

Committee on federal species at risk gets aboriginal perspective

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The scientific committee that advises Ottawa on species at risk says it will include more traditional aboriginal knowledge in its work, addressing concerns from aboriginal people that their voices aren't heard by scientists.

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) includes scientists from all levels of government as well as representatives from conservation organizations. It was created 30 years ago to recommend what species should be listed as endangered, threatened or "of special concern" under the Species at Risk Act.

Committee chair Jeff Hutchings told CBC News that within the last month, Environment Minister John Baird appointed 12 members to an Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge subcommittee, which was created in 2000 but only met informally since that time.

"These are aboriginal people from across the country, including the north," Hutchings said Monday of the subcommittee's members, which include co-chair Larry Carpenter, a board member with the Wildlife Management Advisory Council in the Northwest Territories.

Carpenter said the subcommittee, which will hold its first official meeting in Whitehorse next month, can make a big difference in bringing aboriginal perspectives into studying wildlife and determining at-risk species.

"We're trying to set up a network of people who will be knowledge-holders that we can rely on, and we'll ask them the questions," he said. "Hopefully we'll come up with a better answer than just looking at just the western science."

Inuit hunters and trappers in Canada's North fear Ottawa is moving ahead with listing northern wildlife species without considering their traditional knowledge and expertise in wildlife conservation.

In a letter to the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, Baird said his department plans to classify the Peary caribou of the High Arctic as an endangered species, despite objections from the board itself.

The government is also considering listing the walrus, beluga whale and grizzly bear under the Species at Risk Act.

Hutchings said the inclusion of aboriginal knowledge in the committee's work is "still a work in progress.

"But I'm confident that within the year, a series of protocols and guidelines for the collection of [aboriginal traditional knowledge] will have been developed," he added.