

Context

Between January and March 2021, the IISAAK OLAM Foundation (IOF) supported the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Environment Sector in the role of Species at Risk (SAR) Coordinator. Building on work that began at the AFN National Climate Gathering in Whitehorse, Yukon, in March of 2020, IOF created a foundation for the AFN to establish a national network of First Nations people who are dedicated professionally, personally, and culturally to the conservation, management, monitoring and recovery of species in their territories.

Early discussions included representatives of the Indigenous Partnership Initiative from Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) who are mandated to implement the Pan-Canadian Approach for Species at Risk Conservation (Pan-Canadian Approach) with the involvement of Indigenous Peoples. While the initial thought was to host regionally-focused dialogues and to highlight best practices of First Nations doing species at risk work across the provinces and territories, IOF suggested an alternative approach; to build a strong national network, it would be important to ensure that everyone involved is on the same page, and as such, introductory dialogues and relationship building was deemed critical as a first step.

Between January and March 2021, two regional dialogues were designed, planned, promoted, and hosted virtually on Zoom as a partnership between AFN Environment Sector and IOF (see website [here](#)). Weekly meetings between IOF and Curtis Scurr, AFN Director of Environment, took place, and an engagement strategy was planned and implemented. The concept of Ethical Space was of great importance to the team, and certain considerations such as the inclusion of an Indigenous graphic facilitator for the sessions, were key for ensuring the concept's applicability in a tangible way.

Another key consideration was how to acknowledge the federal government's Pan-Canadian Approach while respecting the fact that advocacy for the diversity of First Nations' voices is the priority of the AFN. This played a central role in determining the direction of the dialogues that were hosted, keeping in mind at all times the need to respect and elevate an independent yet interconnected approach to the species at risk work that the AFN leads and facilitates.

And so, on March 23 and 25, two introductory dialogues were hosted, each of which attracted hundreds of interested participants from across Canada. Target audience/participants were First Nations people who identify as SAR practitioners, harvesters, Elders, knowledge experts, researchers, etc. Non-First Nations people were able to register but were only invited to participate if they were asked to represent a First Nation by the Nation itself, if they worked for an Indigenous organization or a partner organization doing work with First Nations. The intention was not to be exclusive, but rather to create a space that does not yet exist for First Nations to speak to peers about this important topic.

Logistics

The Introductory Dialogues were hosted on Tuesday, March 23 and Thursday, March 25, 2021 from 1pm to 4pm Eastern time. The times were selected to enable people from all time zones to participate.

In total, 162 people registered and 128 participated in both sessions: On March 23, 89 people registered and 55 participated. On March 25, 109 people registered and 73 participated. (79% of registered participants attended.)

The event was promoted by the AFN and IOF, through social media, and via the creation of a webpage: <https://www.iisaakolam.ca/sar-dialogues>. The website included a link to an event registration page on Eventbrite. When polled during the dialogues, it seems that most participants heard of the events directly from the AFN.

Space was given to First Nations participants as a priority, and in a few cases, non-Indigenous people who had been asked to attend by a Nation were welcomed.

The agenda was carefully designed, keeping in mind the goal to ensure that all participants had enough information to be able to start engaging with each other from a place of common understanding and knowledge. Again, the purpose of these dialogues was to create a space that does not yet exist and to foster First Nations leadership in the conservation, protection, and management of SAR.

Facilitators included members of the IOF team as well as graphic recorder Kelly Foxcroft-Poirier from [White Raven Consulting](#), an Indigenous design and facilitation firm.

Elders opened and closed the events, Mentimeter polls were designed and circulated to harvest knowledge and feedback from participants throughout the dialogues, breakout groups were used for smaller group discussion, and main topics were presented by IOF and AFN staff including Eli Enns and Curtis Scurr.

The feedback survey, distributed by email following both dialogues, yielded informative results: Participants greatly appreciated the inclusion of an Indigenous graphic facilitator, enjoyed breakout room discussions and the opportunity to meet other doing similar work, and felt that this was a space that they would like to continue to visit. Some suggested that it would be valuable to have each breakout room facilitated, which was taken into consideration and applied during the first dialogue. Overall, participants felt that the sessions were very well organized and really appreciated the experience.

"It was one of the most unique gatherings I've experienced. It was so well designed and facilitated."

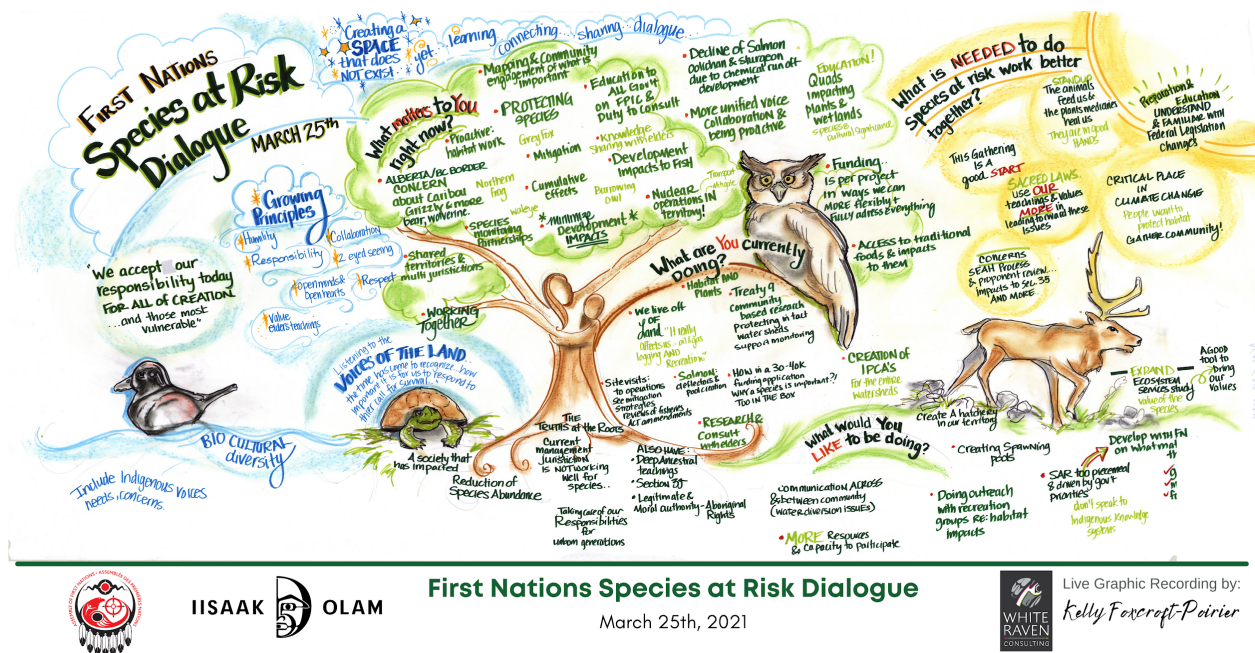
What We Heard

Each dialogue was attended by First Nations leaders involved in protecting biocultural diversity, especially efforts to protect and recover species at risk. Both dialogues opened and closed in ceremony by a respected Elder who reminded participants that species at risk had always cared for humans, and now it was time to uphold responsibilities to these nonhuman relations.

Eli Enns, president of IOF, opened each dialogue by acknowledging the “elephant in the room”: the natural abundance stewarded by First Nations for millennia is almost unimaginable today as the young, immature, and self-destructive colonial society has caused so much harm. Eli noted that the imposition of federal and provincial jurisdictions has created confusion and produced the SAR phenomenon. He emphasized that we have a collective obligation and responsibility to take care of this heritage for future generations. In Canadian law, provinces might have constitutional power to infringe Aboriginal rights, but they have no moral or constitutional jurisdiction to remove or obliterate these rights. As Elder William Commanda said, Indigenous Peoples exercise their rights through taking care of their responsibilities. First Nations can never sign away, abolish, or abdicate these responsibilities to future generations.

In the breakout sessions, participants were invited to share the most important issues related to SAR in their respective territories, the work they are currently doing, and the work they want to do. Key themes and issues were graphically recorded by facilitator Kelly Poirier (see the following figures).





Theme 1: Important issues related to SAR in First Nations' territories

- Cultural keystone species: Participants noted the vital links between biological diversity and the health and vitality of Indigenous languages, culture, and ceremonies. The need for restoration of species such as salmon (both Atlantic and Pacific) was noted. It was noted that some cultural keystone species are vitally important to First Nations communities even though they might not be officially protected or recognized as species of concern to Canadian governments. Access to traditional foods was identified as a core concern to support First Nations' food security and food sovereignty.
- Climate change: It was noted that this is a critical time of climate change, which affects SAR.
- Industrial impacts: Participants pointed to impacts of logging, mining, and other industrial activities on species at risk, and the need to minimize these impacts. Some participants also noted the effect of cumulative impacts of multiple industrial activities on SAR.
- Impacts of pollution: Some participants shared concerns relating to the transportation of nuclear wastes through their lands and communities, as well as chemical runoff that is impacting food fishes such as salmon, oolichan, and sturgeon.
- Jurisdictional conflicts: Participants identified issues around recognition of Indigenous rights and title, cross-boundary (interprovincial) jurisdictional issues, presence or absence of treaty relationships with the Crown, and how jurisdictional issues affect work

with SAR off-reserve, including the need to address conflicts with provincial wildlife officers.

- Need for holistic approaches: Participants emphasized the need for a holistic approach to manage many SAR across First Nations' territories, balancing industry and habitat protection for SAR; some participants indicated a need for alternative processes and approaches to listing as SAR. One problem identified was that siloed funding approaches are not responsive to communities' needs and don't allow First Nations to be proactive, flexible, and responsive to emergent and interconnected needs.
- Partnerships and relationships in SAR work: Participants identified the need for collaboration to access funding, share resources and information, share successes, and promote a comprehensive approach to SAR, to speak with a unified voice.
- Community engagement: Participants noted the need for mapping and community engagement processes to identify what is important to the community.
- Free, prior, and informed consent. Participants noted the importance of educating all governments on the importance of free, prior, and informed consent as well as the duty to consult in matters pertaining to SAR.

Theme 2: Some of the things that First Nations SAR practitioners are doing

- Promoting land-based practices and ceremony.
- Conducting habitat studies: Participants are conducting studies of SAR in their territories, including community-based research for protection at a watershed level. These research activities are being undertaken in consultation with Elders.
- Habitat restoration: Some participants are involved in restoring habitat, such as spawning beds for salmon, for example.
- Holistic approach: First Nations SAR practitioners are using and promoting holistic management and planning processes to address SAR concerns, so that measures to enhance one species (e.g., caribou) don't harm another (e.g., moose).
- Creativity with funding: For example, to mitigate the effect of siloed funding approaches, one community is utilizing funding for freshwater fish habitat restoration to simultaneously restore habitat for salmon, even though there are currently no salmon in their territory.
- Communications and awareness raising: Some First Nations host and participate in events such as festivals to raise awareness for SAR. Other participants in the dialogue conduct advocacy and raise awareness regarding the connections between violence on

the land (including SAR) and violence on Indigenous Peoples' bodies (especially Indigenous women).

- Working with government and industry: Some participants reported participating in discussion tables with government and industry to communicate information for habitat and SAR protection. Some are working with industrial project proponents to develop environmental protection agreements to leave the land as good or better than when the project began.
- Guardians and monitoring: Some participants have developed guardian and monitoring programs in their communities. Others have developing management plans and advising on the development of guidelines to protect SAR.
- Establishment of IPCAs: IPCAs were identified as a tool for ecosystem and habitat protection at a watershed level.
- Building a knowledge network: Some participants noted that they are building a knowledge network regarding SAR to share methods, develop community-based monitoring programs, and promote intergenerational knowledge sharing between youth and Elders.
- Role of non-Indigenous NGO partners: one of the non-Indigenous participants shared that her organization works to identify key biodiversity areas, providing resources and fundraising for work happening on the ground.

Theme 3: Where participants want to go with this work

- Biocultural revitalization: Participants stressed the importance of restoring cultural keystone species such as salmon and bison to revitalize culture, language, ceremonies, and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and experiences related to these species.
- More holistic approaches: Participants noted the need for more comprehensive habitat mapping and strategic planning processes so that specific SAR projects can fit within this overall plan toward a larger goal or vision, rather than piecemeal. It was noted that current approaches to SAR are too piecemeal and subject to government priorities in ways that do not speak to Indigenous knowledge systems.
- Collaborative processes and respect for Indigenous knowledge: Participants wish to see increased collaboration between all levels of government, based on the principles of Ethical Space and Two-Eyed Seeing, in which all knowledge systems are valued. Participants wish to see Indigenous knowledge recognized at the same level as western science in SAR listing, management, and recovery; want to see approaches to SAR informed by Indigenous knowledge.

- **Monitoring and Guardians:** Participants identified the need for further funding and support to monitor industrial impacts in First Nations' territories. Some participants expressed the desire to establish territory-wide Indigenous Guardian monitoring programs.
- **Increased communication:** Participants noted the importance of communication between communities on issues of shared concern.
- **Education and outreach:** Some participants expressed a desire to increase outreach and awareness-raising efforts with recreational groups regarding their impacts on the territory.
- **Resources and capacity:** Participants noted the need for increased resources and capacity to undertake SAR work in their territories.

Recommendations & Next Steps

At the conclusion of the dialogues, participants were asked to reflect on what is needed to “do species at risk work better together.” Participants agreed that these dialogues were a good place to start. One participant noted the need for awareness and training for community-based SAR practitioners around jurisdictional issues and legislative changes, such as changes to environmental impact assessment processes.

One of the Elders concluded the dialogue by sharing about the importance of understanding and upholding Creator’s sacred laws in this work, the laws of Mother Earth, and the sacredness of water.

It is recommended that these Introductory Dialogues be the first step in the development of a series of ongoing dialogues where First Nations’ voices can be shared and play a role in shaping Crown policies and legislation around species at risk management, monitoring, conservation and recovery. Future dialogues might take a regional or species-focused approach, keeping in mind traditional practices such as hunting, fishing, and trapping to ensure an engagement process that does not interfere with or limit First Nations participation.

Finally, it is recommended that the AFN consider integrating its work on species at risk with its work on Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), keeping in mind the interconnection between species and their habitats and the role of IPCAs in conserving and revitalizing cultural keystone species and places.