

NAAEE 2014 Conference, Ottawa**Our Common Ground, Species at Risk School and Community Engagement Project**

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Summary

Conservation Target: Federally listed Species At Risk in Grenville County, Ontario, Canada

Threats:

Contributing Factors/Behaviors: Perceptions that Canadian Federal Species at Risk Act (SARA) and Ontario Endangered Species Act (ESA) targets certain audiences, lack of local information, fear that government will try to dictate practices on private land.

Audience:

Grades 4 – 8

Farmers in Southern Ontario

Audience Assessment and Barrier ID: Farmers not having localized information about which species at risk might be occurring on their own land—what ecological value they bring to the land, where they typically live, and what farmers can do to help them.

Strategy Selection: Utilize the *Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CEPA) Toolkit* developed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for the Commission on Education and Communication for the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2007 to develop an engagement strategy

Time frame: 2009- 2013

Case Study**Background:**

More than 190 of the 30,000 species found in the province of Ontario are at risk for reasons such as habitat loss, pollution, changing land use activities, and the spread of invasive species. In 1971, Ontario passed the *Endangered Species Act*, the first provincial legislation of its kind. The law prohibits willful harm to endangered species that are listed under the Act, as well as willful destruction of, or interference with, their habitats. In 2007, Ontario updated its legislation with the passage of the *Endangered Species Act of 2007*. Among other changes, the new law provides broader protection for species at risk and their habitats, and greater support for volunteer stewardship efforts of private landowners,

resource users, and conservation organizations. It also calls for increased fines, more effective enforcement, and greater accountability.

On a national level, Canada passed the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) in 2002, providing for the recovery of endangered and threatened species and encouraging the management of other species to prevent them from becoming at risk.

There has been a perception among some landowners that these laws target private landowners, raising concerns that, if an endangered species is found on privately owned land, the government will dictate what landowners can or cannot do on their property.

The Grenville Land Stewardship Council a community-based stewardship council is made up of local landowners representing various sectors of the community in Grenville County located in southern Ontario (where most land is privately owned). *The Our Common Ground* program has been operating since 2009 and is one component of a multifaceted program that has that also includes the *Trees for Peace and the Earth Charter program*, through which school groups and community members plant trees on privately-owned sites that require wildlife habitat rehabilitation, erosion control, water quality buffering, or wildlife corridor development. The *Trees for Peace and the Earth Charter* program has been operating since 2003.

Approach:

Through a grant from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Species at Risk program the two-part project called Our Common Ground was implemented. One aspect of the project involved giving presentations to school groups in grades 4 through 8, with the hope of nurturing a sense of stewardship in tomorrow's leaders as well as reaching parents through their children. The second aspect of the program involved selecting a specific public audience connected to protection of species at risk and, with their input, developing a targeted educational campaign to reach that audience.

School Engagement

A group area school teachers was convened that resulted in GLSC working with the teachers to develop a classroom presentations about local species at risk, along with a booklet that students would complete to demonstrate what they learned and to help them reflect on their personal connections to species at risk.

The curriculum adaptation was completed by two local teachers from the Upper Canada District School. By the end of 2010, 57 teachers in Leeds and Grenville had received training and a copy of the curriculum binders and were implementing the curriculum in their classes.

Workshops were held early in 2011 to train teachers with the newly developed species at risk curriculum. The training workshops and the curriculum itself have been well received by all teachers involved, with over 40 teachers participating

Community Engagement

To determine the most appropriate audience, a checklist from the *Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CEPA): A Toolkit for National Focal Points and NBSAP Coordinators*, that was developed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for the Commission on Education and Communication for the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2007.

Using questions from the CEPA toolkit a group of landowners was convened and through this process several professional organizations, representing different sectors, were engaged to assess their interest in working on the project.

Through this work, the local agricultural community was identified as the most effective audience for the project because they had expressed concerns about feeling targeted by the government legislation and were viewed as the “bad guys” with regard to species at risk—two perceptions that the group felt could be modified through the project. The Ontario Federation of Agriculture and 4H Canada responded positively, seeing participation in the project as an opportunity to help change farmers’ public image so they could be perceived as helping, not hindering species at risk management.

Once they decided to target the agricultural community, GLSC organized a farmers’ focus group with the intent of gaining the perspective of their audience, learning of their concerns, and identifying the best strategies for engaging farmers in species at risk protection. They solicited participants by advertising in the local newspaper.

The focus groups provided the key tools needed to develop a specialized communication plan. Fears, misconceptions, challenges, and needs were addressed, and a new sense of trust emerged between the agricultural community and the Stewardship Council. GLSC discovered that a significant barrier for the farmers was not having localized information about which species might occur on their own land. While technical information on listed species is readily available on the federal, provincial, and regional levels, the farmers needed to know more about the species at risk within Grenville County—what ecological value they bring to the land, where they typically live, and what farmers can do to help them.

With input from the Grenville Agricultural Federation and the farmers who attended the focus group, GLSC generated a series of eight articles for local agricultural publications. The articles included messages specifically relevant to the audience, clarifying the legislation and providing localized species at risk information. The development of the articles helped to initiate a two-way process with the Grenville Federation of Agriculture, developing trust and relations with the broader agricultural community in the county. The GLSC steering committee members went to their broader networks to find people to write the articles, which were vetted by the agricultural focus group participants.

Each article included a survey to help assess the effects of the information on farmers’ thinking. To encourage return of the surveys, a drawing was held after the series of articles

was completed. The winner received an oil painting by a local artist—a prize recommended by the focus group participants.

Results:

School Engagement

2009-2013 - school presentations on Species at Risk reaching 4000 students from kindergarten to college.

2012 - Addition of curriculum based lessons focused on chimney swifts developed by Bird Studies Canada.

2011's - development and inclusion of new curriculum lessons focused on species at risk on the farm and in the woodlot.

2010- Classroom implementation of the curriculum by 40 teachers in Leeds and Grenville

2009 -Alignment of Species at Risk presentations with Ontario Grade 4 -8 curriculum



School Presentation at St. Joseph's School, Prescott, ON

Agriculture Sector Engagement

Significantly raised awareness of species at risk in the agricultural sector of the community.

Creation of a 4-H Species at Risk Club where youth learned to

- create videos and podcasts
- Document how farmers are helping species at risk on their property.

Delivery of a 4H Species at Risk Symposium

Cultivated new attitudes of stewardship among the next generation of farmers.



Farmers can coexist with Species at Risk,” says Adrian Wynands, President of the Grenville Federation of Agriculture.