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Chair

Mr. Mark Warawa

Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome, everyone, to the 33rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, as we continue our study on developing a national conservation plan.

I want to welcome each of the witnesses with us today.

I'm going to share with members of the committee and the witnesses the framework of our study, the scope of the study, and what the questions and comments should consider. We had some issues in our last meeting when there was a little lack of clarity as to what the scope was.

The six questions are: what should be the purpose of the NCP; what should be the goals of the NCP; what guiding principles should govern an NCP; what conservation priorities should be included in an NCP; what should be the implementation priorities; and what consultation process should the minister consider using when developing the NCP?

Again, thank you so much to the witnesses for being here. I understand that National Chief Shawn Atleo will have to leave a little bit early, so we will allow National Chief Atleo to go first.

Each witness group has up to ten minutes, and that will be followed by some questions.

We will begin with National Chief Atleo, if you would proceed. Thank you.

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo (National Chief, Assembly of First Nations): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to go first. That used to happen to me in school all the time—A for Atleo, and somehow you end up going first.

I hope I didn't disrupt your proceedings, but I do appreciate the opportunity and indeed the privilege of presenting here today.

As I begin, I'd like to summarize my presentation by stating up front that a lot of good conservation is occurring across our respective territories that involves first nations and industry as well as NGOs. Perhaps this is a place to start to recognize the importance of this study, the work of this committee, the presence of all of you as parliamentarians, and to thank you for the invitation to participate and provide some thoughts and reflect on the questions you posed.

The challenge in developing a national conservation plan, NCP, will be in maintaining a uniform and coherent vision that builds on existing successes. History and experience tell us that anything less than bringing in first nations as full partners risks undermining our shared priorities.

In developing an NCP, we, the AFN, suggest adopting a broad framework based on the principle of sustainable use of environmental resources. For the NCP to be successful and to respond to questions around priorities, we recommend that the NCP respect first nations' treaty and aboriginal title and rights as the basis to manage lands and enable partnerships with industry as well as NGOs; that it must create opportunities for first nations to apply and share traditional knowledge and practices throughout their traditional territories; and must confirm first nations involvement at the national, regional, and community levels to ensure a coordinated approach, words that we would describe in my language, but which I'm going to defer to Dr. Lunney to test his ability to speak in Nuu-chah-nulth, so maybe we'll leave that for later.

What conservation means to first nations is that we've been conserving since time immemorial, practising sustainability long before there was a term for it. That is articulated in our various indigenous languages, and we helped to introduce the concept of sustainability to the world. Think back to the original international discussions in Rio, the notions about sustainability and the need for indigenous peoples to participate in defining it going forward.

First nations concepts of sustainability have always been distinctive mainstream environmentalism, whereas conservationists have often sought to protect the environment by prohibiting the use of environmental resources. I could cite many examples I could reflect on even from my own home territories where I come from, on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

First nations have always recognized that we're part of the environment. We cannot conserve by failing to use resources any more than we can by overusing them. Our prosperity depends on our ability to use environmental resources in a balanced fashion. This is not unique to first nations but is a common feature of all societies, and indeed all life on earth.

The issue for first nations and for all Canadians is how we use resources in a way that is sustainable. We submit that the primary focus of the NCP should be to encourage the sustainable use of environmental resources, with particular emphasis on the customary and sustainable use of resources by first nations.

In the area of customary and sustainable use, the idea that customary and sustainable use should be a focus of national conservation planning isn't new. Article 10(c) of the Convention on Biological Diversity states that Canada shall “Protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements”.

Supporting customary and sustainable use of resources will require the development of two pillars in the NCP: one, the application of traditional knowledge, and two, incredibly important, the recognition of first nations treaty and aboriginal rights. I cannot overemphasize that second element.

It's a little known fact that some of the most biodiverse regions in southern Ontario and across Canada have something in common. These regions are not particularly remote, nor have they enjoyed any meaningful environmental protection under federal or provincial law. Of course what I am referring to here are first nations communities.

Why are first nations communities so diverse? It certainly doesn't have anything to do with the federal regulatory framework, or for that matter any centralized protection goals, and very few first nations have any formal Indian Act bylaws that deal specifically with biodiversity. The reason these areas are so diverse is that first nations continue to manage them in the same way they managed their own environments for countless generations.

● (1535)

Increasingly, first nations are using a combination of science and traditional knowledge to manage environments throughout their traditional territories. The AFN notes article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, which calls on Canada to “respect, preserve, and maintain the knowledge, innovations, and practices of indigenous and local communities”. I think about a science panel in Clayoquot Sound that emerged from the major blockades against clearcut logging in my own home territories, where both scientists as well as traditional knowledge leaders in our communities, one who happened to be my own father, co-chaired a major initiative that brought these elements I've just articulated together. So we do have examples to draw from.

I know that the standing committee has already heard about the Aichi biodiversity targets, and I'd like to speak to target number 18. It requires that traditional knowledge, innovations, and practices of first nations relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and their customary use of biological resources are respected, integrated, and reflected in conservation initiatives with the full and effective participation of first nations. We assert that this is not an unduly rigorous goal and is easily achievable in the context of the NCP.

There are many examples of first nations applying traditional knowledge while working with others, such as with Parks Canada, to educate Canadians. Point Pelee National Park works jointly with the Caldwell First Nation and Walpole Island First Nation to manage the park and increase first nations content within the park. By increasing the use of our knowledge, the joint management of parks, and understandings of our cultures through education programs, first nations can help Canadians connect with nature and acquire a better understanding of our cultures, our languages, and knowledge systems. This absolutely was the effort that led us to hold the crown and first nations gathering this January. It was to talk about the original relationships that formed this very country, the making of treaty, and the need to return to that notion of better understanding between first nations and the rest of Canada.

First nations in Canada require clean environments and access to natural resources in order to continue and maintain their cultures and livelihoods. Sustainability is a foundation for reconciliation, because in the absence of a clean environment, first nations cultures cannot be preserved or promoted. Moreover, first nations rights, particularly harvesting rights, cannot be exercised when environments are under stress and species are near the brink of extinction. We want to emphasize here that the rights we're speaking of are completely linked to conservation and customary and sustainable use. We assert that we do not pull those pieces apart; they must remain inextricably linked together.

This is entirely consistent with what Canada has endorsed, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I draw attention to article 29 of the declaration, which articulates a right to conservation and protection of the environments of indigenous lands and territories and calls for countries to establish programs for the conservation and protection of indigenous lands and territories.

Article 24 of the declaration articulates a right to conservation of medicinal plants. The NCP, as currently envisioned, could easily fulfill both standards. What is less well known is that first nations treaty and aboriginal rights are also valuable tools to conserve critical environments.

Another element of the outcome of the crown gathering that occurred last January was an expression on the part of government, through the Prime Minister, to work with first nations to implement treaty rights and to give expression to the recognition and implementation of aboriginal title and rights.

Our own laws obligate first nations to act as stewards for the environment, to ensure that any resources taken from the environment are taken in a respectful and sustainable manner. We always heard “Only take what you need”. That was a precept we would all be taught. When our rights are recognized, first nations can fulfill our obligations under our own laws. And we have many other such examples, for instance a tribal park in my own home territory that also emerged from those blockades in the early-nineties, the war in Clayoquot Sound, as it's often referred to.

We have a good number of other examples. In Ontario, there was first nations involvement in the bid to have the east side of Lake Winnipeg designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Of course we have Gwaii Haanas, the experience in Haida Gwaii in British Columbia.

By way of conclusion, I think a committee like this readily knows there are many good examples we can learn from. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. But what we do need is to get the message to all first nations, as well as to industry, government, and NGOs, as far as examining what's possible.

● (1540)

A national approach must respect and recognize first nations treaty and aboriginal title and rights, and support first nations in applying their traditional knowledge. Clear respect of those rights is a tool to effective conservation and sustainable use. Failing to respect rights will become an obstacle. It will be a barrier to progress. A meaningful national dialogue can do that, but only if first nations are fully involved.

I will conclude with the three main points the AFN suggests to the standing committee. One, respect first nations treaty and aboriginal title and rights as the basis to manage lands and enable partnerships with industry and NGOs. Two, create opportunities for first nations to apply and share traditional knowledge and practices throughout their traditional territories. Lastly, confirm first nations involvement at the national, regional, and community levels to ensure a coordinated approach.

Thank you for the opportunity to present.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Next we will hear from the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association. You have ten minutes.

Ms. Julia Ricottone (Regional Certification Coordinator, Canadian Nursery Landscape Association): Thank you for having me here.

I am the staff person on the environment committee of the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association, so I am here representing industry. We really appreciate the opportunity to be here.

My presentation will basically go through those five questions, so I will start with the first one.

We believe that the national conservation plan should conserve the biodiversity of species and natural resources across the country. Doing this will promote the conservation and preservation of green space in urban areas. It should establish guidelines and policies that educate developers, companies, and the public about green space conservation.

We came up with four goals for the national conservation plan. The first one would be to establish policies to protect ecosystems in both urban and rural settings; second, to create networks of green spaces across Canada; third, to educate developers and the public about conservation practices and the benefits of preserving green spaces; and four, to encourage land reclamation and remediation.

The guiding principle that should govern the national conservation plan is sustainable development: meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations, and incorporating smart growth principles with that. The sustainable sites initiative is an initiative that says that any landscape has the potential to improve and regenerate ecosystem services. This looks further into the typical areas that may be reserved for conservation, and takes the more difficult step of regenerating the areas that have been damaged. A lot of our members are involved in working on former contaminated sites to restore those lands.

Another principle is living green infrastructure and low-impact development. This involves integrating plants and green spaces into the city planning process, and making plants a useful part of infrastructure. It's working with nature instead of covering it with concrete.

Conservation priorities that should be included in a national conservation plan should be placed on the survival of plant and animal species to maintain biodiversity in both rural and urban areas. This would include protecting habitats and preventing the deterioration of land, air, and water.

The Canadian Nursery Landscape Association believes that the national conservation plan should place a high degree of focus on urban areas. Urban areas are currently eliminating green spaces and reducing habitats for plants and animals. As more Canadians are living in urban areas, there is a growing disconnect that people have with nature. A focus on urban areas can restore degraded lands, create and maintain habitats, and bring people closer to nature, so they can see the value of the natural environment and appreciate those preserved areas that exist beyond the cities they live in. If the national conservation plan made living green infrastructure a priority, it would encourage more connections with nature, and would enable conservation and economic activities to coexist. Living green infrastructure can provide space for plants and animals to thrive within and move between urban boundaries.

Low-impact development can use plants and green space to reduce the strain on municipal infrastructure, and to manage storm water during rain events. It focuses on using plants to manage runoff before it flows into municipal systems. This can help recharge ground water aquifers to conserve our water resources while contributing to greening urban spaces. Low-impact development can involve using parks to harvest rainwater, or greening parking lots to provide more areas to catch water runoff and screen cars from pedestrians, creating more pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods.

Preserving green space in urban areas can also contribute to cleaning the air. And when properly placed, plants can reduce energy use in buildings. This can help us conserve our energy resources and also mitigate the effects we are already seeing from climate change, such as urban heat island effect and increased carbon emissions.

The national conservation plan should establish guidelines for no net tree loss and preserve Canada's tree canopy, particularly within cities. This has been implemented in some U.S. states. One example is New Jersey. Any tree that is removed has to be replaced.

● (1545)

Guidelines should also be set for minimum park space or green space per capita. All communities should have access to the same proportion of green space based on their population size. Any volumes of new buildings or new hard surfaces that are developed should be balanced by appropriate volumes of new vegetation or canopy cover.

To implement these priorities, we believe that research should be conducted to determine the sensitive and unique areas that should be conserved, protected, and restored in both urban and rural areas. Canada should establish a network of protected areas in the preservation of green space, which can include parks and urban spaces. Using green space in urban areas is a unique opportunity to fill the gaps between our current network of protected areas and those new ecosystems that we plan to protect with the national conservation plan. The restoration of degraded ecosystems, such as brownfield restoration and using the principles of sustainable sites initiative, is another way to implement the priorities.

A public education campaign can raise awareness of protection and conservation of green spaces. One example we have from our industry is the St. James Park cleanup in Toronto. This park was damaged from the occupy movement last fall. The community placed a high value on the park. Our industry stepped up and helped to restore it. This is an example of a managed green space, but it still has value to the community and should be protected.

In the consultation process, we believe that it should involve researchers, industry, and the public. We can engage in the tools and research that have already been conducted by Agriculture and Agri-food Canada's agri-environment services branch, who have looked at ways we need to adapt to climate change. They forecasted how our ecozones may change with the climate, which may shift our focus areas for the national conservation plan.

We should continue to engage organizations such as the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association, which have the tools and expertise in environmental horticulture. Our industry can help preserve and restore our land, and help Canadians continue to value nature, which is the best way for the national conservation plan to be effective.

Thank you very much.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Next we will hear from the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. We have Mary Simon—you are the president, I believe—and Ms. Hanson, executive director. You have ten minutes.

Thank you.

Ms. Mary Simon (President, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[*Witness speaks in Inuktitut*]

Thank you for the invitation to appear today.

The Canadian Arctic is home to some 55,000 Inuit. We call it Inuit Nunangat—the Inuit homeland in Canada. It is an intrinsic part of our identity as a people. Future generations of Inuit must inherit a homeland that will continue to provide for them. To that end, Inuit land claims agreements, wildlife management systems, and harvesting practices have all been shaped to ensure that our wildlife resources are to be harvested at sustainable levels. Conservation of wildlife is not just about food. It is also about economic development in the form of wildlife products, tourism, and trade. A viable, contemporary concept of conservation should not create artificial barriers to making best use of wildlife harvested in an environmentally responsible and humane way.

A vibrant renewable resource economy in the Arctic is a major contributor to a balanced overall economy in the Arctic. We look forward to promoting and meeting the ongoing and sustainable demand for all our wildlife products and activities. We have been insistent on this. Our legal challenge to the European Union import ban on seal products is a good example of our determination, as well as our efforts to promote sustainable use and conservation. Conservation planning and policy development, like ail coherent resource management planning and policy development, must be anchored in sound principles, aimed at meeting sound objectives, and implemented in accordance with sound evidence.

As part of that evidentiary base, Inuit continue to advocate for a broader recognition of Inuit knowledge of the Arctic environment and wildlife. Our knowledge is invaluable to us as Inuit, but our knowledge is also a key part of collaboration with governments and others in the areas of research, management, decision-making, and policy development. We work to have Inuit knowledge promoted and recognized on both domestic and international levels. The world will not take seriously a conservation plan for the Arctic that has not been developed and implemented in full and fair partnership with Inuit, or does not place Inuit needs and ideas at its centre.

ln the pursuit of a collaborative approach, we have seen some good precedents. On a national level, Inuit have worked with Environment Canada on processes connected with the Species at Risk Act and CITES. We have had similarly productive working relationships with territorial governments and Arctic co-management bodies in relation to various wildlife issues and problems. We are collaborating with the Government of Canada on our defence of sealing, and appreciate the federal government's support on this issue.

Those things said, there is room for more to be done at the federal, provincial, territorial, and aboriginal levels to make Inuit positions and interests a more prominent feature of relevant processes, projects, and outcomes. We can expect increasing complexities, in the form of both challenges and incentives, in striking the right balance between the conservation of natural resources—lands, oceans, and wildlife—and industrial development. The current controversies in Canada with respect to pipelines serving oil sands development and Arctic oil drilling offer good illustrations of this point.

Inuit from around the circumpolar world have recently given the world some key principles about how to get that balance right, while also respecting Inuit rights and values in the Arctic. A national conservation plan should expressly support this document: *A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Resource Development Principles in Inuit Nunaat.* I brought extra copies, which I think the clerk has received, of this important declaration we developed.

ln keeping with that declaration, and for numerous other sound reasons, Inuit Nunangat, the Inuit homeland, should be identified as a separate, high-profile region in an NCP. This means including Arctic Quebec and Labrador, as well as the territorial Arctic. It means treating Arctic land and marine areas as equal components of an Arctic regional plan.

● (1555)

Inuit land claims agreements provide good examples of how land and marine issues can be dealt with in a highly integrated way. As Inuit priorities must feature in the heart of the Arctic component of an NCP, so too are Inuit a central and necessary partner in its development and implementation. There are many compelling reasons for this: legal and political reasons, land claims rights, the crown's constitutional duties to consult and seek accommodation, international human rights standards, and political and moral reasons. Inuit will expect and demand no less. There are also practical policy and business reasons. Inuit make creative, reliable policy development and business partners.

Prudent, effective, and state-of-the-art laws and policies are needed to govern all oil and gas exploration and development in the Arctic, particularly in relation to the marine areas. Regions must have a final say on whether uranium mining should be allowed to proceed in parts of the Arctic. Even in advance of formal devolution of greater natural resource development powers, major industrial projects should have political buy-in at the regional level, as well as at the national level. Greenlanders have sometimes called this a twin-key approach.

An NCP must support and accelerate full implementation of Inuit land claims agreements, including both their fundamental objectives and their specific provisions dealing with land, wildlife, and resource access and management. Human and environmental health intersect and overlap in the Arctic. An Arctic portion of a national conservation plan must put the well-being of Inuit communities at the fore, and it should include measures aimed at closing the severe and unacceptable gaps in the health of Inuit and other Canadians.

An NCP should stipulate that rational, sustainable use of resources, especially wildlife, cannot pander to animal rights extremists who wish to close down aboriginal livelihoods altogether, or respect the rights of aboriginal people only when they are exercised in some kind of antique, folkloric way divorced from the realities of modern, mixed, and monetized economies. An NCP should stand up to the misguided foreign governments and organizations that have bought into a distorted, unreasoned animal rights agenda.

An NCP should show respect for Inuit knowledge and other forms of aboriginal knowledge, and champion adequate public sector and private sector funding for aboriginal organizations who are working to maintain, amplify, apply, and communicate aboriginal knowledge. To this end, I would encourage policy-makers to consult the Inuit Qaujisarvingat: the Inuit Knowledge Centre created by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami to connect the scientific community and Inuit knowledge holders.

An NCP must serve to sustain cultural diversity among human populations, as well as genetic diversity among non-human populations.

Cultural sustainability and the success of educational systems are inseparable in the contemporary world. Maintaining cultural continuity means having a mix of policies that allow for an ambitious Arctic-based education and training system. We seek to maximize support across jurisdictional, geographic, and public sector and private sector boundaries.

My presentation is a little bit long. I guess the clerk has a copy of this. You say I have one minute left?

● (1600)

To finish it off, I think the Arctic regional component of the NCP should fit into a broader set of national policies directed toward sustainable development in the Arctic and elsewhere. The NCP has to be part of a coherent international effort with respect to conservation and environmental issues generally. To this end, I have three more pages, which I will provide to you.

I thank you very much for allowing me to be here.

The Chair: Thank you, President Simon.

We do have a copy of your presentation, which we will distribute to each member after it's been translated into both official languages. Thank you so much.

Finally, we will hear from the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters. Mr. Farrant, you have ten minutes.

Mr. Greg Farrant (Manager, Government Affairs and Policy, Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, members of the committee, and fellow panellists. On behalf of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, our 100,000 members, and 675 member clubs across the province, I am pleased to have the opportunity to appear before you today to comment on the creation of a national conservation plan.

Like many of the witnesses who have preceded me, we participated in the round-table discussion chaired by the minister and Ms. Rempel earlier this year. As one of the largest charitable, non-profit, conservation-based organizations in the province, and one of the largest in Canada in fact, the OFAH works with all levels of government, academic institutions, the private sector, other NGOs, Ducks Unlimited, the Canadian Wildlife Federation, our affiliates in provinces and territories, first nations, and members of the general public to protect, conserve, and enhance our valuable natural resources, most notably, fish and wildlife populations and their respective habitats.

The OFAH is home to the invading species awareness program, the Ontario Invasive Plant Council, the Lake Ontario Atlantic salmon restoration program, and the stream steward program, to name but a few. At the heart of our work is a strong belief in public policy, legislation, regulations, and standards that seek to conserve our natural resources for current and future generations and that are based upon the best available science

You've heard from others who have appeared before you about the need to restore and protect wetlands. You've heard from Mr. Wong about the creation of national parks and marine protected areas, and you've heard from Mr. Hummel about boreal forests, all important aspects of conservation and all equally important in terms of creating a national conservation plan. Instead of echoing or expanding upon their comments, however, I'll use my time before you today to talk about another equally important consideration when developing the NCP, namely the threat to fish and wildlife populations from various sources.

Last week we had the privilege of appearing before the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans to discuss the need for action on aquatic invasive species, which threaten valuable fish populations and habitat, have an impact on water quality, compete for food sources, and ultimately in many cases displace native species. The same is also true for terrestrial invasive species, plants and insects alike, which threaten our wetlands and forests.

In reading the transcripts of other witnesses, I noted that invasive species were frequently mentioned as something that required particular attention. Assistant Deputy Minister Keenan referred to the threat posed by these species several times during his testimony, but I am not aware that any of the previous witnesses focused to any degree on this issue in relation to the development of the NCP.

Our environment and ecosystems supply multiple important benefits for the quality of life and economic well-being of Canadians. The introduction and spread of invasive alien species affects our environment, our economy, and society as a whole. This threat is increasing at an alarming rate, requiring management and control with limited resources and often limited success, and new invaders continue to arrive as a result of insufficient prevention and detection. The economic cost to Canada of just 16 non-indigenous species is estimated to be as much as $34.5 billion annually to the Canadian economy.

The Government of Canada has been working towards a collaborative approach to invasive species by developing strategies, frameworks, and recommendations for over a decade, but we still see the impact of these invaders on a daily basis, from the forests of British Columbia to the waters of the Great Lakes basin and the oceans that abut our coasts. Previous witnesses have all broached interesting ideas for inclusion in the NCP, but I note that for the most part they avoided discussion of the resources that such a plan will require to be successful.

I find it a bit ironic that as we discuss the creation of a national conservation plan, governments across this country, including the federal government and our provincial government in Ontario, are in the process of passing austerity budgets, which have already had an impact on the funding to address threats to the conservation of our resources. Witness, for example, the recent sudden cancellation of funding for years two and three of the invasive alien species partnership program by Environment Canada.

Our neighbours to the south continue to spend over half a billion dollars a year to address the impact of these species, and $50 million alone on mitigation plans for Asian carp in the Great Lakes. What is missing here, and what must be considered as part of any national plan, is the investment of resources required to adequately implement plans on a scale that will make an appreciable difference.

The threat posed by both aquatic and terrestrial invasive species is mirrored by a threat to our wildlife populations and their continued existence by diseases like chronic wasting disease, which has already caused immeasurable harm to deer populations in western Canada and several U.S. states, and affects elk, moose, and potentially caribou.

● (1605)

For well over a decade, the OFAH and the Canadian Wildlife Federation have been telling governments that the threat posed by chronic wasting disease must be taken seriously and that measures to combat the spread of this disease and other wildlife diseases to other parts of the country can and should be established. Thus far, recommendations have fallen on deaf ears, but the mitigation of diseases that have the capacity to wipe out huge populations of native wildlife must be considered in the development of any national plan to conserve our natural resources.

As governments everywhere seek to develop alternative energy sources, exemplified by the rush in some jurisdictions to embrace newer technologies like windpower, there is often little thought given to the impact of these innovations on fish and wildlife populations and habitat. The placement of so-called wind farms, both on land and in water, largely ignores the deleterious effects on fisheries and wildlife.

In Ontario, hundreds of new dams to serve the interests of small local communities are due to come online in the next few years. The track record, both here and elsewhere, is that fisheries values are negatively affected by these facilities in terms of habitat and fish passage, yet little consideration is given to that in the planning process.

No consideration of a national conservation plan can entirely avoid talking about the “elephant in the room”—namely, funding. This is not to suggest that governments must constantly be looked to as the sole source of funding for environmental projects. Quite the contrary: we believe that most organizations, including our own, recognize that the days of approaching government with hand out are a thing of the past.

We are facing what the authors of a new paper on funding for fish, wildlife, and conservation programs have recently termed as the perfect storm, where a convergence of events has created a crisis in funding for fish, wildlife, and conservation programs. No consideration of a national conservation plan could ignore the reality of the current fiscal situation, nor can such a plan succeed when the necessary resources are not behind it.

In his 2007 report entitled “Doing Less with Less” and in a more recent report, the Environment Commissioner of Ontario outlined the chronic state of spending in Ontario on the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Natural Resources. At present, these two ministries combined, who are the front line for environmental and natural resource protection in this province, account for only 1% of the entire provincial budget.

On the ground, the impact of these restraints has been profound, and not just in Ontario. Thirty years ago, the wildlife branch in Manitoba had 105 employees; today it has 35. In Ontario the impact can be even more severe. Once home to 5,800 full-time employees, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources has currently dropped to 3,300, and is going to shrink again under upcoming restraints.

At the federal level, the Canadian Wildlife Service, once revered for its expertise and reach, is now a mere shell of its former self. In real terms, the cuts will be visible and affect core programs. There will be a reduction in stewardship and partnership funding. There will be fewer, not more, strategic partnerships.

A new model for the delivery of stewardship in Ontario will be developed and the MNR will reduce its involvement where other organizations, like ourselves, are active. The Ontario stewardship program, a flagship community-based partnership delivery model, is in danger of being completely eviscerated.

I believe it was Mr. Hummel who correctly noted that most of the successful conservation programs in Canada have resulted from partnerships between NGOs and the private sector. Under the scenario I've just outlined, these partnerships are more and more likely to be the wave of the future.

The OFAH Lake Ontario Atlantic salmon restoration program is one of these cases, where we, together with NGOs, private interests, and academic institutions, have stepped up to provide the bulk of the funding for the program, which to date has put over four million fish back into Lake Ontario.

Despite the gloomy fiscal outlook in some quarters, there are positive developments, and I must say that the federal government's commitment to a national conservation plan is one of those. We're pleased to see the federal government taking the initiative on this, particularly since we've been urging them to do so for some time.

We noted at the time of the round table the use of the phrase “better connect Canadians with nature” in the preliminary document. For this to happen, we have to know how Canadians view nature. We're pleased to see that Environment Canada is about to release the long-overdue report on the importance of nature to Canadians at the National Fish and Wildlife Conservation Congress, which we are hosting in Ottawa at the end of the month. Copies of the agenda for that have been provided to the clerk.

I'm almost out of time, Mr. Chair, and I appreciate that.

There are many positives to the NCP.

● (1610)

In concluding my remarks, I would respectfully point out that anglers and hunters are ardent conservationists. Mr. Hummel stated as much in his remarks to this committee when he noted, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that being a fisherman or a hunter “does not make you the environmental devil incarnate”.

The North American wildlife conservation model, which has been the underpinning for the management of wildlife populations across this continent since the late 1800s, came about as a result of pressure from hunters who saw the need for a marriage between sustainable use and wise conservation. That model was championed by Teddy Roosevelt and Wilfrid Laurier during their time and was the precursor of the wildlife management regime employed today.

We look forward to our continued participation in future discussions around the NCP. Thank you again for affording us the opportunity to be before you today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Farrant.

Thank you again to all the witnesses. It was very interesting.

We will begin our first round of questioning. Each questioner will have seven minutes.

National Chief Atleo, my understanding is that you have to leave around 4:30. Is that correct? And Mr. David will stay on to answer questions. Okay. I encourage those who are asking questions to keep that in mind, that Chief Atleo will be leaving at about 4:30.

The clock on the wall is not accurate. I'm using BlackBerry time, which is.... That clock is about two and a half minutes slow. So that gives us a little less than 20 minutes.

We will begin with Mr. Lunney. You have seven minutes.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for their valuable contributions to this discussion.

The broad perspective that's been suggested to us and some of the things we should be concerned about in this national conservation plan are conserving, of course, connecting, ecosystems, wildlife corridors, restoring habitat, and also connecting people to the habitat, which is increasingly a concern with urbanization and with more and more people disconnected.

Mr. Farrant, with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, you made a comment about anglers and hunters being connected to wildlife. I want to say that we recognize that. You're on the front lines. You are in fact engaged in environment. You're some of the Canadians who actually do get out and engage in our wilderness areas. And we do appreciate the feedback there. Actually, observation is the foundation of science. So those front-line observations are very valued.

Given the shortage of time, I'm going to have to address some questions the other way. I have to go to the national chief, because the area I represent, about 9,000 square kilometres, and the national chief's traditional territory have significant overlap.

Chief Atleo, I want to go briefly to the Nuu-chah-nulth and to our own area.

Out in Barkley Sound I have seen sites, traditional harvesting sites, dating back in some estimates almost 10,000 years, where some of your ancestors were harvesting fish in areas...and fish habitat there, where they channeled them into areas and then closed if off to be able to harvest.

You have been managing wildlife on the coast and your peoples have done this as well for many years. One of the terms we've heard occasionally here from your culture in the Nuu-chah-nulth language is I think a very valuable concept, if I'm pronouncing it right: *Hishuk ish tsawalk*. You might want to correct my pronunciation. It literally means “everything is one”, that we're part of nature and nature is part of us, if I understand that correctly.

Could you expand a little bit on the traditional activities of your people in our area?

● (1615)

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo: Sure. That's why I wanted to leave that to you.

Hishuk ish tsawalk. Very well done. And I'm appreciative of the effort to reach in and pull out a phrase that means so much to my people. We can find it in other indigenous languages, the sense of interconnectedness and the notion I referenced earlier: take only what you need.

There are wonderful stories about the use of fish weirs in Nuu-chah-nulth territories and old stories that would be taught to children about a bear that came lumbering into the fish weir, tore it apart, and then there's an argument between the people and the bear about the use of the fish and then a travel up to the bear's territories, where the bear took off the outer fur and there was a human, and they had to negotiate and come to an understanding about how the resources were going to be used.

Those old notions and traditional ways of viewing the relationships between animals and the environment, how they're used in a sustainable fashion in a place like Nuu-chah-nulth.... I'm glad you're touching base with my home territories, because for your purposes there are a number of elements there. There's a UNESCO world heritage site. There's a treaty that had been forged in a modern treaty negotiation framework where the issue of aboriginal title and rights and a vision for the future of territories merges in a negotiated fashion.

Most parts of Canada have yet to follow and conclude arrangements or implement treaties. So the convergence of rights in a territory like mine, where clear-cutting was happening, and with 21 out of 27 rivers the clear-cut went right to the river's edge.... One of those rivers is Atleo River, and that's my family's home territory. You see these important stocks of fish choked off due to the lack of connection, a lack of *hishuk ish tsawalk*, a lack of linking among various resource management regimes that would occur in a place like Clayoquot Sound.

So first nations.... At that time there were blockades. This is the science panel that I mentioned, a really critical example, I think. Dr. Lunney, you mentioned the issue of observation, the foundation of science. The need to connect that with the traditional knowledge of first nations is what I'm emphasizing here. That gave rise to a joint management regime in Nuu-chah-nulth that was arrived at with governments. It led to more formal agreements being forged.

This all links to our intervention about the need for rights recognition, coupled with first nations' traditional views, of which Dr. Lunney has brought one phrase that describes, in one of the 52 languages, what this means to our people. So it is about rebuilding fish stocks in a place like Clayoquot Sound. It means having a say over what's happening in the territories. And I think your work can play a central and important role to build on the effort of the crown gathering that says this whole country, on the anniversary of the War of 1812, was forged in a relationship between first nations and those who have come to call Canada home.

This was founded on the making of treaties with mutual respect and recognition, where we would with great ease have an exchange of world views, as Dr. Lunney and I are having, about *hishuk ish tsawalk* and the notion of interconnectedness. But to bring it to a practical, on-the-ground way of having the real partnership give effect in the local territory is something that's going to be absolutely necessary going forward.

So we see good examples of it. I can bring them from my home territory. They do exist. And in the presentation we provided to committee there are other such good examples we should be drawing from. I would encourage you to consider making this element central in your work going forward. As I've said, otherwise I think we're going to continue to be caught up in this cycle of conflict and deep division.

It's time that we brought the relationship much closer together and had a conversation about the living environment around us: where we get our food, how we're connected, what we're doing about the quality of water, our relationship to the birds and the animals. I think this is an excellent entry point for us to be connecting. So I thank you for that.

Mr. James Lunney: Thanks for raising that.

I wanted to raise the issue of habitat. And for your information, the members of this committee—regrettably not the whole committee—will be out on Vancouver Island looking at some of the habitat restoration that has been going on since some of those issues of degradation took place.

You mentioned food, and I know that in the first nations tradition you have traditional knowledge about medicinal plants. That's something we should be taking a much more serious look at. I wanted to mention that.

I have to move on, because I want to bring in our Inuit friends here, about the situation in the north, which is very different from the situation in the national chief's traditional territory. Of course the national chief represents all of Canada now, but coming back to your area—

● (1620)

The Chair: Unfortunately, Mr. Lunney, your time has expired.

Mr. James Lunney: You're kidding.

The Chair: And you were just getting started.

Ms. Leslie, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for your testimony. It's very helpful.

My first question is actually going to pick up on the questioning by Mr. Lunney.

National Chief Atleo, you were talking about this example of clear-cutting, and having that local knowledge, and understanding how this could be done better, or what the impacts would be. With that kind of consultation, would it be sufficient for first nations to be consulted by industry? Is that sufficient consultation when it's industry?

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo: Common law has developed to the extent that we even use the word "consultation", because the courts have instructed governments that first nations must be consulted and accommodated when it comes to our aboriginal title and rights. Over 40 court cases have affirmed what the Constitution.... We are now at the 30-year anniversary of the affirmation of aboriginal title and rights, and treaty rights. What we have yet to do is to give effect to that constitutional recognition.

What's more helpful, to answer your question, is to use what is universally now, among indigenous peoples—I can say with great confidence—a newly recognized minimum acceptable standard in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, of the right to free, prior, informed consent over what takes place in our territories. But it extends beyond that to policies that we discussed at the recent crown and first nations gathering.

We have the right to have an education, particularly when we were subject to one that sought to pull out all of the knowledge we're talking about—the traditional knowledge of our people, and the language by which we would express it—and sought to attempt to take it away over seven generations in the residential schools. Now we enter a time of reconciliation when we put that back. We give effect to it by supporting indigenous young people to learn about who they are, learn about the stories, such as the one I shared about the bear and the weir on a river in my territories. We give effect to it by being able to understand how other policies, whether it's clear-cutting or other people's practices on the lands and use of resources, impact first nations.

The key here is what the declaration makes very clear, and it's what former Auditor General Sheila Fraser said after ten years and over 30 audits. The only way forward is for first nations and governments to jointly design the way forward. That means making sure that treaty rights and aboriginal title and rights are central to policies and legislation that are developed. Going forward, it must reflect, respect, and support that, and first nations must be fully engaged in that effort.

In short, it wouldn't be acceptable that just one segment is consulted, just as it's not okay for just one department of the federal government to be involved. This is really government-wide.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thanks very much.

My next question is for Ms. Simon.

You talked about a collaborative approach and some good examples of collaborative approaches with regard to species at risk. I think species at risk should be a part of a larger conservation plan.

Should a conservation plan include the ability for the minister to grant permits that would negatively impact a species at risk, without having a review process? We have a situation of allowing perpetual granting of this permit, such as what's in the Budget Implementation Act right now. Would you consider that to be a part of the collaborative approach you're talking about?

Ms. Mary Simon: I'm sorry, but my audio isn't working for some reason.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Oh, okay. Shall I give you a moment?

The Chair: We'll pause for a moment, and make sure we have the sound system working.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Does that work now?

The Chair: Could you repeat that? I'll just hold off on the timer.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thank you.

You talked about the collaborative approach with species at risk, and I think species at risk should be a large part of a conservation plan.

Should a conservation plan give the ability to the minister to grant permits for development that could negatively impact a species at risk? These permits would be given without a review process, which could maybe lead to perpetual permits. Is that something you would consider to be part of a collaborative approach to conservation, and what you were talking about?

● (1625)

Ms. Mary Simon: Thank you very much for your question.

When we talk about a collaborative approach, it goes back to what Chief Atleo was saying about informed and prior consent. The collaboration has to be based on the proposition we need to be informed about. Species at risk is a good example of that. We collaborate in the species at risk on many issues, including different species that are related to the Arctic.

As an Inuit representative, I don't believe that permits should be given without collaboration or be regranted without a review process. The position of ITK would not be that there would be no review process after that. It would be more in terms of collaborating and consulting, as Mr. Atleo said, before such action is taken.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thank you.

Mr. Farrant, I have in front of me an article from 2005, when you had presented the then Liberal Minister of Fisheries a letter from OFAH talking about the shock of your membership to government budget cuts that would compromise habitat research and protection and enforcement. When it comes to marine conservation, don't you think that it should be habitat that's protected, and not simply a species like fish—that protecting fish habitat would be a really important part of any conservation plan?

Mr. Greg Farrant: Thank you for the question, Ms. Leslie.

Yes, we do. We've had a number of consultations recently and several face-to-face meetings with the current Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Mr. Ashfield, over proposed changes to the Fisheries Act in the budget implementation bill, and we are extremely concerned about any cuts that would impact on the ability to protect habitat. Thus far I have to say to you that we are generally pleased with the response of the minister and the government in terms of the fact that they will continue to protect those habitats.

I know some quarters of Saskatchewan and Alberta have some concerns that Ontario does not because some of the reservoirs in those provinces contain a recreational sport fishery. Some of the so-called ditches or drainage canals that feed into those contain spawning habitat, and I know they are very concerned about that. They have had an opportunity and continue to have an opportunity through consultation with the minister's office and the minister himself on habitat protection. I think we're starting to get some answers that are giving us a reasonable level of confidence that it's going to continue.

The Chair: Time has expired; I'm sorry.

Ms. Rempell, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Centre-North, CPC): Thank you.

I actually wanted to echo all of my colleagues' comments on the depth and richness of the presentations that were made today by all the groups. We really thank you for coming out today.

I wanted to start with Chief Atleo, being respectful of your time. You mentioned two pillars: the application of traditional knowledge, and recognition of first nation rights that need to be embedded within the NCP. I wanted to tease out that first principle a little bit for some of us who perhaps aren't entirely familiar with that concept, just so we make sure we've got some of those key principles in the document.

I'll ask you a question you could probably speak to for a week. If you could perhaps talk about the key principles of traditional knowledge as they would apply to a national conservation plan, what would those be?

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo: Key principles of...?

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Of your traditional knowledge practices. Are there some key practices? If you were going to drill down one more level on that principle, what would those next bullet points look like?

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo: Let's think back to the fur trade in Champlain's day, because I think there's a real economic underpinning to this conversation. The rights application is the Innu telling Champlain, “You can trap downriver; upriver is exclusively ours. Do we have an understanding?” There was both a sense of conservation, as well as respect for rights, if I can speak about it in that manner, to drill down as simplistically as possible. You have balance: you have economic activity, you have conservation, and you have rights recognition, the principles that have been forged in Treaties 1 to 11, pre-Confederation treaties.

I'll throw in one more anniversary. The 250th anniversary of the Royal Proclamation of 1763 is coming up in 2013, where the relationship was always based on mutual rights recognition and respect in the treaty-making process. That's the reason why those are two important pillars: rights recognition, so that first nations do as was signed onto in Agenda 21 in Rio—jointly design or define with Canada what "sustainability" means. That doesn't mean just the animals or the fish; it's about habitat. And it's not just habitat; it's the idea of energy, energy strategy, the use of natural resources, and how we view our relationship with those resources.

That's the most succinct way I can respond.

● (1630)

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Thank you so much.

President Simon, I think your perspective today brings something unique that we haven't had at committee yet, in that you talked a lot about Arctic conservation and the connection your people have to the Arctic and that you have a wealth of knowledge in conservation principles there. You talked a bit about the sustainable hunt, about sustainable natural resource development in the Arctic.

Are there other key principles, as far as your region and your traditional lands, that you feel need to be reflected in the national conservation plan?

Ms. Mary Simon: I think those are the key elements. If you, like Mr. Atleo, drill down into that question, you can start to see areas where you would have to go into more detail in terms of conservation.

Ms. Michelle Rempel: What would those areas be?

Ms. Mary Simon: For instance, when we work with species at risk, the Inuit knowledge that was not being considered was how the polar bear was being impacted by climate change. There was a movement in the United States to uplist the polar bear to a category three, endangered species. When you listened to the elders in our communities, and the knowledge they possess, it was completely the opposite. It has now been proven that Inuit were right in their assessment of the situation. So that's an example of how you have to go into a much deeper analysis of each of the key principles I talked about.

When the Mackenzie Valley pipeline review was taking place in the early seventies—and it still applies today—when they were holding public hearings, the Inuvialuit elders said they had to develop in a certain place and not in another place, in terms of the pipeline. The scientists thought they were on the right track until an elder spoke up and said that the beluga whales calved in a certain area of the ocean. They checked into that, and he was absolutely right.

So that's what I mean. We need to consider all the knowledge that people possess when you start to develop a conservation plan, because these are the real-life situations we're experiencing.

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Thank you so much.

I'll close with one question for Ms. Ricottone.

You brought the perspective of conserving urban landscapes and bringing urban conservation principles into a national conservation plan. Groups in my riding are looking at using urban green spaces, even on private lands, even urban farming, mixed use. Does your organization have any views on that, and how perhaps some of those activities could be embedded into the principles of a national conservation plan, also understanding that municipal bylaws, etc., are subject to these principles as well?

● (1635)

Ms. Julia Ricottone: We see the national conservation plan helping to create the top-down approach to working with the municipalities and giving them some guidelines for developing their bylaws and creating those policies. I think the best way to do it is to provide the examples and the reasons why urban conservation is good, and go from there.

The Chair: Your time has expired. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Choquette, you have five minutes.

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to all the witnesses. My first question goes to Ms. Simon.

You mentioned the climate change that is affecting Canada's north. Climate change is absolutely real and obvious. It is affecting the permafrost and the biodiversity. You mentioned the polar bear, as well. You are presently working with a network called ArcticNet that studies the impacts of climate change. What are its priorities and, in your opinion, how could they be included in the national conservation plan?

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Simon: Thank you very much for your question.

Yes, climate change is real. It has been happening for many years. In fact, Inuit predicted the changes long before nation-states were actually talking about it. We started to see those changes years ago. You really need to take that into consideration if you're developing an NCP in relation to Arctic waters, for instance, even though the ice is melting right before our very eyes and the Northwest Passage is opening up.

There are all these predictions going on about how the resource-rich Arctic is going to be exploited. Before that exploitation takes place, I think as a country we need to have a very clear idea of what kinds of rules and regulations we're going to have in place, not only to protect the oceans but also to protect the land and its people. People in the Arctic are going to be impacted very heavily, not only in terms of their lives and their livelihoods but also in terms of the social impacts likely to happen if and when the Northwest Passage becomes a place where not only development takes place, but also shipping will increase, as predicted by scientists, to a very large degree compared to what's going on right now.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you, Ms. Simon. I have another question for you.

At the moment, Canada has protects only 1% of its oceans and marine spaces. According to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the target is 10% for marine areas and 17% for land areas. Do you feel that those targets should be part of the national conservation plan and are they sufficient?

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Simon: Thank you for that.

I'm not an expert on the percentages, but I can respond to the question. I think that, yes, we need to look very carefully at how the oceans are going to be addressed in terms of all the potential development. The oceans are already being affected now with a lot of the dumping and debris that goes on with shipping, which is under more control now than it was in the past.

One thing I'd like to add, if I may, is not necessarily directly related to your question, but it is interrelated. Canada is going to be chairing the Arctic Council starting next year, and I think Canada can show a lot of leadership on Arctic conservation in its upcoming chairmanship. I really believe that. But we have to be careful, because we need to prepare for the council chairmanship. I think we need to begin that work now. It would take into consideration the very questions you're raising with us today as witnesses.

● (1640)

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you very much, Ms. Simon.

My next question is for Mr. Farrant.

You mentioned that the Invasive Alien Species Partnership Program has been abolished. Do you think that it is important to put it back into the national conservation plan?

[*English*]

Mr. Greg Farrant: Yes. I can't be any briefer than that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette: Thank you.

Do I have any time left?

[*English*]

The Chair: It's finished. Merci.

The next five minutes are for Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Thank you.

Ms. Simon, I really appreciated your very forceful comments about the international animal rights movement and their effect on communities right across the country, in the north and beyond. Again, the issue of foreign-funded groups trying to affect public policy in our country is at the forefront. As somebody in a previous life who's fought the animal rights fanatics, as I said, I very much appreciated those comments of yours.

I'd like to talk about the situation on Baker Lake. What I've heard is that there was a mine developed very close to Baker Lake that has been of great benefit to that community in terms of reducing unemployment to almost nothing. From your standpoint, from a conservation and environmental standpoint, did that mining development work for the community and also work for the local environment?

Ms. Mary Simon: Is that the old development or the new one?

Mr. Robert Sopuck: It's the new one.

Ms. Mary Simon: I would say there has been a benefit, and it's highly supported by the region in terms of its development. Whether in fact it has almost eliminated unemployment in that area I can't answer directly at this point. We can get the figures for you. But I would assume there is a lot more opportunity for jobs. It depends on how and what those jobs are. As you know, our population up to today is still lagging behind in educational achievement, so sometimes it depends on how well someone is educated and can get those higher-paying jobs, not just the menial jobs.

These are still questions that confront us in the north.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Are you familiar with the environmental performance of that mine? Was it done in an environmentally sound way?

Ms. Mary Simon: As far as we're concerned, it was. There was an environmental review undertaken and the environmental review was accepted and people were involved in that review process.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: My point was that I'm always looking for shining examples of sound economic development and high levels of environmental protection, and what I've heard is that the Baker Lake mine fulfills both.

I'd like to hear more, Ms. Simon, about the polar bear issue and where you see that going over the next little while. As you know, our government has been a strong defender of the Inuit polar bear hunt, and I presume we'll continue to do so. Polar bear stocks are in good shape, in your view. Could you elaborate?

Ms. Mary Simon: Yes, they are in good shape, despite the negative predictions of our closest neighbour. We have found that the population of polar bears has in fact increased because the polar bears are starting to come inland. The ice is melting. Polar bears live on ice and they hunt on ice, so when they have no food they start coming to the inland regions of the Arctic. In fact they are going into communities.

That's where the concern is right now. The threat to polar bears is not the hunting, it's climate change, and we have no control over what's happening on climate change. If it becomes ice-free, I don't know what's going to happen to the polar bears. They may adapt. I don't know. I'm not a scientist. But we know for sure they are becoming a threat more and more to the people who live in the communities. As you know, polar bears are vicious animals. They're beautiful, but they are nevertheless vicious.

Now we have polar bear watches in some of our communities when children go to school. Everybody walks to school. They don't want the children to confront polar bears in their community, because they do come into the communities.

● (1645)

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Churchill has the same thing.

Mr. Farrant, one of the things that I like very much about the organized angling and hunting community is your active involvement in conservation programs.

You talked about the Atlantic salmon restoration program. Can you talk about some of the active programs in Ontario that either you or your member organizations are involved in? By active, I mean actually going out there and doing conservation work on the ground.

The Chair: It will be a very short answer, because Mr. Sopuck is out of time.

Mr. Greg Farrant: I'll try to be brief again. I won't answer "yes" this time.

I can give you some basic examples in a very short fashion.

The invading species awareness program is on the ground across this province. We have 27 summer students that we hire as a hit squad in every corner of this province. We have a permanent staff up in Thunder Bay dealing with invasive species on Lake Superior. They work with cottage associations, municipalities, marine operators, bait operators, bait-fish communities, law enforcement, and all sorts of local groups on the ground, everything from wash your boats to don't throw your bait out—things like that on a very local level.

The stream steward program enhances habitat, restores habitat by planting trees, restoring streams, and things like that.

Both of them are Trillium award-winning programs from the Province of Ontario.

Those are a couple of examples.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Quach, you have five minutes.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for being here today to give us your information and to answer our questions. I am going to continue with Mr. Farrant.

Earlier, Ms. Leslie brought up the matter of protecting fish habitat. You mentioned establishing a dialogue with the minister that would include you to a greater extent. In the budget bill presently before the House, are you expecting the minister to make any changes that would address your concerns?

[*English*]

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: A point of order, Ms. Rempel.

Ms. Michelle Rempel: I believe my colleague is referring to the fisheries minister. I'd ask her that if she is going to talk about habitat, which is valid, that it stay focused to the scope of the national conservation plan.

The Chair: Are there any other speakers to the point?

Madame Quach.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: The witness was talking about protecting fish habitat and wanted to know what the impact of better dialogue with the minister would be. In terms of that dialogue, I just wanted to know if he was expecting any changes to the budget that would protect fish habitat.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have limited time, so I'm not going to take any more input on the point of order.

The point of order is relevant, in that we're a little bit off topic, off the scope. I began the meeting reading the six questions that dealt with the scope. I'd encourage us to focus on the creation of a national conservation plan.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Okay. I will ask my question another way. Mr. Farrant, do you feel that the government could amend its budget to provide better protection for fish habitat?

[*English*]

Mr. Greg Farrant: I'm not sure that the government needs to, based on what we are hearing from Fisheries and Oceans Canada, what we're hearing from the minister and his staff, and officials at the department now. We continue to ask questions about what the changes to the act are going to look like and what they're going to mean on the ground. Thus far, we're getting sound answers, we're getting positive answers that generally give us comfort of where this is going.

As to whether or not this will be reflected in changes to the budget act or other legislation is beyond my scope to comment on.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Great. Thank you. Let me move to Ms. Ricottone.

You also talked about protecting habitat. Do you feel that it is logical to have a conservation plan that would protect only some particular species rather than fish habitat in general?

● (1650)

[*English*]

Ms. Julia Ricottone: When I was referring to habitats, I was mainly referring to land habitats for plant and animal species.

In my opinion, yes, we should.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: You also talked about protecting urban areas.

How could the government help to decrease urban warming in a potential conservation plan? You touched on the matter quickly and it was very interesting. You spoke about guidelines that would set a minimum for parks and green spaces and mentioned how that would help to reduce the warming.

Could you give us a few more concrete examples of that and tell us the kinds of government proposals that could help to achieve it?

[*English*]

Ms. Julia Ricottone: Our goal with that is to help use green spaces in urban areas as connecting points of other conserved areas across the country, because plant and animal species don't live by our boundaries. So if there is a way we could influence more protection of those spaces in urban areas, then that would be beneficial to the overall plan.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you.

Mr. Farrant, you mentioned the lack of funding and resources that prevents the plan being implemented to any significant degree. You also mentioned diseases that scientists are testing for and finding, and programs that could help to mitigate those diseases.

In terms of a national conservation plan, would investing more so that scientists could do more testing help with the conservation of more species?

[*English*]

Mr. Greg Farrant: Certainly more money is always a great idea, but there are a number of things the plan could recommend.

I want to be really clear about this. When we talk about things like wildlife diseases, and we talk about habitat, and we talk about invasive species, these are issues we've been raising with a succession of governments for 20 years in the case of invasive species, so it's not something that's particular to the current government.

More science is always beneficial, but there are a number of things in terms of wildlife disease, such as chronic wasting disease. Putting up a firewall in Canada to provide for no movement between jurisdictions requires no funding envelope. It requires some regulatory change, which is something the national conservation plan could certainly consider. But it's not a case of needing more money to do that; it's simply establishing some different standards, some new regulations to address that.

One of the other things we've long had an issue with—and it's not something that's universally shared across the country, and we recognize that—is the issue of game farms. Game farms are the vectors for the spread of chronic wasting disease. We've long encouraged both the provincial government in Ontario—all parties—and successive federal governments to look at the game farm issue in terms of how diseases spread. It's nose-to-nose contact with these animals, and for 30 years or more game farms have been the proven vectors of how chronic wasting disease gets into the natural population. So again, it's not a case of money, it's a case of jurisdictional regulation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Toet, you have five minutes.

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first comment is to Ms. Simon.

Ms. Simon, it's just a comment, really. It was great to be in Europe recently, actually with an interparliamentary delegation, and to see that not everything is done on a partisan basis. But we actually met with a member of a parliament there who took us to task on the seal hunt. You were eloquently defended by members from both sides of the House on that, so it was very good to see that occur.

I'd like to direct my question initially to Mr. Farrant, and to Ms. Ricottone. It is in regard to urban education, because I think it's a key component of what we need to do here. The conservation plan will only be successful if we also have urban buy-in, education of our urban population, or education of our new immigrants and our young people.

I wonder, from the perspective of both your organizations, what you are able to bring forward in regard to that. Maybe Mr. David could also add his comments on that, because I think it's such an important component of this going forward.

A lot of time we have a lack of connection with urban residents with what's really happening out in the world with wildlife and with conservation issues, because we're surrounded by brick and concrete and we don't see it. One of the things we've talked about is more green in urban spaces. That's great, but I think it's also an education factor. I just wonder if you could speak to that.

● (1655)

Mr. Greg Farrant: Sure, I'd be more than happy to do so.

One thing I didn't touch on but that is in the written presentation the committee members will have is that we strongly agree that public awareness and education should be a key component of the NCP.

For many years we've gone to committees here, particularly the fisheries and oceans committee, to talk about a national public education and awareness program on invasive species. In fact, in 2003 and again in 2005 that committee recommended funding for our proposal for a national public education and awareness program. Unfortunately, that hasn't transpired, but it's obviously a key.

You're quite correct that there is a disconnect with many urban residents. There's also the issue of new Canadians. We continue to look for ways to reach new Canadians, to talk about fish, about wildlife, about recreational hunting and fishing, and talk about the connections between those and conservation. So yes, they're all very relevant.

Mr. Lawrence Toet: Do you have any ideas of how we could tangibly do that within a national conservation plan?

Mr. Greg Farrant: I can certainly provide this committee with the invasive species public education and awareness proposal we gave to the fisheries and oceans committee ast week. We'd be more than happy to send this committee a copy of that, which outlines exactly how it works on the ground. I might add that it would work in connection with all our partners across the country, all the affiliates in all the provinces and territories, and for a reasonably small amount of money for a national program.

I'd be happy, through the chair and the clerk, to provide members of the committee with that, which demonstrates how it would roll out.

Ms. Julia Ricottone: From our perspective, we haven't formally been involved in any public education programs, but we do have access to a number of studies and reports outlining the benefits of green spaces and plants, and how they can help improve lifestyles and improve communities overall. That could help to be the background and the basis of educating the public on why conserving these plants and these spaces is important.

Mr. William David (Senior Policy Analyst, Environmental Stewardship, Assembly of First Nations): I'll try to be quick.

For our part, we think education is key, particularly in urban areas. It's a little odd, because you wouldn't necessarily think it, but the national chief was referencing, for instance, Caldwell First Nation or Walpole Island First Nation and the initiative at Point Pelee National Park. What is going on there is that you have first nations slowly being brought into the management of the park, and particularly education. It's important, because urban Canadians have one relationship with the environment, which may not be well formed, but it's a particular relationship.

First nations have a very different relationship with the environment, and it's very tied in with their cultures. So by having that kind of public education in cities, we not only enable Canadians to view their relationship with nature in a slightly different way, help to connect them with nature, we also build greater understanding with all Canadians, and hopefully form a basis for a broader reconciliation.

It seems a bit odd, because you don't have a lot of urban first nations, but you do have a lot of urban areas in first nations' traditional territories, and I think it's something that's very worthy of further consideration.

The Chair: The time has expired, but I'm going to give Ms. Simon an opportunity to comment. I think you had a word you wanted to share with us.

Ms. Mary Simon: Yes, thank you very much.

First, my comment is on education—it's key. I say that because as I was listening to the discussion on habitat conservation, we were talking more about the southern parts of Canada and not about the Arctic.

The habitat in southern Canada is very important for us, because the birds that come to the Arctic, like the Canada goose and the different types of ducks, all winter down here and farther south. When they come up, they become very healthy because the habitat is still healthy.

So what you're saying to us is very important, but it's also very relevant to the Arctic as well. I just wanted to make the comment that it is an education issue, because maybe some people don't think of it in those terms.

The other point I want to make is building up aboriginal organization and traditional knowledge capacity should go hand in hand with preserving, where appropriate. Also, I think expanding the federal government's own in-house scientific knowledge base is also very important for the NCP.

● (1700)

The Chair: Again, thank you so much to each of the witnesses for being here. It's been very interesting, and we appreciate your taking the time to come here to share your expertise with us.

Colleagues, at this time we're going to suspend for a couple of minutes. Again, the clock is a little slow. It's a little after five now, so we're going to suspend for a couple of minutes and then we'll move in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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