

Canada's Species at Risk Act



A polar bear with her cubs in Churchill, Manitoba. (Credit: [James Seith Photography](#) via Flickr.)

Canada's [Species At Risk Act](#) was designed to protect Canadian plants and wildlife. In order for the *SARA* to work properly, government must use the powers of the *Act*.

There are three main tools of the *SARA*:

1. Official recognition: a plant or animal cannot be protected unless it is "listed".
2. Habitat protection: begins with identifying habitat needed for survival and recovery.
3. The 'safety net': federal government can step in if a province is failing to protect a species and its habitat.

But this piece of federal legislation contains some fundamental weaknesses, and its implementation to date has left most species without habitat protection.

Flaws in the listing process

Under the *SARA*, the federal government receives recommendations from an independent science advisory body — the [Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada](#) (COSEWIC) — on whether a species is at risk of extinction.

The bad news is that the Federal Cabinet often does not follow these scientific recommendations.

If listing an animal is deemed to have social, economic or political impacts, it can be denied listing, referred for further consultations, or sent back to the scientific body for further study. In other words, a species can be left off the list, leaving it vulnerable to continued decline.

Recommended for protection—but denied

For example, government scientists have recommended that polar bears be added to the list of endangered species several times, but the federal government has repeatedly postponed adding the bear for protection. This has left the [polar bear](#) without any plan for protection throughout most of Canada.

The porbeagle shark was denied protection by the *SARA* because it might have impacted the fishing industry — despite a 90 per cent decline in the porbeagle shark population.

Putting politics and economics ahead of species protection seriously weakens the *Act's* effectiveness. At the *Act's* five-year anniversary, only 445 out of 551 species identified as at risk by COSEWIC have been listed.

A closer look at species listing

The David Suzuki Foundation report [Left off the List](#) profiles eight of the dozens of species that have been assessed as at risk, but have been excluded from the *Act* designed to protect them.

Flaws in habitat protection

When a species is listed, the *SARA* requires development of a Recovery Strategy that identifies habitat crucial for its survival, as adequate habitat cannot be maintained, protected or restored until it is first identified. Yet the majority of recovery strategies released to date do not identify [critical habitat](#). This, despite requirements within the *SARA* (Section 41) to do so.

Flaws in the scope of the Act

The *SARA* currently applies only to federal lands—like post offices, national parks, airports and RCMP detachments. Most public, or Crown, lands in Canada are under provincial jurisdiction. This leaves only a tiny fraction of the country under direct protection of the *SARA*.

Holes in the safety net

The *SARA* does contain a special "safety net" provision that can protect areas normally under provincial jurisdiction, but only if the federal Minister of Environment approves. The "safety net" has never been employed, despite the dire circumstances of species like the [Northern Spotted Owl](#)

The Bottom Line

Weak legislation, loopholes, lack of funding, poor habitat protection, political interference and poor implementation leaves Canada's rich wildlife with poor protection.

<http://www.daidsuzuki.org/issues/wildlife-habitat/science/endangered-species-legislation/canadas-species-at-risk-act/>