

**REPORT TO REGIONAL PARKS COMMITTEE
MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2025**

SUBJECT **Species at Risk Ecological Monitoring Report**

ISSUE SUMMARY

To update the Regional Parks Committee on the Capital Regional District's (CRD) Regional Parks and Trails Species at Risk Monitoring Program.

BACKGROUND

The CRD's regional parks and trails play an important role in protecting ecologically important values within their land base, and to enhance and better preserve these values, the CRD's Regional Parks Division provides a Species at Risk Monitoring Program.

The Species at Risk Act (SARA) federally protects threatened and endangered species to prevent their extinction and helps them recover from human-related threats. SARA identifies critical habitats essential for the survival or recovery of these species. While SARA mainly applies to federal lands, the CRD is responsible for protecting species at risk within its regional parks and trails. The BC Ministry of Environment's Conservation Data Centre also conducts assessments to support recovery efforts. Protecting these species in regional parks and trails requires understanding their locations and what threats they face to ensure compliance with relevant laws. In 2023, CRD Regional Parks expanded its team by adding two conservation technicians to monitor ecological values in regional parks and trails. They launched a Species at Risk Monitoring Program to prioritize and track species most at risk of extinction or other threats. The program aims to:

- Compile a comprehensive inventory of priority species.
- Identify and mitigate known threats.
- Increase awareness and foster stewardship for species recovery.

Additionally, the program supports and informs provincial and federal species assessments and recovery efforts.

The first two years of the program prioritized rare plants and the threatened pacific coast population of western painted turtles (*Chrysemys picta bellii*) as a pilot study. Surveys were conducted for 33 plant species within 18 regional parks, and 17 of those species were observed and inventoried. The main threats to these plants include invasive species and trampling. To protect them, recommended actions are invasive plant management, fencing and educational signage. In 2023 and 2024, staff implemented 20 actions to protect 11 species at risk within 11 regional parks. The ongoing monitoring and coordinated efforts to mitigate threats will continue.

In 2023, staff conducted surveys for western painted turtles at Matheson Lake Regional Park and in 2024 at Elk/Beaver Lake Regional Park and the former Royal Oak Golf Course property. The project aimed to increase the understanding of habitat use, nesting activity and the relative

abundance of native western painted turtles and non-native pond sliders. Staff used visual observation and remote wildlife cameras in suitable habitats and nesting areas.

Native turtles were observed in all three parks, and threats such as recreational disturbance, predation and invasive species were identified. Staff and volunteers removed invasive species from three known nesting sites in two regional parks. Turtle nesting activity was confirmed at Matheson Lake Regional Park and in October 2024, fencing and educational signage were installed to reduce recreational impacts on nesting habitat. Ongoing monitoring and maintenance of nesting areas are planned to continue in future years.

IMPLICATIONS

Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies

The CRD's Species at Risk Monitoring Program aligns with the CRD Board priorities and the Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan 2022-2032. The program aims to enhance environmental stewardship, protect ecological values, improve visitor experiences and support First Nations reconciliation. A key success indicator in the Strategic Plan is increased protection of at-risk species and ecosystems in regional parks.

Climate Implications

The program is currently being expanded by staff to monitor broader ecological values. This includes identifying key indicators of climate change and assessing climate change impacts in regional parks and trails.

Financial Implications

In the first two years of the program, several recommended actions have been implemented in regional parks to mitigate threats and enhance habitats for the recovery of species at risk. These efforts are funded by the core operational budget and annual contributions from Environment and Climate Change Canada's Priority Places for Species at Risk funding (\$60,000 annually). Staff will continue to implement mitigation actions as resources allow and seek external funding for future priorities.

First Nations Implications

In the first two years, the program focused on species at risk, identified by federal and provincial guidelines, using Western scientific methods. Staff are now working with Indigenous partners to inventory species of cultural importance and aim to expand the program to protect these values as well. The program currently does not include Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Understanding both TEK and Western scientific knowledge and integrating them into the monitoring program is an important next step.

Intergovernmental Implications

Sharing data with intergovernmental partners is an important component of this program. The program contributes to improved assessment of the status of species at risk and supports provincial and federal recovery efforts.

Service Delivery Implications

The program is mainly supported by staff who monitor ecological values in regional parks and trails. It will continue to expand to monitor more priority species and ecosystems, support the environmental impact assessment program and assess the overall ecological health of parks and trails. To better understand species at risk, staff started a volunteer-based eco-monitoring program in collaboration with the Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship. Continued strategic monitoring of ecological values will support management decisions and actions in regional parks.

Social Implications

Visitors to regional parks may notice new signs and fencing that may change their experience in some areas. These improvements include better conservation fencing at Island View Beach Regional Park to protect the endangered contorted-pod evening-primrose (*Camissonia contorta*) and new fencing at Matheson Lake Regional Park to protect critical nesting areas for western painted turtles. Staff greatly appreciate the public's cooperation in protecting these important areas and welcome reports of unique and rare species in regional parks and trails.

CONCLUSION

The *Federal Species at Risk Act* obligates the CRD to protect species at risk within its regional parks and trails. In 2023, the Regional Parks Division started the Species at Risk Monitoring Program to inventory priority species, identify threats and support their recovery. After two years, staff surveyed 33 plant species across 18 regional parks and western painted turtles in three parks, and actions were taken to mitigate threats. The program will continue to expand to identify more species and locations, including culturally important species identified by Indigenous partners.

RECOMMENDATION

There is no recommendation. This report is for information only.

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