

Species, Places, and Culture

Seeing the Connections

First Nations Approaches to Transforming Species at Risk Conservation Across Canada



Report on the 2022 regional dialogues co-hosted by the
IISAAK OLAM Foundation and the Assembly of First Nations

December 2022

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym or Abbreviation	Definition
AFN	Assembly of First Nations
CKSP	Cultural keystone species and places
ECCC	Environment and Climate Change Canada
IOF	IISAAK OLAM Foundation
IPCA	Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas
Pan Canadian Approach	<i>Pan-Canadian Approach to Transforming Species at Risk Conservation in Canada</i>
SAR	Species at risk
SARA	<i>Species at Risk Act</i>

Origins of the AFN Species at Risk Dialogues

Pan-Canadian Approach for Species at Risk

In 2018, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), the federal agency responsible for the management of species at risk (SAR), published the *Pan-Canadian Approach to Transforming Species at Risk Conservation in Canada* (Pan-Canadian Approach). The report underscores ECCC's commitment to collaboratively implement SAR conservation with a focus on priority places, species, sectors, and threats.¹

Some of the principles that guide ECCC's implementation work for SAR include shared leadership, strengthened partnerships, and Indigenous engagement.² ECCC recognizes the importance of Indigenous Peoples participation in biodiversity and SAR conservation while acknowledging the need for increasing capacity for Indigenous-led community stewardship, planning, and action.³ Despite these principles of inclusion, Indigenous Peoples were not invited to contribute to the design of the Pan-Canadian Approach. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) noticed this oversight and sought to highlight the voices of First Nations practitioners who are involved in managing SAR, cultural keystone species or places (CKSP), and culturally significant species and places⁴ in their territories across Canada.

AFN's 2022 regional dialogues revealed the importance of seeing the connections between species, places and culture when transforming species at risk conservation across Canada.

Highlighting First Nations Voices

In March 2020, the AFN hosted its first National Climate Gathering in Whitehorse, Yukon. Conversations from this gathering galvanized ongoing work led by AFN on SAR in the context of climate change and beyond (Figure 1).

¹ ECCC. 2018. *Pan-Canadian Approach to Transforming Species at Risk Conservation in Canada*. Gatineau, QC: ECCC. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/eccc/documents/pdf/species-risk/pan-canadian-approach-transforming-species-risk-conservation-canada.pdf>

² ECCC. 2018.

³ ECCC. 2018.

⁴ CKSP is a term that refers to plants, animals, and places that are critical to the functioning of a culture such as western red-cedar for Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island (North America)'s Northwest Coast. A key finding of the 2022 dialogues was that the terms "SAR" and "CKSP" may resonate less with many First Nations practitioners and Elders than "culturally significant species and places," or some variation thereof (see "What We Heard" section below). We reflect this preference in the terminology we use in this report.

Figure 1. Recent Milestones in First Nations’ Involvement in Dialogues about SAR and CKSP



Building on this work, in March 2021, AFN partnered with the IISAAK OLAM Foundation (IOF) to host two national dialogues for First Nations practitioners working in conservation with a focus on SAR (Figure 2).⁵ Through these gatherings many participants noted that the term “species at risk” did not resonate with them and preferred “cultural keystone species.” Read the full summary report [here](#). The following year, in March 2022, IOF and AFN hosted three regional dialogues to further advance conversations about SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places among First Nations practitioners (Figure 3).⁶



Photo: Lesly Derksen on Unsplash

⁵ For a summary of insights from the 2021 dialogues and an overview of SAR management in Canada, including some of the limitations from First Nations’ perspectives see: “Part 1: Introduction to the Cultural Keystone Species Blog Series,” <https://conservation-reconciliation.ca/blog/introduction>. The full Part I report is available [here](#).

⁶ For a summary of the 2022 dialogues and an overview of CKSP see: “Part 2: Introducing Cultural Keystone Species,” <https://conservation-reconciliation.ca/blog/part-2>.

Figure 2. Summary of 2021 SAR Dialogues



2021 SPECIES AT RISK INTRO DIALOGUES

CREATING A SPACE THAT DOESN'T EXIST: A NATIONAL FIRST NATIONS NETWORK FOR SPECIES AT RISK

*"The species that are at risk have always cared for humans. It is time to uphold responsibilities to these nonhuman relations."
- A lesson from a respected Elder*



TWO NATIONAL DIALOGUES
MARCH 23, 2021
MARCH 25, 2021

128 PARTICIPANTS FROM ACROSS CANADA

THREE THEMES DISCUSSED

1. Species-related issues that matter most
2. Current SAR activities of First Nations participants
3. Aspirations for future SAR work

NEXT STEPS

1. Build awareness
2. Understand and uphold Natural Law
3. Continue dialogue
4. Keep culture in mind
5. Integrate SAR work with work on Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs)

1. SPECIES-RELATED ISSUES THAT MATTER MOST

- Cultural keystone species (CKS)
- Climate change
- Impacts of pollution
- Jurisdictional conflicts
- Holistic approaches
- Partnerships and relationships
- Community engagement
- Informed consent

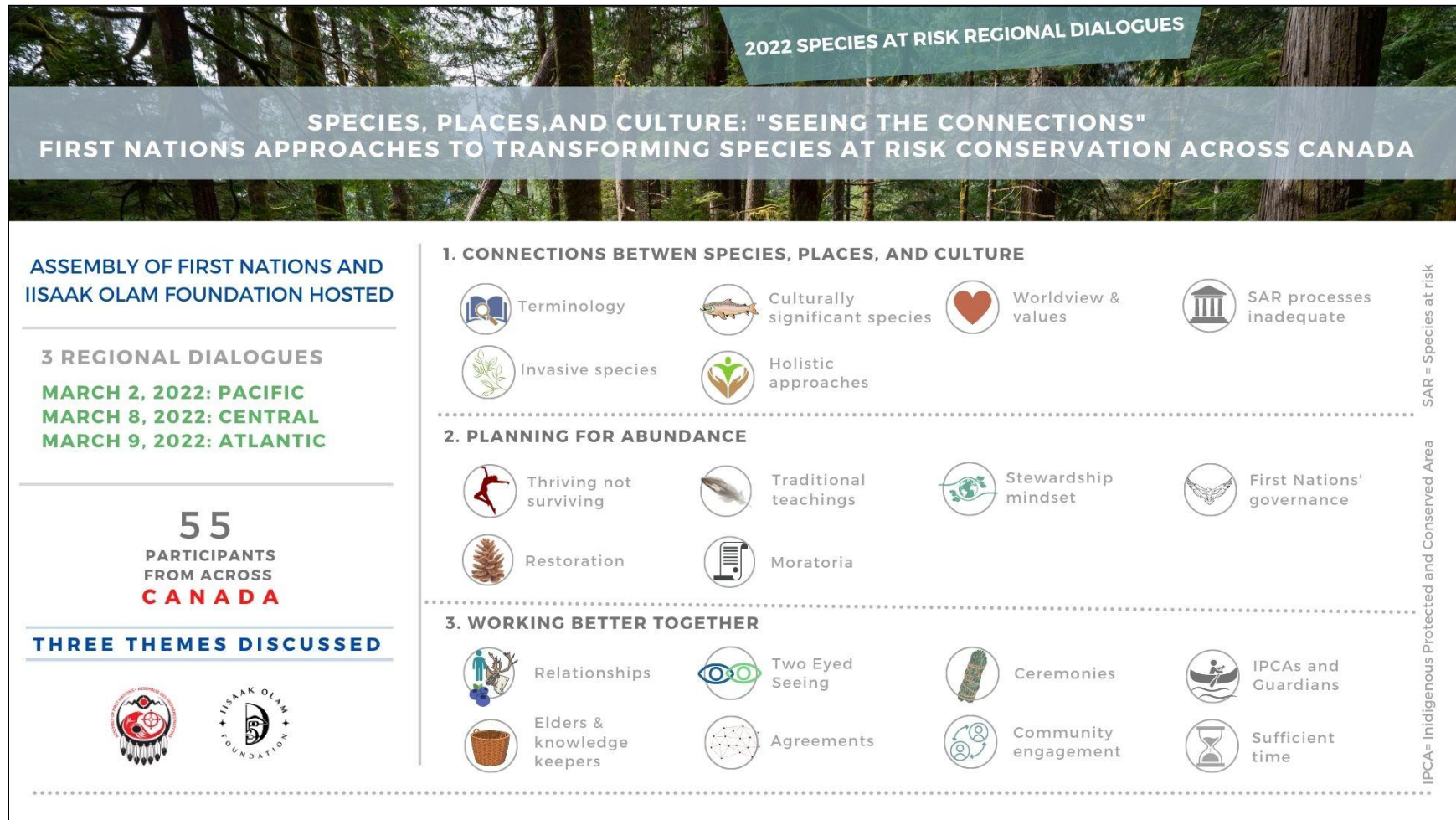
2. CURRENT SAR ACTIVITIES OF FIRST NATIONS PARTICIPANTS

- Land based practices
- Habitat studies
- Holistic approaches
- Creative funding
- Raising awareness
- Working with government
- Guardian programs
- Establishing IPCAs
- Building knowledge networks
- Fund raising

3. ASPIRATIONS FOR FUTURE SAR WORK

- Biocultural revitalization
- Holistic approaches
- Respect for Indigenous knowledge
- Guardian programs
- Increased communication
- Education and outreach
- Resources and capacity

Figure 3. Summary of the 2022 SAR-CKSP Dialogues



Objectives of the 2022 Regional Dialogues

The three virtual regional dialogues (Pacific/Central/Atlantic) that took place in March 2022 aimed to elevate First Nations' leadership in the conservation, protection, and management of SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places. The dialogues had the following specific objectives:

1. Continue to foster a space for First Nations to build relationships and share knowledge and experiences;
2. Explore what “planning for abundance” looks like for First Nations; and
3. Contribute to the transformation of SAR policies and practices.

Like the preceding dialogues in 2021, the 2022 dialogues were solutions-focused. However, AFN and IOF agreed it was important to acknowledge at each dialogue difficult truths about the management of species in Canada. As dialogue hosts described at each gathering, biodiversity has plummeted from a state of abundance to a state of threat or extinction due to decisions made by Crown governments since European settlement. Many Elders across Turtle Island accurately predicted the loss of biodiversity and that future generations of newcomers would come to Indigenous Peoples for guidance.

While acknowledging these truths, there is an opportunity to think about how First Nations' knowledge and approaches to the stewardship of SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places can help Canada develop better strategies, frameworks, policies, and legislation. IOF and AFN discussed Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) during the dialogues as a pathway or process to help First Nations governments and communities forward their visions for their territories and articulate their own approaches to the stewardship of SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places. According to the Indigenous Circle of Experts, IPCAs are conservation areas that are Indigenous-led, represent a long-term commitment to conservation and are guided by Indigenous governance and knowledge systems.⁷

In September of 2022, AFN and IOF hosted a plenary session at the AFN National Climate Gathering in Fredericton, N.B. called “Opportunities and Pathways for IPCA Planning and Declaration.” The session aimed to build increased awareness of the potential for IPCAs among First Nations across the country.

In the following sections we provide an overview of the regional dialogues, summarize what we heard, and outline calls to action.

⁷ Indigenous Circle of Experts. 2018. *We rise together: Achieving pathway to Canada target 1 through the creation of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas in the spirit and practice of reconciliation*. <http://www.conservation2020canada.ca/resources/>

Overview of the 2022 Dialogues

IOF and AFN hosted three regional dialogues in 2022 on March 2nd (Pacific region), March 8th (Central region) and March 9th (Atlantic region) over Zoom. In total, 120 people registered and 55 individuals participated across the three sessions (Appendix A).

Participants included First Nations technicians, leaders, and Elders involved in protecting biocultural diversity, especially regional efforts to protect and recover stewardship of SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places.⁸

AFN and IOF promoted the event through social media and a webpage.⁹ As in 2021, polling revealed that most participants heard about the dialogues directly from the AFN.

Each of the regional dialogues included:

- An opening and closing by an Elder;¹⁰
- Presentations on key topics for discussion;
- Facilitated small group break-out discussions;
- Polls to collect knowledge and feedback from participants throughout the dialogues (Appendix B);
- Graphic recording; and
- A participant feedback survey.

What We Heard

Participants discussed three key themes in each of the dialogues:

- Connections between species, places, and culture;
- Planning for abundance;
- Working better together.

[Cassyex Consulting](#), an Indigenous graphic recording consultancy owned by Michelle Buccholz, provided live graphic recording during each dialogue (Figures 4 to 6).

⁸ Non-First Nations people were able to register only if they were representing First Nations in their work. As in 2021, the intention was not to be exclusive, but to keep building a space that does not yet fully exist for First Nations to speak to peers about culturally significant species.

⁹ IOF redesigned our website in September 2022. The new webpage replaces the previous webpage: <https://www.iisaakolam.ca/sar-dialogues>.

¹⁰ Each dialogue opened and closed in ceremony by a respected Elder who offered prayers and shared stories of their lives, including changes they witnessed in their lifetimes. While describing threats to their Indigenous languages and to species vital to their cultures, the Elders also held hope for future generations because of the important work participants are engaged in. Tla-o-qui-aht Nation Elder Moses Martin supported the Pacific dialogue, Anishinaabe Elder Ma-Nee Chacaby supported the Central dialogue, and Elder Phyllis Googoo, knowledge keeper with the AFN from unceded Mi'kmaq supported the Atlantic dialogue.

Figure 4. Graphic recording from the Pacific regional dialogue



Figure 5. Graphic recording from the Central regional dialogue

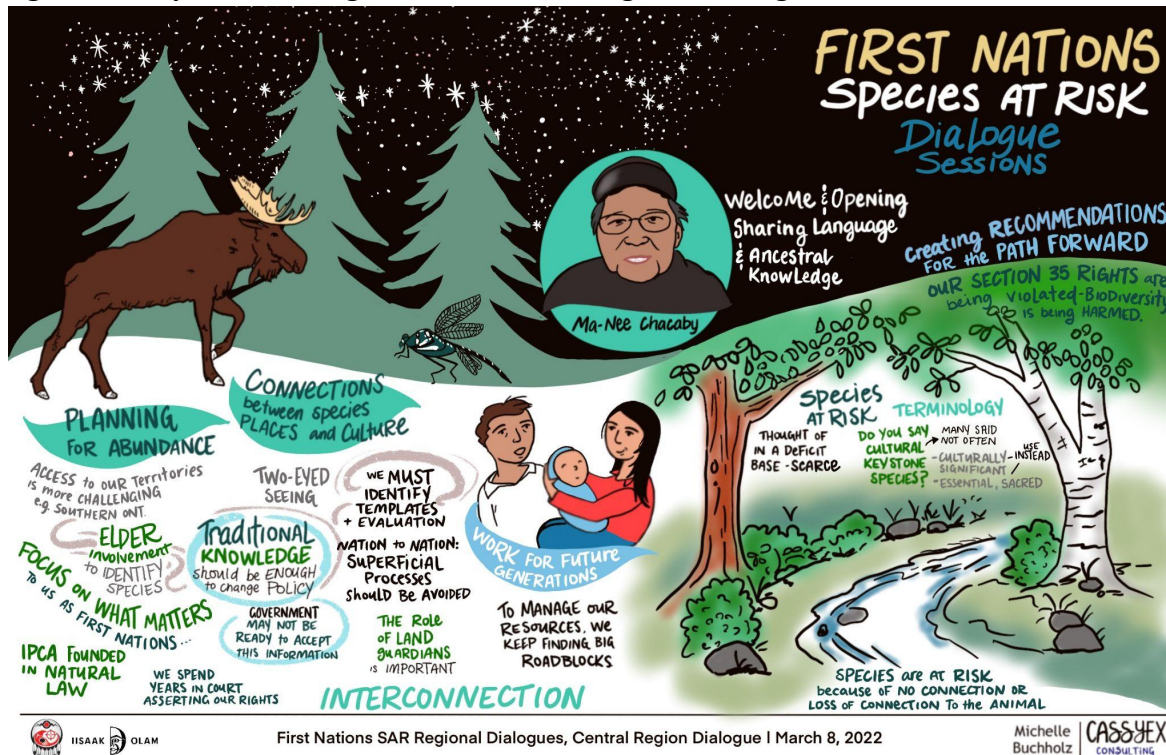
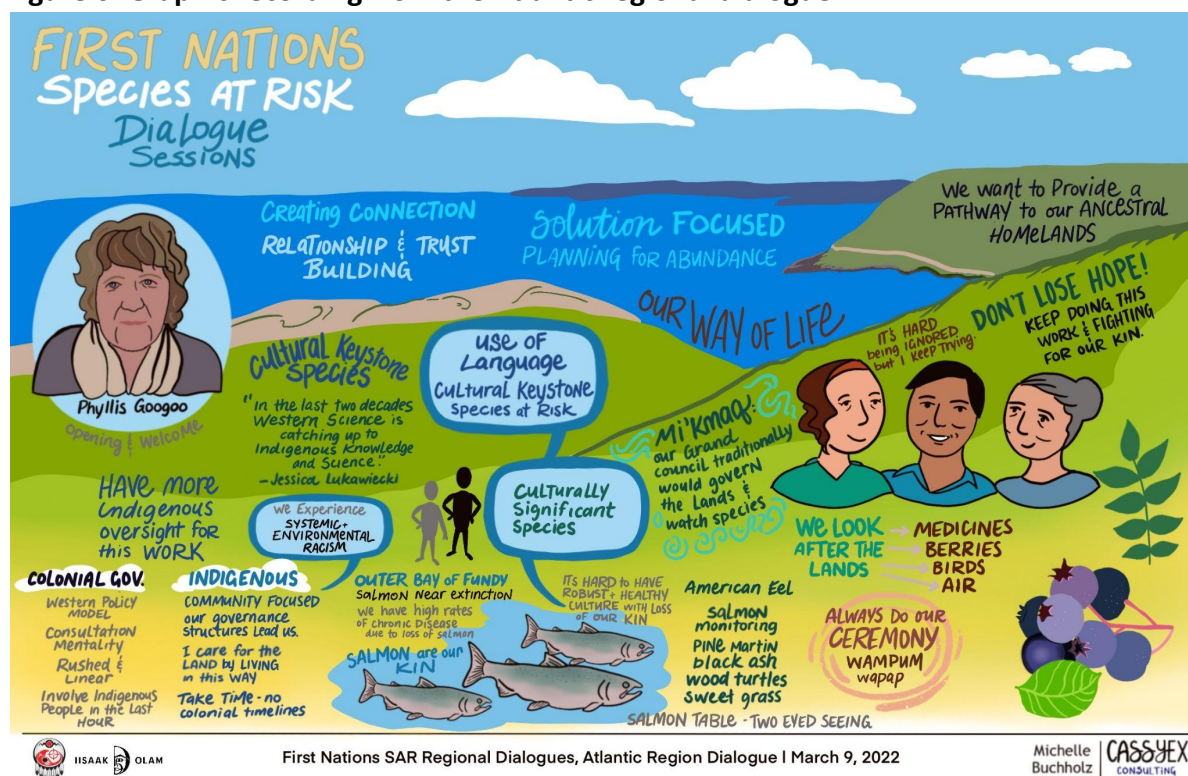


Figure 6. Graphic recording from the Atlantic regional dialogue



Theme 1: Connections between species, places, and culture

- **Preferred terminology.**
 - For some, “culturally significant species” (or a variation of it) is preferable over “cultural keystone species” and “SAR.”
- **Culturally significant species are at least as important as SAR.**
 - We have deeper relationships with culturally significant species than with species listed via the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) because of our place-based relationships; and
 - Culturally significant species must be listed on SARA and associated measures must be developed provincially and federally.
- **First Nations’ worldviews and values are central to this work.**
 - All living beings are related and must be treated with respect, reciprocity, and gratitude;
 - There is a profound connection between the health and abundance of culturally significant species, ecosystem health, and food security;
 - Ceremonies are vital for reinforcing links between species, lands and waters, languages and cultures; and
 - Indigenous knowledge systems are standalone systems and must not be forced into Western or colonial scientific frameworks.

- **A holistic and integrated approach that weaves together locally specific Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices is needed.**
 - Issues related to SAR and culturally significant species are varied and place-based (i.e. a pan-Indigenous or pan-Canadian approach will be ineffective);
 - Think beyond individual species to webs of relations, places and spaces, and ecosystems;
 - Revitalizing Indigenous languages supports renewed relationships to species;
 - Indigenous Knowledge must be valued equally to Western science and reflected in species at risk tools and legislation; and
 - Indigenous Guardians are playing an increasingly important role in monitoring SAR and culturally significant species.
- **The process for listing SAR is inadequate and does not sufficiently include Indigenous Knowledge.**
 - Existing SAR processes do not acknowledge the connections people have with their territories, including SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places;
 - The process for listing SAR is cumbersome, superficial, limiting, overly technical, and alienating for Elders and community members; and
 - SAR processes do not adequately embrace Indigenous knowledge systems.
- **Threats to important species.**
 - Invasive species are threatening the habitat and ecosystems of SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places; and
 - A Western approach to conservation threatens the diversity of perspectives that, when considered and applied, can lead to beneficial biodiversity outcomes.

Theme 2: Planning for abundance

- **Planning for abundance is a positive approach.**
 - Planning for abundance (i.e. thriving not just surviving) is connected to traditional teachings and is a more inspiring, hopeful and positive approach to stewarding and protecting species as compared to managing from a scarcity mentality;
 - Planning for abundance can help SAR recover, especially if they are also culturally significant species; and
 - All peoples, and not just staff and leadership of all governments, can participate in planning for abundance by adopting a stewardship mindset in relation to Mother Earth.
- **Various actions can support planning for abundance.**
 - Placing moratoria on at-risk culturally significant species and SAR is a traditional and contemporary practice that can be effective, especially if ecosystems and habitats are included;

- Restoring degraded landscapes and ecosystems is an important part of planning for abundance; and
- Revitalizing traditional governance structures that support planning for abundance holds great potential (e.g. the establishment of Guardians programs).

Theme 3: Working better together

- **Focus on relationships.**
 - Building, maintaining and strengthening relationships (with the lands and waters, animals, plants, and amongst peoples) are central to working together effectively and defining solutions (and solutions must support relationships);
 - Sufficient time must be allocated for discussions and decision-making and cannot only be defined by the needs of Crown governments; and
 - Crown governments must engage with community members (not just First Nations' leadership) in SAR and stewardship processes.
- **Build capacity for cross-cultural collaboration.**
 - Two-eyed seeing (the ability to embrace Indigenous and Western scientific worldviews) is essential to working cross-culturally;
 - Seek out the guidance of Elders and knowledge keepers;
 - Reach agreements between and within First Nations that build on ancestral teachings about sharing resources and responsibilities;
 - Ceremonies support collaboration and are essential to stewarding non-human relatives; and
 - Bringing Indigenous teachings into Western frameworks and spaces is challenging but necessary.
- **Connect with complementary processes.**
 - Indigenous-led engagement processes must inform conservation planning to support SAR and culturally significant species; and
 - IPCAs, Guardians, and processes to restore and protect SAR and culturally significant species are complimentary.

Calls to Action

Building on the findings from the 2021 and 2022 dialogues, we present a number of calls to action for ECCC and Crown Governments to facilitate meaningful collaboration with First Nations in the development of SAR policies and legislation. These calls to action include recommendations for strengthening the Pan-Canadian Approach.

Our **overarching call to action** is for ECCC to revise the Pan-Canadian Approach in collaboration with First Nations to reflect First Nations priorities, approaches, and recommendations relevant to SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places. Moving beyond a consultative

framework, we recommend that ECCC develop co-governance frameworks with First Nations to advance the protection and stewardship of SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places.

In this context we recommend the following actions to support ECCC's work to engage with, and support capacity within, First Nations leadership in the recovery and care for SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places. We anticipate these efforts will support building or strengthening partnerships with First Nations, which in turn will improve management outcomes for SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places.

Terminology:

1. Include the terminology of "cultural keystone species and places" and "culturally significant species" along with "species at risk," which often does not resonate with First Nations people.

Capacity building:

2. Build internal capacity within ECCC by increasing staff competence to work respectfully and effectively in cross-cultural contexts with First Nations. This includes fostering greater understanding of CKSP, and culturally significant species and places and First Nations' worldviews relevant to conservation and SAR; and
3. Support First Nations' capacity to participate in the management of SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places (e.g. provide funding and resources and respond to First Nations' request for support).

Relationship building and partnerships:

4. Build meaningful partnerships with First Nations that go beyond consultation on SAR frameworks, policies, and legislation;
5. Recognize and respect First Nations' jurisdiction, governance, authority, knowledge and legal systems;
6. Support a distinctions-based approach, acknowledging the plurality of Indigenous Peoples who co-exist in Canada (e.g. there are distinctions between and within First Nations, Métis, Inuit Nations and communities necessitating different approaches by ECCC);
7. Actively engage with AFN and First Nations to advance policies, legislation, and processes that better reflect First Nations' perspectives on SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places;
8. Engage early and commit to building long-term relationships;
9. Keep an open mind and heart and approach this work with humility.

Indigenous Knowledge:

10. Work with First Nations to elevate their knowledge systems as a reliable and complementary source of information when prioritizing places, species, and threats;
11. Support First Nations' efforts to increase food security and food sovereignty, ecological restoration, and cultural revitalization as interconnected strategies that can also support SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places;
12. Make equal space for Indigenous knowledge and Western science (i.e. work in Ethical Space), including language and culture; and

13. Advance holistic solutions that recognize the connectedness of all things (e.g. “the land, people, and language are one;” economy and biodiversity are inseparable).

IPCAAs and Guardians:

14. Support (e.g. provide funding for and remove barriers to) First Nations to establish and govern IPCAAs as a complementary means of managing SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places while supporting Indigenous leadership; and
15. Fund First Nations’ Guardians programs as a complementary pathway of restoring and protecting SAR, CKSP, and culturally significant species and places.



Photo: Old-growth cedar, Tla-o-qui-aht territory (IOF 2022)

Appendix A: Participation in the 2022 Regional Dialogues

Region	Registered Participants	Actual Participants
Pacific	54	22
Central	44	21
Atlantic	22	12
Total	120	55

For comparison, the three 2021 dialogues attracted a total of 128 participants (162 registrations or a 79% attendance rate).

Appendix B: Poll Results from Dialogue Participants

During each dialogue, IOF facilitated live polls to obtain participant input. The results of some of these questions are summarized in the table below. Because of the low sample sizes relative to the number of First Nations in Canada, these results are not representative of the perspectives of First Nations across the country. However, they provide a snapshot of the perspectives held by the participants of the 2022 dialogues.

Question	Number of respondents (combined across the three dialogues)*	Responses (aggregated across all three dialogues)
What percentage of attendees attended the 2021 <i>and</i> 2022 dialogues?	48	21%
What best describes the roles and work of attendees (top 5)?	44	Steward: 20% Researcher: 17% Ecologist: 13% SAR Technician: 13% None of the Above: 13% Harvester: 10% Guardian: 9% Elder: 3% Knowledge Keeper: 3%
What percentage of attendees use “Cultural Keystone Species” in their work? *Note: Data from this question is from Pacific and Central regions only (technical glitch)	31	46%
What other terms are used to describe species of importance to your Nation (top 3)? *Note: Data from this question is from Pacific and Central regions only (technical glitch)	24	Culturally significant species (or some variation) Essential Traditional species or [name of First Nation] species of interest/significant species