



Islands Trust Conservancy
Species at Risk Program

Mid-term Evaluation
March 2023



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*Thank you to everyone who participated in the
interviews and surveys!
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The Islands Trust Conservancy Species at Risk Program Mid-term Evaluation March 2023

Purpose





The Islands Trust Conservancy (ITC) Species at Risk (SAR) Program aims to enhance partnerships with those working with species and ecosystems at risk, and cultural species and ecosystems of significance.

This six-year program is funded through Environment Canada and Climate Change Canada's Nature Fund, Species at Risk Stream for Priority Places.

Some of the SAR projects on ITC protected lands enabled through this new funding include:

-  Partnering with local island conservancies on SAR projects
-  Strategic SAR outreach activities
-  Surveying for SAR and critical habitat
-  Restoring SAR habitat and installing habitat structures, and
-  Invasive plant management in SAR critical habitat

This report summarises the outcome of a mid-term program evaluation, to identify:

-  What is working well / not so well to date
-  Any gaps and missing elements
-  Ways the SAR program can improve support to partners
-  Opportunities to be more proactive with the SAR program and outreach

The mid-term program evaluation (2023) consisted of a series of interviews with ITC and Islands Trust (IT) staff, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC, the project funders), the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), and staff from the Howe Sound Biosphere Region Initiative Society (HSBRIS). Local conservancies were also given the opportunity to respond to an online survey to provide input on the ITC SAR Program.

Respondents provided valuable feedback on the SAR Program. The comments and suggestions in this document are the ideas and thoughts of the respondents, provided for the ITC's consideration as they continue the implementation of this program.

In addition, there were several comments that are beyond the scope of the SAR Program, but nonetheless provide valuable information. These comments have been captured separately in the summary.

Summary

What is working well

Respondents were overall very pleased with the SAR Program.

- 👉 The funder (ECCC) is really happy and expresses confidence in ITC staff, their ability to deliver the program and to be good managers of their funds.
- 👉 Both ECCC & CWS are very satisfied.
 - They appreciate that ITC is taking this time to undertake a mid-program evaluation.
 - ITC is meeting and exceeding the requirements of the contract and there are no concerns with ITC meeting anything written into the agreement.
 - They appreciate that reporting is prompt, timely, very detailed and fulsome on how things have been going.
 - They see the hiring of a dedicated coordinator as a very positive step forward. The SAR Coordinator can give full attention to the SAR program and this full-time role and the organizational abilities and enthusiasm of current staff makes this a success.
 - ITC is involved in many partnerships around the region, and their collaborative approach is welcome.
- 👉 Overall, IT / ITC management is supportive of the program and very proud of it.
 - The ITC SAR Team is an extraordinary, capable team, who are doing a great job, delivering a lot with a very small staff.
 - Despite high workloads, team morale is high.
 - The Program has advanced the ITC's ability to be more proactive in both species management and ecosystem management.
 - The SAR Program is starting to build a community of practice.
 - The SAR Program has helped to raise the profile of IT/ITC.
 - Funding for the summer co-op student program augments staff capacity.
 - The new website page and resources are a great start at the engagement and outreach components.
 - Finance is now equipped with a system that is working well, tracking the grant monies to create a quarterly invoice. The first year was a bit chaotic, but more recent years have been much better.
- 👉 The SAR Coordinator is doing a great job.

- She is very prompt, doing all the tasks required, and more.
- It has been of great benefit to have a colleague whose focus is on SAR, to whom other staff can turn for expertise and input when needed.

🌱 There are multiple benefits from the SAR program:

- It raises the profile of SAR.
- It enables evaluations of SAR distributions that were previously unknown.
- It is very useful for outreach and storytelling.
- It has helped with building partnerships.
- There are many inventory projects underway each year, a necessary component of monitoring and management. Lack of updated information about SAR in the past has hampered management and protection efforts and this component of the SAR Program is progressing very well.
- Creation of a strong community of practice for SAR research and restoration work will have long-lasting benefits throughout BC's south coast and into adjacent US areas of the Salish Sea.
- This big boost in capacity assists ITC in achieving the other aspects of their work, e.g., land transfer and covenant agreements, legal work, surveys, and appraisals.

Gaps and Missing Elements

Respondents provided the following suggestions.

🌱 Strategic approach:

- ITC oversees a large number of protected areas. A strategic plan would help ITC to identify goals and what funds to use for each project.
- The Program would benefit from more extensive prioritization exercise, perhaps an Advisory Panel or Committee to help give the program structure and to set priorities.
- A bigger picture look at how to serve the wider organizational goals and strategies would help to align SAR priorities with ITC's strategic goals.

🌱 Finance and administration:

- Tracking matching funds is difficult and ITC needs to improve its ability to track the matching component of other contracts and other expenses.
- It is a challenge to complete reporting in March/April. This is a busy time of year and biologists need to get out in the field.
- The contracting process internal to ITC is set up to be transparent and fair, but it involves lots of paperwork and the insurance requirements can get cumbersome.


🌱 Communications:

- There is a need for improved internal ITC communications.
 - More structured communication on the program would be helpful.

- There is also a need for a wider ITC communication strategy, both internal and external.
- A holistic outreach and engagement plan would be helpful.
 - Some conservancies have low awareness of the program.

 Supporting tools:

- The tools ITC uses can be cumbersome. For example, the email marketing tool is unwieldy.

 Data and Monitoring:

- Access to data from other jurisdictions is a challenge. It is hard to collect data on private land.
- With very little data, ITC has not been able to undertake any data analysis.
- Improved knowledge of presence of SAR and/or available habitat is an essential component of effective conservation planning and action in the region; early discussions both internally and with partners revealed the need to create a single, reliable data source of information about SAR populations and habitat.

 Staff roles:

- The base systems are in place, but there is a need for more clarity around roles, how the five strategies fit the ITC workplan, and who is working on what piece to avoid duplication.

Limiting Factors for the SAR Program:

 Data:

- There are knowledge gaps and a lack of data on the properties ITC manages.
- There is no data sharing agreement in place with covenant landowners. Without the landowner's permission, ITC cannot share the data collected with the province, so the provincial-level data on SAR are incomplete. These agreements are landowner must be between a landowner and ITC and cannot be broadly incorporated into covenants without agreement from landowners when property changes hands.
- The program has been struggling to balance data security / privacy concerns with the broader need for these data across the region. Some of these issues can only be resolved by changes to Conservation Data Centre (CDC) or ECCC policy and also lack of adequate resources to create, curate, and maintain a central data portal.

 Staff capacity:


- ITC has a very ambitious work program. If there is any staff turnover, this could compromise the ability to deliver in the same way.
- Outreach is important but events take a lot of time to manage.
- Setting aside the staff time to negotiate the Section 11 *Species at Risk Act* stewardship agreement is challenging, and progress has yet to be made with this agreement.
- Capacity is a major challenge, both internally within IT/ITC and with almost all project partners and target audiences. Internal procedures have had a major impact on the

program's timelines (e.g., procurement processes), as well as capacity constraints within the ITC Mapping department.


 Funding:

- The funding restrictions are a challenge. ECCC does not permit funds supplied by them to be matched with other federal funding sources. As an example, because SAR is funded by ECCC, HSBRIS can't contribute to the SAR program financially.
- Funds for land management, SAR inventories (except for broader conservation planning) and acquisition are limited to ITC-protected lands only (do not apply to the islands as-a-whole).

Opportunities for SAR Outreach and Engagement:


 Need for more engagement:

- Some have very little awareness or understanding of the SAR program – it needs greater visibility.
- EEEEC and CWS would appreciate a presentation from ITC on how it's all going from an anecdotal point of view—how the program worked; how this funding benefitted ITC and ITC's strategic objectives; the opportunities that presented themselves through this process.

 Building partnerships:

- There is an opportunity to bring together a community of practitioners. The SAR workshop work is starting to build a community of practice.
- ITC should bring together the conservation organizations and experts in some form of regional workshop to create relationships. Collaboration amongst groups is an important opportunity to build on.
- There needs to be an expansion of knowledge sharing among professionals and practitioners regarding species and groups of species before knowledgeable people retire. We need to undertake 'knowledge based' successional planning.

Red Flag:

 There is a need to plan ahead and to manage risk for times with less funding:

- ECCC and CWS highlighted that the program runs until March 31, 2026 and right now, there's unprecedented amounts of funding going into conservation.
- ITC should consider how to maintain progress if funding is less available. What is the plan to keep the key pieces of the projects (the species / the ecosystems) that matter the most? How does the program keep running with less funds?
- There is a need to make sure that the SAR gains are not lost and that ITC is planning ahead.

The Next Three Years

Respondents offered the following comments and suggestions:

- 🌱 Building on the movement and momentum that has been started.
- 🌱 Continue what we are doing. (Would need more staff to do more.)
- 🌱 Consider the strategic direction for the SAR Program (work plan?)
- 🌱 Improve upon internal communication re: SAR Program Strategies and overlap with other ITC projects.
- 🌱 Expand monitoring programs.
- 🌱 Greater outreach and awareness.
- 🌱 Over the next few years, the SAR program should include a major focus of coordination and analysis of SAR data across the Salish Sea in order to effectively inform those strategic documents.
- 🌱 Greater emphasis on First Nations engagement and relationship-building, and inclusion of species of cultural importance that are not necessarily considered at-risk.

Comments Beyond the Scope of the ITC SAR Program

The following suggestions from respondents are outside of the current scope of the ITC SAR program.

Suggestions for program improvement

- 🌱 There is a need to develop techniques to effectively confirm the presence of threatened species on land.
- 🌱 ITC is missing project management software.
- 🌱 ITC Staff are mostly working in silos, there is a need for more information sharing and understanding of each other's roles.
- 🌱 The contracting process internal to IT can get cumbersome and Finance Department is often stretched.
- 🌱 Internal capacity is a really limiting factor for the program. We are inspiring people, but not adequately staffed to process all the donations.

Suggestions for program expansion

- 🌱 Islands Trust should consider bringing a biologist onto the team to support land use planning decisions and educational programs.
- 🌱 Focus is on areas already protected; there is a need to monitor SAR outside the reserves as well.
- 🌱 Species work should be viewed as a regional undertaking. For example, contracting a herpetologist to work with each conservancy, to grow knowledge on herpetology across all ITA conservancies.

- ✿ SAR Program could be expanded into a comparable program for the Islands Trusts Council – the policy and local government side of Islands Trust.
- ✿ Seek additional funding to support the program, e.g., from the Province.
- ✿ Inclusion of marine ecosystems
- ✿ Secure funding for land acquisition.