25 000 Polar Bears in the world. This carnivore plays a key role in Canada's Arctic ecosystem. Its habitat consists of sea ice where it predominantly hunts seals, and maternal denning sites on land near the coast. Some protection of terrestrial habitat important to Polar Bears, including denning sites, occurs through Canada's national parks and through provincial and territorial parks.

The Polar Bear has significant socio-economic and cultural importance to the North. In Canada, the hunting and harvesting of polar bears is restricted to Aboriginal people or sport hunters guided by Aboriginal people. This is an important source of cash income for small settlements in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

Management of Canadian Polar Bear populations is the responsibility of the provinces, territories and wildlife management boards in which they occur, and co-management boards/resource user groups, which are the main organizations of wildlife management in many northern areas. The legislation, research and management programs of each of these jurisdictions, along with the national Accord for the Protection of Species at Risk, SARA, and the Canadian Polar Bear Technical and Administrative Committees, provide a management framework for ensuring the sustainability of Polar Bear populations in Canada.

Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge

ATK includes, but is not limited to, the knowledge Aboriginal peoples have accumulated about wildlife species and their environment. ATK can incorporate aspects of culture, spirituality and history. Therefore, Aboriginal peoples with different backgrounds (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) may define ATK in different ways.

¹ Other words that have been used to describe this knowledge include traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), Inuit qaujimaqatugangit (IQ), indigenous knowledge (IK) and naturalized knowledge systems.

SARA and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge

SARA recognizes the importance of ATK in the assessment and determination of which species are at risk and in the development and implementation of recovery measures.

To this end, SARA requires that the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) carry out its functions, including the assessment of species, on the basis of the best available information on the biological status of a species, including scientific knowledge, community knowledge and ATK.

Including ATK in COSEWIC's species assessment increases the accuracy of assessments by bringing out information and perspectives on wildlife species that are not available in published scientific literature. Using ATK in recovery strategies and action plans also assists in the development of measures for species at risk and implementation based on the best information available.

Polar Bear Assessment and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge

The Polar Bear was assessed by COSEWIC in 1986, 1991, 1999 and 2002. When SARA came into force in 2003, the Polar Bear was listed on Schedule 3 of the Act, among 103 species of special concern that COSEWIC had added to its list over the previous 25 years, but, as of the end of 2001, had yet to reassess with updated criteria and information.

In 2005, the Governor in Council (GIC) referred the Polar Bear back to COSEWIC for reassessment. One reason for this was to include ATK in order to meet the requirements for ATK as set out in subsection 15(2) of SARA. In response, COSEWIC commissioned the writing of a new status report, to include more ATK prior to their reassessment.

Through this same time period following the coming into force of SARA starting in 2003, COSEWIC began to strengthen its capacity to collect and work with ATK by establishing an Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Subcommittee to develop guidelines for gathering and including ATK in species assessments.

- Terms of reference for the Subcommittee were approved in 2004 to ensure that Aboriginal knowledge is recognized as a very significant gift to be treated with respect and integrity for the benefit of wildlife species.
- In February 2006, the ATK Subcommittee established an ATK Process and Protocol Guidelines Working Group to develop guidelines for gathering and including Aboriginal knowledge. The presentation of the draft guidelines to Aboriginal elders and knowledge holders for their review and approval is taking place through 2008 and 2009. ATK Subcommittee members will also identify qualified individuals and establish a network of Aboriginal knowledge holders and related experts from approximately 35 eco-regions of Canada to facilitate their work.

In April 2008, COSEWIC announced its reassessment of the Polar Bear as a species of special concern. In August 2008, the assessment report was published. Citing consideration of extensive inventory, research, a wealth of Aboriginal traditional and community knowledge and the emerging threats posed by climate change and northern development, the Polar Bear was assessed as a species of special concern. The 2008 assessment presented a greater and more consistent inclusion of ATK than previous assessments of the Polar Bear.

The assessment brought together ATK more fully with traditional science and other information throughout the report. The ATK substantiated many of the documented scientific claims such as the interchange among subpopulations, variability and preference of diet, impact of habitat changes such as the deterioration of sea ice conditions and their impact on polar bears, and the effects of climate on the extent and availability of sea ice. The information included through ATK was presented throughout the report, both where it aligned with and diverged from other observations and data.

Prior to the release of this assessment, members of the COSEWIC Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge Subcommittee reviewed the draft interim report on the Polar Bear and provided comments and recommendations. They also met with 30 Inuit and Inuvialuit Elders and knowledge holders and the Co-chair of COSEWIC's Terrestrial Mammals Species Specialists Subcommittee in November 2006 to discuss preparation of the status report on the Polar Bear.

Conclusion

For species at risk, the inclusion of relevant ATK is an important part of assessment and recovery planning, including the identification of critical habitat, and, ultimately, finalization of action plans and recovery measures. While the inclusion of ATK in species assessment will benefit from the finalization of the Subcommittee's guidelines, the process that ensured greater inclusion of ATK in the assessment of the Polar Bear reflects the evolving experience with working with ATK and the learning that has taken place under SARA. The ATK collected for the assessment of species at risk provides one part of important baseline information that can support ongoing monitoring and which may help identify beneficial actions, in some cases independently of whether formal SARA obligations are triggered by a listing decision.