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Chair

Mr. Harold Albrecht

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● (0850)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC)): I'd like to call the 68th meeting of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development to order.

Our first part of the meeting today will consist of testimony from Wildlife Habitat Canada, with Mr. Len Ugarenko; from Nature Canada, with Stephen Hazell and Ian Davidson, who has not yet arrived but will be here shortly; and from the David Suzuki Foundation, with Mr. Bill Wareham by video conference from Vancouver.

We're going to begin with the presentations by our witnesses, and then we'll come back to our questioning, with each member around the table having a chance to ask questions.

We're going to begin with Wildlife Habitat Canada and Mr. Len Ugarenko. I understand that Mr. Ugarenko also has his executive assistant, Julia Thompson, with him today. Welcome, Julia.

Mr. Ugarenko, please proceed, and thank you for having your presentation prepared in print.

Mr. Len Ugarenko (President, Wildlife Habitat Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for giving Wildlife Habitat Canada the opportunity to present some ideas for your study on habitat conservation. The details of who we are and what we do are in the speaking notes, so I'll just summarize.

We were created in 1984 by the federal, provincial, and territorial governments and conservation organizations when it was recognized that waterfowl populations across North America were plummeting. The bulk of our funding is derived from the sale of the Canadian wildlife habitat conservation stamp, which is purchased primarily by hunters to validate their migratory bird hunting permits. Through a contribution agreement with Environment Canada, we get the funds from the sale of the stamp, which we administer on conservation projects across Canada.

The first question you asked us was what types of stakeholders are involved in habitat conservation and how much this accounts for total efforts in Canada. “Stakeholder” is an interesting term. In this context it lends itself to defining those who are actually involved in doing the work necessary to conserve wildlife habitat. Stakeholders can range from groups of schoolchildren cleaning up a stream bank, to community groups working locally in their neighbourhoods, to provincial organizations such as the Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation and the Alberta Conservation Association, through to national conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl and, of course, Wildlife Habitat Canada.

It's important to go beyond the stakeholders we know to involve all of society. While it may sound trite, simply stated, each person has to understand that if they breathe air, drink water, and consume agricultural and natural resource products, then they are a stakeholder.

It should also be recognized that the original stakeholders who founded the conservation movement in North America and paid for the bulk of habitat conservation were the anglers and hunters. They continue to provide funds through licence and permit fees and voluntary contributions of both time and money to conservation projects and fundraising events.

It's difficult to accurately quantify the conservation work done by the range of stakeholders because so much of it is unreported. For larger groups, one can get a sense of their efforts and accomplishments by reviewing their annual reports and publications, while local efforts may be documented only in community newspapers, if at all. In the past, Wildlife Habitat Canada produced reports on the status of wildlife habitat in Canada that were used by various organizations to assist with their conservation planning.

The second question was on whether Canada has publicly available knowledge and expertise on habitat conservation, what the sources of this information are, and how it is disseminated. Canada has a large amount of information—read knowledge and expertise—on habitat conservation. One only need ask and look. There are a number of very good sources available, such as the websites and publications of the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, and the regional and national non-government conservation organizations. And many of the NGOs provide periodic updates on the work they're doing in the form of electronic newsletters. The key is that one needs to know where to look and what questions to ask. It would be helpful if there was a wider distribution of this information, perhaps through the press, especially to new Canadians.

The third question was on what the most effective habitat conservation groups or organizations are and what actions they take. All groups can be very effective. It depends on the level, scope, and geographic extent of the project undertaken and how “effective” is defined. Some define it by most acres conserved, others by return on dollars invested in habitat conservation, and others the number of people who are participating. We use all of those criteria and more.

The local cleanup projects see immediate results. They're hands-on actions. Larger groups produce multi-year plans at the regional level, such as the Prairie Habitat Joint Venture, which covers Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, or at the national level, such as the North American waterfowl management plan. These plans often include acquiring critical habitats in perpetuity through outright purchase or long-term easements, and physically modifying sites to restore vegetation, hydrology, and other ecological functions, to name a few. Other habitat conservation actions include education and demonstration projects.

Groups often use the press, Internet, and social media as community outreach tools to promote habitat work and project results while recruiting volunteers.

● (0855)

As to who the most effective habitat conservation organizations are, this is often expressed in terms of those groups that are able to minimize overhead while delivering on-the-ground habitat conservation projects. Some have already been named in my remarks regarding the first question.

The fourth question was how “conserved land” is defined and accounted for in Canada, and whether that definition is different from that in other countries. Within Canada there are differences of opinion regarding the definition of conserved land and how it is accounted for and reported in various databases. At Wildlife Habitat Canada, for example, we try to use a broad definition to help our conservation partners with the work they do. Habitat conservation can mean or include the acquisition, restoration, enhancement, and management of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Having worked all across Canada as well as in the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean, I have seen that all countries use similar definitions for habitat conservation.

The point is not how habitat conservation is defined yet rather how it's achieved. At the heart of the matter is that there are a lot of good people doing a lot of good work trying to achieve habitat—and thus wildlife—conservation, no matter how it's defined.

Do we need to have a universal definition of conserved land in Canada? How much time will this take, and in the end what purpose will it really serve? I think the time has come to implement the actions we know are needed before it's too late.

The fifth question was, when it comes to recovering a species, how best management practices and stewardship initiatives compare to prescriptive government-mandated measures. Best management practices such as farm plans, biodiversity plans, and the like can be very effective on their own as long as there is a public that is willing to initiate those actions on a voluntary or subsidized basis.

While at times prescriptive measures must be part of the planning tool box, because the general public, most of whom have lost their connection with nature, often do not understand what is happening in the natural world around them, government-mandated measures, including legislation, can be very effective in guiding land use to direct conservation efforts in order to help declining species. But on a cautionary note, one has to be careful how it's done. Government programs can often be very bureaucratic and frustrating, with more money being spent on managing the bureaucratic process than actually going into on-the-ground habitat-conservation work.

The sixth and final question was on how the federal government can improve habitat conservation efforts in Canada. Simply stated, it's by completing a national conservation plan as soon as possible. In the meantime, there could be more effort directed toward public education and active involvement in habitat conservation. For example, more could be done on connecting youth with nature by promoting the immediate and long-term benefits, especially in the areas of health and education. As well, we need to develop ways of involving new Canadians in wildlife habitat conservation and educating them about the importance of being active participants.

There are tax incentives that provide some financial relief, yet perhaps more is necessary in this area when one considers the actual cash value of ecological goods and services.

We need to work on fostering a cultural shift in society that began with the advent of the blue box. The Ontario government provides an example of how this could be done. They recently published their plan to conserve biodiversity by establishing actions and activities within individual government ministries. Hopefully over time, people will take home what they are doing at work and the message will spread.

On a final note, we purposely left out the studies and statistics regarding rates of habitat loss and degradation. The fact that we are here today underscores that point, and I'm sure others will likely cover those details. In moving forward it is important that habitat conservation actions taken in the future be economically viable. Canada must move forward to improve habitat conservation but also remain cognizant of the natural resources industries upon which our society relies.

We face a future of uncertainty. As alternate sources of energy are developed, there will be new challenges on the landscape related to land use and habitat conservation. Climate change and species adaptation will likely cause shifts in the way we approach habitat planning in the future. Maintaining a healthy balance between habitat conservation and economic development will be difficult, yet we believe it can be achieved.

Thank you very much.

● (0900)

The Chair: Mr. Ugarenko, you're about three seconds short of your 10 minutes. Thank you so much for honouring that.

We're going to move now to Mr. Bill Wareham in British Columbia and ask him to give us his 10-minute opening comments.

Mr. Wareham, welcome and thank you for getting up early. We know it's much earlier there than it is here.

Mr. Bill Wareham (Science Project Manager, David Suzuki Foundation): No problem, I appreciate the opportunity. I live in Gibsons, British Columbia, and I'm used to commuting to Vancouver at six in the morning anyway. So it's a normal day here, but nice to see you all.

I also provided a written document for you, which outlines some of the background of our organization.

The Chair: Mr. Wareham, just for clarification, because it wasn't translated, we haven't circulated that document, but we will be listening intently to your comments.

Mr. Bill Wareham: Great.

Overall, I'd just like to highlight that the David Suzuki Foundation has a strong interest in habitat conservation. Our mandate is to try to realize a balance between running a dependable economy and maintaining a core infrastructure of habitat, diversity, and ecosystem function.

Just so that you know a little bit about me, I have worked for about 27 years in the conservation field. I've worked with freshwater fisheries out of Winnipeg. I've worked with Ducks Unlimited and with the World Wildlife Fund on the endangered species program. I've worked with Sierra Club for many years, and I've been about 11 years now at the Suzuki Foundation, working on terrestrial conservation and on freshwater and marine conservation of fisheries.

I'll cut to the questions directly. The first one is about looking at what types of stakeholders are involved in habitat conservation. There are many people involved. I'd put them in two different categories. There are those who work on the ground and are involved in Streamkeepers; or in habitat conservation of local, natural areas; or in Friends of Parks, who help manage parks for wildlife conservation. Then there are the other groups that work on policy, legislation, and amending and reforming regulations at a broader scale. They look at habitat issues for large industries and across larger landscapes. It's really important that both of these stakeholder groups be recognized as part of what is needed to engage habitat conservation at a higher level. I believe we can do more by including the many people who care deeply about habitat conservation and work through industry, NGOs, community groups, and within government. The magic lies in trying to combine all of that energy into a process where stakeholders have the knowledge of what can and should be done as well as the logical and economical priorities necessary for moving forward with habitat conservation.

On the second question about the availability of knowledge and expertise in habitat conservation, when you look across the databases within provincial and federal governments, there's a lot of knowledge out there. There's a lot information. Unfortunately, a lot of the information we had in the past is sometimes lost with the evolution of websites. The history of trends and conservation initiatives is also sometimes lost. I believe we could do better at trying to integrate and provide a more common repository for habitat conservation. Some of it is regionally focused. Some of it is focused on species, according to endangered and threatened species management and conservation plans. Overall, if you're really for habitat information, you have to dig deep into the various organizations. Sometimes that includes individual groups, municipal governments, and a variety of federal agencies that hold the information you need.

In regard to the most effective habitat conservation groups and organizations, there are so many groups out there that work at a range of scales and on different types of habitats that the measure of effectiveness is difficult, unless you confine yourself to talking to the groups about whether or not they're meeting their own objectives. On a large scale, the Nature Conservancy of Canada and Ducks Unlimited do fantastic work on trying to protect private lands and working with landowners to protect habitat. Despite all the on-the-ground efforts of these organizations, we continue to see a loss of habitat, both on private land and on crown land. An example I'll use is in the context of farmland, where the increasing value of farmland drives farmers to try to maximize their yields. They'll often develop the last remaining natural habitats, whether it's wetlands, hedge rows, or remnant pieces of bush on their lands. Those are often the last refugia for wildlife that remain on the landscape. We're seeing an ongoing decline in that type of habitat, particularly in areas near urban centres.

● (0905)

In that context, many of the other organizations that work on improving environmental policies at all levels of government—those that work on new legislation or regulations associated with legislation—are very important because it's sometimes the over-arching limits and boundaries set by these regulations that are the only feasible way to protect habitat at a larger scale.

Overall, I look at the large indicators and trends in wildlife, and here, when we look at our commitments under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, we're failing to meet those targets—and to me, that's the measure. Regardless of all the effort and goodwill, we're still losing the battle or we're not living up to our commitments.

You could say that conservation organizations have not been very effective, but I believe it's truly a reflection of the failure of governments to move on habitat conservation agendas in a timely and effective way. I believe much more investment is needed to really focus that effort.

As for the next question, how conserved land is defined and accounted for in Canada, it's defined through provincial and federal agencies, and associated maps and data are housed in all of the different places. The Canadian Council on Ecological Areas tracks large-scale protected areas. We have national parks, national wildlife areas, provincial parks, conservancies, and ecological reserves. These large habitat conservation areas are quite easy to identify and define. The smaller-scale protection is more difficult and it takes a lot more digging to piece together any kind of data on the scale of protection involved there.

One complicating factor in accounting for habitat protection is the diversity of designations and permitted uses within these. Across the many provinces, with all the different types of parks and conservancies, there is a variety of uses permitted within these and different scales of habitat conservation within them. We refer you to the IUCN, which provides a useful scale of protection classifications and defines the degree to which certain designations of habitat are actually protected within different areas.

When it comes to recovering species, how do we best manage stewardship initiatives compared to prescriptive government mandates? I say we clearly need both. Best management practices alone should be a baseline for commercial and industrial activity. But best practices are often not enough. For example, logging companies employed best management practices in the boreal forest area in regard to caribou habitat over the past decade, but the caribou continued to decline. It requires a federal government effort to develop the recovery strategies to determine the disturbance threshold for caribou and to really put a tighter requirement on habitat conservation.

Even though we have science behind us, industry does not always do the right thing: it has other interests to satisfy, obviously. As we develop large-scale activities, whether it's boreal forest or oil or agricultural development, we see the need for a tighter regulatory framework on habitat conservation.

In the case of private land conservation, best management practices are often not economical for landowners. In these cases, it's not only restrictive regulations that can help realize conservation of habitat but also improved financial and tax benefits that will incentivize conservation. These are needed, again, at a broader scale to really do the job for habitat conservation that most Canadians are expecting.

The last one is, how does the federal government improve habitat conservation efforts? I'll just go through a quick list here. How many minutes do we have?

● (0910)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Bill Wareham: I'll just do a quick run through the recommendations.

The first is to engage the full range of conservation NGOs and public stakeholders, which includes on-the-ground work, and policy and regulatory work.

The second is to commit to the biodiversity convention targets and develop strategies toward those based on the agreement reached at Nagoya, Japan.

The third is to enhance funding to accommodate habitat protection using the various acts we have.

The fourth is to engage first nations, municipal, and provincial governments in more strategic planning around habitat protection priorities.

The fifth is to provide incentives that are financial to landowners and to governments to put the effort on the priority habitat conservation areas.

The sixth is to provide economic incentives, particularly for species-at-risk recovery planning, and to provide funding to non-government organizations that will enable them to use their volunteer capacity to add to the effort toward habitat conservation.

Lastly is the need to acknowledge that protecting nature from harm isn't a matter, in the first place, of doing the conservation work in the wake of development but of pursuing habitat conservation that maintains the conservation and integrity of the environment at the front end.

Thank you very much for your time and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Wareham. Thank you again for providing your comments in written form. We will make certain that all the committee members receive them after they have been translated, so the shortened time span won't negatively impact your written statement. Thank you very much.

We will now move to Nature Canada, from which we have Mr. Ian Davidson, the executive director.

Welcome, Mr. Davidson.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Executive Director, Nature Canada): Thank you very much.

My apologies to the people here. I had a small issue with my child. She's in the hospital with a high temperature. She's fine, and I'll go forward with my presentation.

First of all, by way of introduction, my name is Ian Davidson. I am the executive director for Nature Canada. I have been working in the field of conservation for most of my life, I think since the age of 17. I've worked with the Canadian government, with the Canadian Wildlife Service, for a not-for-profit organization. I have spent a lot of my life working overseas in conservation arenas, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is a privilege and an honour to be once again invited to speak about the national conservation plan being considered by the standing committee.

Nature Canada has been connecting Canadians to nature since 1939. It is the largest grassroots-based conservation organization in Canada, representing some 46,000 members and supporters, as well as our network of 375 provincial and local nature organizations across Canada.

Today I wish to focus on key habitat conservation principles and objectives that Nature Canada believes should be incorporated into the national conservation strategy. I also wish to touch on the roles of government and not-for-profit organizations in improving habitat conservation and in reconnecting Canadians to nature.

First, here is some context. The 1980 world conservation strategy defined conservation as “the management of human use of the biosphere” in such a way “that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations”.

This is as good a definition of conservation as I have found. Yet even in 1980 and increasingly since, human actions are reducing the life-supporting capacity of earth's ecosystems, even as rising human populations and consumption are making heavier demands on those ecosystems. In simple terms, we need about 1.5 earths to support current human populations at current consumption levels. Nature's bank is currently overdrawn, and the deficit is increasing.

Nature Canada suggests two key public policy principles that should flow from these inconvenient truths: first, that there must be no further net loss in wildlife habitat in Canada; second, that nature conservation must come first in natural resources development and decision making.

With respect to the first principle, a 1986 DFO policy established a long-term objective of a net gain in productive capacity of Canada's fish habitats. Proposed development projects were to be reviewed by DFO under the Fisheries Act to ensure no net loss. No net loss means that such projects are not to damage fish habitat or, if habitat loss is unavoidable, that habitat be created elsewhere to compensate.

Other wildlife species deserve just as much no net loss in productive habitat capacity as fish do. This should be a key principle underlying federal policy and law governing habitat conservation.

The second principle is called “conservation first”—it's a phrase that was coined by the former WWF Canada President Monte Hummel—which states that robust networks of protected areas need to “be established as anchor areas of high conservation value” before major resource development decisions are made, so that the resilience of ecosystems to stresses and uncertainties such as global climate change can be maximized.

Implementation of these principles demands good ecological science capacity within the federal government.

Canada has made significant commitments to conserving habitat, such as through the Conventions on Biological Diversity, on the Conservation of Migratory Species, and on Wetlands—the Ramsar convention—and through laws such as the Migratory Birds Convention Act, the Fisheries Act, the Species at Risk Act, and the Canada Wildlife Act, as well as in policies such as the DFO's no net loss policy.

Two recent commitments are of particular interest. First, in 2010 Canada agreed to the so-called Aichi targets to conserve, through protected areas, at least 17% of Canada's terrestrial inland waters and 10% of coastal and marine areas by 2020. The Aichi targets are included under the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 developed pursuant to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

According to the Canadian Council on Ecological Areas, in 2013 —as of this past February—the federal, provincial, and territorial governments now protect about 10% of Canada's land area and only about 0.88% of its marine territory. So there is a long way to go to achieve the 17% and 10% targets respectively.

● (0915)

The federal government is also responsible for managing other lands of vital conservation importance, most notably some 2.2 million acres of community pastures in prairie Canada. Through the visionary action taken by key agricultural leaders more than 75 years ago, public resources were applied to restore degraded grasslands to a state that yielded economic production and environmental benefits year after year.

The PFRA community pastures provide one of the best examples of a triple bottom-line enterprise in Canada. The 80 community pastures in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Manitoba comprise over 9,000 square kilometres, some of the largest unfragmented tracks of native grasslands found anywhere in North America. Not only do they contain critical habitat for numerous species at risk, such as the almost extinct iconic sage grass, but at the same time they also provide pasture for hundreds of thousands of head of cattle annually.

The recent announcement by the federal government to transfer the community pastures out of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration presents a unique challenge and opportunity to ensure that the best management practices developed through the PFRA continue to serve pasture patrons and protect one of our most imperilled habitats. The successful devolution of these native grasslands to the patrons and\or first nation interest for management purposes demonstrates a new and innovative way to manage for wildlife on the productive landscape.

The point is that the federal government has historically played a crucial role in conserving habitat by establishing national parks, national wildlife areas, migratory bird sanctuaries, national marine protected areas, and other management areas. Completion of these systems of protected areas by the federal government will be critical to achieving Canada's international commitments.

Non-profit groups such as my own, Nature Canada, can play important roles such as through public-private partnerships, but only the federal government and the provincial governments can achieve the big wins, such as expanding Nahanni National Park Reserve; creating new and important protected areas, such as the proposed Lancaster Sound National Marine Conservation Area; and ensuring the viability of some of the largest swaths of native grasslands to protect biodiversity.

Nature Canada has itself played an important role in habitat conservation. In 1996 we became the co-partner with Bird Studies Canada of the globally recognized important bird areas program. With BirdLife international partners in over a hundred countries, we're monitoring a worldwide network for the most important sites for birds and biodiversity on the planet.

We have identified nearly 600 IBAs across Canada's diverse landscapes, which represent nearly 3% of Canada's land area. Acting with regional conservation partners, we built an exhaustive important bird areas database, finalized almost a hundred site conservation plans, helped communities implement more than 150 local projects, and initiated a network of thousands of volunteers who conserve important bird areas.

In addition to conserving habitat by establishing protected areas, Nature Canada firmly believes that the national conservation plan could play a crucial role in reconnecting Canadians to nature. The 2011 Ipsos poll found that 80% of Canadians say they feel happy when connected to nature, and 85% worry that natural areas we enjoy today won't be there for their children or grandchildren. There's also abundant evidence that young people are increasingly disconnected from nature and habitat, and the term nature deficit disorder has been coined to describe this disconnection and its affliction.

The bottom line is that few people are aware of and/or engaged in nature. Once considered a core Canadian value, Canada's identity as a nature nation is at risk. Thus, Nature Canada believes an important objective of the national conservation plan should be to rebuild the nature nation by inspiring and motivating Canadians to put habitat back in nature.

In conclusion, Nature Canada makes a number of recommendations to this panel. The first is to include the principles of no net loss and conservation first as key habitat conservation principles.

Second is to continue efforts to complete Canada's system of national wildlife areas and national parks, and to provide sufficient funding and scientific research capacity to the Canadian Wildlife Service and Parks Canada to achieve these objectives.

Third is to accord greater habitat protection to important bird areas in Canada in support of on-the-ground partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, nature groups, first nation aboriginal communities, the private sector, and others.

● (0920)

Fourth is to focus on Canada's most threatened ecosystems, with special attention to our native grasslands, which provide habitat for a multitude of resident and shared species.

Under the national conservation plan and out of recognition for the foundational roles that grasslands have played in shaping Canada, the devolution of key native grasslands to the provincial governments of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba needs to be delayed until patrons and first nation groups can develop sustainable strategies to manage and conserve these large tracts of Canada's most valuable native grasslands.

Fifth is to provide adequate funding to our federal government agencies, including the Canadian Wildlife Service, Parks Canada, and DFO to clear up the backlog in the development of recovery strategies for species at risk, and to protect critical habitat for species at risk identified in recovery strategies.

Finally, we need to support programming to reconnect Canadians to nature, programming that recognizes nature as a core value; focuses on engaging Canadians where they are, namely in large urban areas; bridges the new Canadian divide; and works through partnerships and leverages the experiences and resources of the many diverse stakeholder groups across this land with the aim of re-establishing Canada as a nature nation.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davidson, and we welcome Mr. Hazell who's joined you as your conservation adviser.

Now we'll move to five rounds of seven-minute questions, and we'll begin with the government side.

Mr. Sopuck, you may go first.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Thank you very much, and good morning, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Davidson, the term “habitat” is an important one. As an owner of habitat on my own farm, I feel that habitat is a very dynamic concept. Habitat changes all the time, doesn't it? The implication is that by locking up a piece of land and leaving it alone, certain positive outcomes will happen. Would you agree that sound management of habitat is important in most cases to achieve environmental objectives?

Mr. Ian Davidson: I would agree that's part of the solution. Obviously, in the way we see the world there are many different ways that habitat can be conserved. I think I spoke a little to the fact that we believe strongly that the Canadian government has a mandate to conserve some of our protected areas, but that's only part of the solution. We believe strongly that a number of stakeholders across the landscape, both stakeholders like ourselves, but also private landowners, industry, and so forth, have an important role to engage in various ways of conserving habitat. We believe that bringing this all together provides a much better vehicle for the conservation of habitat throughout.

● (0925)

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Mr. Davidson, do you think that habitat can be changed through human activity from one state to another and still retain its conservation values?

Mr. Ian Davidson: I believe that conservation values would potentially change. For example, I take the case of the northern parts of Alberta where there's considerable development of oil and gas

The issue here is that a lot of the boreal forest in question is potentially being rolled back and there are indications that there is a re-restoration of this land, but we believe that in some cases like this, you can't really bring back habitat as it was before. So the restoration of the boreal forest that was there might not necessarily bring back the same values that were originally there.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Right, but again, if ecosystem function is important, and I'm convinced that it is, we can change land from one state to a second state and still retain ecosystem values.

Just for the record, the amount of boreal forest being affected by the oil sands development in Alberta compared to the amount of boreal forest right across the country is very small.

Again, in terms of the 600 square kilometres that have been affected by oil sands development, I would note that 10% of that has already been rejuvenated to perhaps a different habitat state, but it has been reclaimed, nevertheless.

Mr. Davidson, I was interested in your comments about fisheries and habitat. Again, when one looks at prairie reservoirs, for example, which greatly altered riverine habitats, creating lake habitats from what were river habitats, what happens when that occurs—and it has happened and continues to happen—is that the fish community just booms. So, again, with this notion of moving from one state to a second state, obviously, the creation of dams in prairie Canada has been tremendous for fish, hasn't it?

Mr. Stephen Hazell (Senior Conservation Adviser, Nature Canada): I wouldn't know. I would say that the no net loss policy is and has been an extremely important principle that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has applied, and the policy does indicate that, yes, if development is going to destroy fish habitat, then by all means let's.... Well, they basically have required until now that habitat be compensated for.

So that was a good idea to put pressure on developers so they can't just wipe out lakes under schedule 2 but have to do something else. That was a useful thing because, overall, as I think a number of the witnesses have said, we're losing habitat and for that reason we need to draw the line.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Mr. Wareham, we have had a number of success stories in the conservation field like the bald eagle, the white pelican, the peregrine falcon and, of course, the ubiquitous Canada geese. It is important to highlight the success stories as well isn't it, Mr. Wareham?

Mr. Bill Wareham: Yes, what we're seeing overall at a global level is that with the land development we are applying to agriculture, forestry, and other things, there is a transition to a different ecological state. Certain species thrive in that change, but the overall diversity is declining. So we might have an abundance of certain species that can thrive in the revised habitat type, but the overall diversity is gone, and in many cases we've lost species or whole suites of species in these areas.

I think we have to be careful not to highlight the abundance of individual species as an overall measure of conservation benefit: we should be looking at the diversity of species and the overall ecosystem function in maintaining that diversity.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Mr. Ugarenko, I really appreciated your highlighting the contributions of the anglers and hunters. Again, as I've said many times in this committee, the contributions of anglers and hunters to Canada's conservation work is always under-appreciated. These are the folks who step up and open up their wallets up and actually ask to spend their own money on conservation—and your organization is living proof of that.

What would your recommendations to government be, Mr. Ugarenko, regarding how to conserve habitat on the privately owned agricultural landscape?

Mr. Len Ugarenko: I think there are a number of really good programs that are in effect now. For example, in Manitoba through the Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation they sign easement agreements with the agricultural community. They do it in such a way that whether they're raising crops or animals, the economic productivity of the land goes up and they manage to maintain the habitat on their land going door to door. We fund the Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation. We do work with Mr. Davidson in Nature Canada on important bird areas; we fund those projects through Nature Canada. We do the same thing with Bird Studies Canada.

However, when you take a look at things like the Delta Waterfowl Foundation, they have what they call their ALUS plan, alternate land use strategy. They basically go in—and I've seen these farms—and work with the farmer to maintain the critical areas of habitat on their property and to manage whatever it is, livestock or crops, in such a way that it's not detrimental to the habitat they're trying to protect.

In Prince Edward Island and other places, Ducks Unlimited Canada has a program that we fund where they develop environmental farm plans. Again, in P.E.I. they're helping the dairy farmers keep the effluent out of the wetlands, to keep the cattle from getting hoof rot stepping into streams and into the wetlands, but at the same time maintaining wetland habitat, which is critical for migratory waterfowl and other birds.

So it can be done. There are enough examples out there on the landscape. It varies from province to province, and from product to product, and the area that people are going to be dealing with. I've worked with the Wildlife Habitat Council in the United States. They have an excellent program. It's creeping into Canada. They work with natural resource companies and waste disposal companies, where they actually develop wildlife plans on their property and rehabilitation plans if they're doing quarrying and they're going to abandon certain pieces of property afterwards.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ugarenko, our time is up.

Mr. Sopuck, thank you.

We're going to move to Madame Quach.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm going to share my time with Mr. Choquette.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today. I also want to thank Mr. Wareham for getting up so early this morning.

I'll just wait until all of our witnesses are able to hear the interpretation before I ask my question.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Quach, we'll start your time now.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

All of you, to some degree, mentioned tax benefits and adequate funding for government agencies so they can manage habitat protection programs effectively. Would you say that budget cuts, like the elimination of Parks Canada conservation officers, can have an impact on habitat conservation? If so, what can the government do to remedy the problem and to work towards meeting the targets agreed to under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity?

All of you talked about it to some degree. Knowing that climate change is a very present concern that will affect how we adapt, I'd like to know what steps you think the federal government should take?

[*English*]

The Chair: Is that directed to a specific witness, Madame Quach?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: All of them commented on it. Perhaps Mr. Wareham could answer that.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Wareham, do you want to respond to that question, please?

Mr. Bill Wareham: I'd be happy to address that question. Thank you very much.

The overarching frame, I think, is that we need to look at the natural habitat classifications we have across the country and make sure that we protect very significant components of those habitats. We know that climate change and the shift of climate regimes across habitat are going to change the composition of those areas and the species mix that perhaps use it. The base of habitat is the vegetation complex, the soil complexes, in these areas, and different species will use them over time. We have to accommodate the shift of species regimes across the landscape, and that is best done by maintaining that diversity of habitat.

As Bob Sopuck said, you can transition a habitat and it will serve some other function, but only to the degree that you have adjacent habitats that species can move to and accommodate their futures in under a different climate regime. It's really about taking a bolder step in protecting that representation of ecosystem classification types across the country.

● (0935)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: All of you mentioned that the government needed to impose stricter standards to help meet targets, including the Aichi targets.

Could you give us specific examples of such standards or best practices?

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Hazell.

Mr. Stephen Hazell: We have some concerns with respect to how some federally managed lands are being managed. For example, national wildlife areas, which are a tremendous resource, are often overlooked. Most Canadians have never even heard of them, but the Canadian Wildlife Service manages almost as much land as Parks Canada.

There are some concerns about how that land is managed. For example, Nature Canada was involved in a dispute and legal actions relating to the Suffield National Wildlife Area in Alberta. There was an application to do additional oil and gas development activity in the national wildlife area itself, on grasslands, which we've heard are threatened ecosystems.

I think we have to be much more careful about how we regulate activities on those federal lands. That's an important point. And to reinforce the point, in terms of cost-effective approaches to managing conserved lands such as national wildlife areas, the Canadian Wildlife Service operates on a shoestring budget. I mean, it's really shocking how little funds are available to manage the amount of land they have.

The Chair: Madame Quach.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You said that, unlike in the case of national parks, the protection of certain wildlife areas is limited to the surface of the land. That means, then, that these sanctuaries are not necessarily protected below the surface of the land.

What impact do activities have on migratory birds and other species in areas where the land is not protected?

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Hazell: I think your question related to the fact that in a number of protected areas the surface rights are protected but not subsurface rights, and that obviously is an issue. That was the issue in Suffield, the fact that the subsurface rights were proposed for development.

Let me step back a bit. We have to recognize that there's a range of protection. Obviously in the national parks and in the provincial ecological reserves you get a much higher level of protection, which is intended to protect the full ecological integrity of those areas. When you're talking about a managed landscape, the objectives are different. There are agricultural interests; there may be industrial interests. It's a different level of protection. I think, as Bill has mentioned, you have to have some areas for which the full ecological integrity of that place is protected so we can continue to have representative ecosystems protected across the country, whether they're Arctic ecosystems, boreal, grasslands, St. Lawrence lowland forests, or whatever.

The Chair: Madame Quach, do you want to share some of your time?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Yes. I am going to share my time with Mr. Choquette.

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Choquette, you have one minute.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm going to sum up what I took from your remarks in one minute. You talked about the importance of continuing to fight climate change, of taking action based on sound science and of having legislation that governs habitat conservation effectively. I also took away the importance of the no net loss policy.

Could you elaborate a bit more on that? I know we don't have much time, but I think it's very important.

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Hazell: As I mentioned, this no net loss policy was developed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in 1986, in parallel with some changes to the Fisheries Act that protected fish habitat. In the most recent omnibus budget bill, those changes have largely been undone. However, the changes to the Fisheries Act that have diminished protection for fish habitat have not yet been declared in force. I would suggest to the committee that if we're interested in the no net loss principle, then let's not declare those changes in force. It's a matter of government prerogative to do that. I'm familiar with one law, the Motor Vehicle Fuel Consumption Standards Act in the 1980s, which was never declared in force. It was ultimately repealed when the government brought forward some very important strengthening of fuel efficiency regulations a few years ago—this is the current government.

No net loss is an important principle that can be applied as much to wildlife habitat conservation as fish habitat conservation. It hasn't worked perfectly for DFO. The Auditor General has made some critical remarks about whether the DFO has achieved the goal of no net loss in conserving fish habitat production. But, nonetheless, I think it's a useful principle that could be applied to wildlife as well.

● (0940)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Choquette, and Mr. Hazell.

We'll move to Ms. Rempel.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for coming this morning, especially Mr. Davidson; we wish you the best with your family today.

Mr. Chair, I remind my colleagues on both sides of the table today that the scope of the study is terrestrial ecosystems. I won't call points of order, because I think that it's been studied in the DFO and we're both looking at this issue. That's just a reminder to my colleagues.

Mr. Wareham, in looking at best practices for habitat management, you spoke about the concept of overall ecosystem function. I'm quite interested in that, because some of our witnesses have spoken today about the development of recovery strategies through SARA, etc.

Could you speak about that concept, and whether there's a better way that the government can use that concept to both protect habitat and look at recovery strategies?

Mr. Bill Wareham: I'll provide a couple of examples. In the context of transforming habitats, there are limits to transformation. You get to the point where you no longer have the function. I'll use the example my being born and raised in Winnipeg, and growing up in Manitoba and the prairies. The transition I've seen there shocks me to some degree. You look at the elimination of quarter-section roads, hedgerows, wetlands, and even, in many cases, the rail lines. The quarter-section roads themselves have been transitioned into crop land that can be very extensive—you can have 10 sections of land in canola, and the accommodation for species in those areas is negligible. In that example you're not providing another habitat function there, so I think it's really important in looking at the larger-scale development areas. If you have these large development areas, then you subsequently need larger intact areas or areas that provide habitat for the species that live in that ecosystem.

Similarly with ancient forest areas on the west coast, these forests are thousands of years old. They do change; habitat changes, as Bob said, but it changes at a very slow pace over thousands of years. When we eliminate that forest on a large scale, over huge tracts of land, the species that lived in that old-growth forest habitat go away. They don't move somewhere: they're gone.

If we want to maintain species and abundance in ecosystem function at that scale, you need to be looking at the landscape-level impacts. You can have impacts at a very intense level in some places, but you need to accommodate that.

For example, in the Great Bear Rainforest conservation planning initiative I was involved with, we set targets for small-scale, landscape-scale, and regional-scale forest conservation. At the large scale the science demonstrated that you needed 70% of the old-growth forest intact to reduce the probability of losing species. At the finer scale you could go down to 30%, and at the site level you could log up to 80% of a particular site, but it had to scale up to maintain, as I said, that larger landscape level conservation function. Whether it's prairie wetlands and grasslands, whether it's forest or boreal forest or any other type of habitat, you need that scaled approach.

Does that answer your question?

● (0945)

Ms. Michelle Rempel: It does.

Perhaps to Mr. Davidson, and Len, if you would follow up on that question, have you ever encountered a situation where there have been competing demands in, let's say, overlapping recovery strategies, where we're perhaps not looking at the overall ecosystem in recovering one specific species over another?

Maybe as a follow-up to that question as well, how can the federal government better partner with provincial governments, given that there is some overlap of jurisdiction in these areas?

I open it up to each of you, bearing in mind that we probably have one minute each to answer that question.

Mr. Ian Davidson: I can answer that very quickly. We were just talking about this yesterday with respect to a number of prairie species. We were talking about sage grouse, which is a SARA-listed species, and swift fox. As you know, foxes tend to eat birds. In this case, on the landscape both species are considered endangered and there are recovery plans that aim to put them back onto the landscape. So we have to be very careful when we think about this and how we engage and how we look at multi-species reintroductions, if you will.

Mr. Len Ugarenko: I'll answer the second part of your question, if I may, in terms of provincial-federal work. Many of the provinces have developed their own species recovery plans and biodiversity plans. Then you can go down to the regional conservation organizations and the national ones, which also have their plans. If governments and these organizations could work more closely, you'd be eliminating a lot of duplication and expense, and also the overlapping and competing interests, as Ian pointed out.

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Are there specific examples of how we could improve that efficacy?

Mr. Len Ugarenko: There are. I could go into great detail for you. Many of the grant applications that we receive have federal and provincial governments, non-government conservation organizations, and local groups all partnered on a specific project. So it is going on; it's not well publicized. Each one of them is either putting money on the table or providing services as part of their work in the project.

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Perhaps—oh, sorry. Did you want to add to that?

Mr. Ian Davidson: As a specific example of this, going back to my comments, there is a sage grouse partnership that is being developed in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. It brings together ranchers, private landowners, government, and scientists, who are really trying to figure out how to do this. How do we put multi-species conservation issues on the landscape that are good for wildlife, good for habitat, and good for the people who live off that habitat?

Ms. Michelle Rempel: I find your comments quite fascinating because that's really the challenge that faces us as a federal government. How do we bring stakeholders together, given that there are, I wouldn't say, disparate but certainly separate policy frameworks on how to approach this issue at different levels of government?

Mr. Hazell, to close off, perhaps you could expand upon your colleagues' answers to that question. Are there specific examples of how we can better improve our policy framework to work with different levels of government in protecting habitat either through land use planning or whatever? Also, are there gaps right now in our federal policy as far as looking at an ecosystem approach rather than a per-species approach is concerned?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: My first comment is that right now there is actually quite good collaboration among the levels of government, and particularly with the not-for-profit organizations who are working on the ground on the landscape, the folks like Nature Conservancy of Canada and Wildlife Habitat Canada, etc. There is pretty good cooperation, but I have to say that we have pretty much lost one of the very best tools we had to ensure that we had a broader ecological focus, and that's the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act. One of the really interesting things that's happened in the Mackenzie gas project—

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Surely it's not lost.

Mr. Stephen Hazell: It is pretty much lost. After the act has come into force, we now have less than 1% of the environmental assessments taking place than before, but that's a separate argument.

I just want to say regarding the Mackenzie gas project that as part of that whole effort... and with this idea of conservation first, there was an effort made in the Northwest Territories Protected Areas Strategy—which is in place and is a total vision for the Northwest Territories of having protected areas that are linked, that would support solid habitat conservation across the landscape while potentially allowing this pipeline to be built.... So there was a huge effort made, and I point to World Wildlife Fund Canada, in particular, but also some groups like CPAWS Northwest Territories and DU, Ducks Unlimited, based in the DU group in Yellowknife. But a lot of that was driven through the environmental assessment process.

● (0950)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hazell. I'm going to have to discontinue there.

Thank you, Ms. Rempel.

Ms. Duncan.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

Mr. Davidson, our thoughts and prayers are with you.

We've heard today that we need both best management practices and government measures, so I'm going to focus on government measures.

I believe there is strong scientific consensus that the main reason for the loss of animal species is human-caused degradation of habitat, and the loss of areas where animals live, breed, raise their young and feed is the main cause of endangerment for over 80% of Canada's species at risk.

Mr. Davidson, could you comment on how disappearing animal and plant species threaten our valuable natural heritage as well as our economy?

Mr. Ian Davidson: Thank you very much.

I would go back to my earlier comments. We've been talking a lot about grasslands, and prairie grasslands in particular, and for the longest time there has been a range of species on the grassland landscape that shared that habitat with humans.

In recent years, particularly in the last couple of decades, we've seen a significant loss in a large number of species, in birds, mammals, reptiles and so on and so forth. Also for the longest time we've had human production, humans working on that landscape, particularly the ranching community. It's interesting how those evolved together over the last hundred years. In the ranching areas in southern Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, in particular, we still find quite a lot of biodiversity, with many of the threatened species holding on because on the productive landscape, ranching tends to mimic some of the conditions that were on that landscape many hundreds of years ago before the introduction of cattle and so on.

I go back to the devolution of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration lands, which we as an organization see as both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is that there is production happening on the landscape that favours many of these threatened species, but with the loss of that and the potential sell-off of those lands to private interests, we lose a real opportunity, I think, to show that on the Canadian landscape, particularly the grasslands, there is an opportunity where humans and wildlife can co-exist. Many of the threatened species that we worry about, particularly the SARA-listed ones, are going to struggle if we don't find ways of combining human and wildlife needs on that landscape.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Davidson, you mentioned SARA. I think that strong SARA legislation is needed to protect species and their habitats in provinces where there is essentially no legislation or only weak laws; to meet Canada's international obligations; to ensure the consistent recovery of species across jurisdictions; and to help maintain Canadian industries' social licence to operate.

Maybe Mr. Hazell would want to answer this. Could you comment on SARA?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: There are lots of issues with respect to implementing the Species at Risk Act. Our view is that the act does not need to be rewritten. The act itself is working well. It's really a question of implementing it.

There have been challenges, and I certainly know that the Canadian Wildlife Service and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans have struggled to meet their requirements for developing recovery strategies. But I think that could have been predicted. When you bring an act into force and you have hundreds of species at risk, it's going to take a while to figure out how to manage each of them.

Ian mentioned just one of the many implementation problems: what do you have when you have foxes and chickens on the landscape? That's an issue.

Our view is that it is not really a good use of the government's time and Parliament's time to reopen the legislation. It's working reasonably well.

I think that Bill Wareham's comments with respect to providing incentives to landowners regarding species at risk on their property need to be considered. There are provisions in the act to develop a regulation on compensation. The government hasn't yet brought forward any regulation. That may be worth a look. This is all speculative, but I think it's perhaps worth a look.

● (0955)

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you, Mr. Hazell. So that would be one of your recommendations, then.

Mr. Stephen Hazell: I wouldn't say we need a regulation on compensation. I'd say the committee might want to think about it.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you. I appreciate that.

The environment minister told the Canadian press last September that the government is looking to revamp SARA. The minister said the act can be more efficient and "more effective". In your opinion, does SARA need implementation or streamlining?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: In my view, it just needs to be implemented.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Thank you.

Has the government's implementation of the act been characterized by delays in developing recovery strategies, identifying critical habitat, and protecting areas once they have been recognized? Can you make recommendations specifically to the committee regarding these issues?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: I could, but, Bill, do you want to take it?

Mr. Bill Wareham: Sure, I'd be happy to do that.

The requirement for meeting timelines on recovery plans is really essential. We're seeing an ongoing delay and lag in performance on that front. We're also seeing a tendency towards not listing species that are recommended by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. That's a concern, because unless you have a fallback of provincial governments and other interests supporting recovery strategies and funding habitat conservation activities, these species, despite their threatened status, can get lost in the wake.

Either we need to commit to listing and implementing SARA or we need the government to accommodate and facilitate those collaborative activities between other governments in those jurisdictions to really work on recovering those species. I think we would not like to see a situation in which SARA is degraded to something that seems to be more efficient and can meet its targets but doesn't actually meet the species conservation and recovery objectives that we need.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Duncan.

We move now to Mr. Pilon. These are now five-minute rounds.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Pilon (Laval—Les Îles, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm not sure who is the best person to answer my question.

I am 54 years old. I live on an island. When I was young, there were a lot of wetlands. In the morning, when we would get up, we'd see turtles on our property. Thanks to urban development, those turtles are no more. I know it's too late.

I grew up on an island and I still live on one. From spring right through to fall, we would go to the beach. We would watch the migratory birds all along the beach. Forty years later, the beach remains, but the birds are gone.

Is there a way to protect that beach land and bring the birds back? Are they gone for good? Which of the three of you would best be able to answer that question?

[*English*]

Mr. Bill Wareham: It's Bill Wareham here. I could take a shot at that.

In regard to migratory birds particularly, this is where the government needs to play a large role in working with other jurisdictions at a national level. There are some initiatives like that, which are based on collaborations with Mexico and Central American governments and the U.S. government. Those places are facing similar challenges to what we are, in that the development priorities for agricultural lands and natural habitats are intense in many other areas as well, and there's a cumulative loss of habitat along their flyways. We might protect the habitat here in Canada, but if it's not protected in other critical areas throughout the flyway, we lose those species. It's important to protect the breeding grounds, the transition areas where these birds feed on migration routes, and also the wintering areas.

You need a broader scale plan. I think the federal government needs to play a more active role in engaging those other jurisdictions in active planning and priority setting around species that we see declining in the Canadian landscape.

● (1000)

The Chair: I think Mr. Ugarenko was wanting to respond as well.

Mr. Len Ugarenko: Bill answered most of the question, but having worked internationally, and quite literally, on beaches, for migratory shore birds and sea turtle nesting sites, they can be rehabilitated. It depends on the nature of the interaction and what's going on around them.

Your question was whether can this be turned around. Yes, it can. Boston, for example, put in legislation banning motor vehicles on beaches during the plover nesting season. Many of the resorts around the Caribbean shut their lights off at night. When a sea turtle hatches, there's a fine band of light between the ocean and the sky, and that baby sea turtle heads for that in the water. If there's a light behind it, it goes that way.

It can be done. It depends on the impact initially and how degraded the beach is. If it's not degraded, it's about how it can be rehabilitated and how the folks who are using the beach will cooperate in the rehabilitation effort.

Mr. Ian Davidson: To quickly build on what Bill and my colleague here have mentioned with respect to migratory species, as we look at the national conservation plan into the future and talk about habitat, we are part of a global network, and many of our wildlife species move between Canada and many other countries. I think it behooves us, as part of the NCP, to embrace other ways of conserving species. That means working in partnership with our friends to the south, and I mean right down to Argentina, because many of our birds move from here to Argentina on an annual basis.

Mr. Len Ugarenko: There's what's known as the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. It's literally a group of people, working from Arctic Canada right down to the southern tip of Argentina, who are developing sites for these migratory shorebirds.

The Chair: You have one minute left.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Pilon: Could you please explain to us the role that local and provincial naturalist clubs play in habitat conservation?

[*English*]

Mr. Ian Davidson: Absolutely.

As I mentioned, there are about 350 local naturalist groups across Canada. They're found in every urban centre, big and small. They are active volunteers who meet on a regular basis, and they're involved in many aspects of habitat and wildlife species conservation.

Tonight I'm supposed to go to the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club, which is a meeting of about 50 or 60 individuals who are knowledgeable of nature in and around the Ottawa environment. They engage people to talk about habitat conservation. They work with young people; they work with municipalities. These are really active people.

I think that's another aspect of the NCP that we need to think about, and that's how we engage the large volunteer network of naturalists and naturalist organizations across this country.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Pilon.

Mr. Woodworth, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to all of the witnesses for their time and attendance here today.

I will preface my remarks briefly by saying that in the last Parliament I was a member of this committee and we spent many meetings and listened to many witnesses in the study and review of the Species at Risk Act. I take very, very strong exception to the notion that the act does not need reform. In point of fact, the architecture of that act, the structure of it, often impedes the protection of species at risk—in my opinion anyway, having listened to all of those witnesses. But unfortunately, that's not the subject I want to deal with today.

I do want to ask Mr. Davidson about the concept you raised of no further net loss in habitat, which I haven't thought about very much before. First of all, I want to ask for a distinction, if it exists. Are you speaking only of critical habitat, or are you speaking of habitat generally?

Mr. Ian Davidson: I'm talking about habitat generally.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: All right. And are you speaking about the territory of Canada as a whole, or are you speaking of only subdivisions within it?

Mr. Ian Davidson: I'm talking about Canada as a whole.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Okay. I am thinking, for example, of a hydro-electric project on a waterway. It could be the case that it will destroy some fish habitat and that they will replace that elsewhere to compensate, but in doing so will destroy terrestrial habitat. So there would still be a net loss of habitat. Am I interpreting that correctly, or is there a flaw in my thinking?

● (1005)

Mr. Stephen Hazell: Perhaps I could take this. So far, in terms of how the Department of Fisheries and Oceans applies the no net loss policy—

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I'm not asking about the DFO. I'm saying that if we take the new principle that's being proposed, that there should be no net loss of habitat whatsoever, then moving a pond from its natural location to install it in a new location will result in the loss of terrestrial habitat. It seems to me that this would mean that development could not occur because no matter what we do, if we put a hydro-electric project in somewhere, it's going to displace natural habitat. If we're looking at the entire territory of Canada, there's no place for that habitat to go where it won't destroy other habitat. So what am I missing?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: I'm not sure we can immediately jump to the conclusion that there is going to be a net loss. I think what has to happen is that whatever government agency is involved.... And there is a problem constitutionally here, in that the federal government has responsibility for fish and the provinces, generally speaking, have most of the responsibility for wildlife conservation—

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: I'm only talking about loss of habitat, not jurisdiction.

Mr. Stephen Hazell: Yes, I know. I appreciate that. The idea is how you actually achieve it. I think we have to recognize that when you start into a negotiation and into discussions, if you had that principle of no net loss, you go into the discussions with the developer knowing this is basically what we're looking at, so how do we get there? It's amazing how clever the engineers can be.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Let me put it in a more personal way. I come from southern Ontario. I've traipsed around southern Ontario quite a bit and can tell you that there's not an inch of land in southern Ontario that is a lifeless desert. Every inch of the land in southern Ontario is a habitat for something, whether it's flora or fauna, insects, you name it. If I were able to dictate a policy of no net loss of habitat in southern Ontario, it would in effect freeze that existing habitat altogether, would it not?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: I don't see why it would. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans was able to fairly successfully implement its policy for over 20 years—

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: Yes, by destroying terrestrial habit and replacing it with marine habitat, or water habitat. But in southern Ontario, if I put a building up or a sidewalk up over a habitat, there's no place I can move that habitat without destroying some other habitat. There's going to be a net loss no matter what. I simply can't see how the notion of a no net loss in habitat can work.

I can see a no net loss in critical habitat, which is why I prefaced my remarks with that question, but no matter what I do in southern Ontario, any human development—short of going straight up—is going to result in a net loss of habitat, isn't it?

Mr. Bill Wareham: Perhaps I could speak to that.

The Chair: You've got 30 seconds.

Mr. Bill Wareham: The concept as it's best applied, in my view, is that you look at the scales of habitat from a natural to an unnatural...and I'll take the Fraser delta on the west coast as an example. We have a large area in the Fraser delta that is agricultural land; it's mixed with green space, remnant wetland habitats, shrublands and foreshore habitat. In the intensive agricultural land, it is used as habitat. It's used by migratory birds, it's used as staging grounds for raptors in the winter time, so you could say that's habitat. But in the context of putting up a large greenhouse over a hundred acres, which displaces that habitat, the option for no net loss is to enhance habitat in other areas. So you take that agricultural land and you revert it to a more natural state. We know that the natural grass habitat in the Fraser delta, which accommodates over-wintering owls and raptors from across western Canada, requires that intense grass habitat to produce the mice to feed the raptors. A potato field doesn't do that; it doesn't provide the same habitat. So you're looking at trading off qualities of habitat, and the no net loss principle is about maintaining a net opportunity for quality habitat.

I think that's the way to look at that, because not all habitat is created equal.

● (1010)

The Chair: Mr. Woodworth.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth: That's a step in the direction I was heading with the issue of critical habitat.

Thank you.

The Chair: I think we've exhausted that one.

Linda Duncan.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First, I'd like to start off by thanking all three organizations for the incredible work you've done on behalf of Canadians for many decades. I hope you're able to continue to do that.

I'd like to thank Mr. Davidson for raising the issue of the shutdown of the PFRA. That was a unique, cooperative effort among federal, provincial and local governments, first nations, and most of all, farmers. I know there's been a huge outcry about that because so little of the native grasslands are left in the world. We're fortunate in Canada that we've had some of them. I know that there's grave concern that by doing that, those areas will be severely threatened.

Second, we have the Mackenzie River Basin agreement. Historically, in Canada, both Liberal and Conservative governments have put in place very useful mechanisms for cooperation such as the Mackenzie River Basin agreement between first nations, both levels of governments, and scientists. Yet there has not been one stitch of work there given the potential, and now documented, impact of the oil sands on the whole basin.

The third one, as many of you have mentioned, is SARA. Regrettably, many grassroots organizations have had to shift from doing their important work on the ground to taking the federal government to court for its refusal to obey the simple timelines to deliver on critical habitat.

Could you respond to this question: do you think the direction that we're going in the country is a result of a lack of political will, or do you think there is simply a dearth of resources to move forward? Or do you think that the increasing lack of respect for science is more important? What is the main reason that we seem to be going in a direction of not delivering on the critical mechanisms that were put in place by previous governments?

The Chair: Who wants to respond to that?

Were you directing it to a particular witness?

Ms. Linda Duncan: It's to anybody who would like to respond to that.

Mr. Bill Wareham: I'd like to take a shot at that.

At a social-psychological level here in Canada there's an air of fear that somehow we won't maintain our economic wealth, prosperity, and activity in the country if we protect too much land, in that it will reduce the opportunity for industry to move across the landscape as it needs to. It's a false fear because as we have heard many times—and it's in much of the literature—we have the ability to find the balance between development, conservation, and maintaining the environmental quality of our air and water. Remarkably, we continue not to do that, which I believe is out of that need to try to maintain maximum economic opportunity in the short term. Unless that lens changes and we really accept that we can be okay and can invest in a longer-term future with longer-term strategies, then we'll continue to lose this habitat in the face of that short-term economic priority. It's really about putting more emphasis on the long-term benefits of that habitat conservation. That needs to be profiled and sold more to the public, to industry, and across the country.

Ms. Linda Duncan: The last question that was put to you was what type of stakeholders are involved in habitat conservation and how does it count for the total efforts in Canada.

More than 30 years ago there was the formation of the Canadian Environmental Network, which, to their credit, past governments had continued to support. That was important because in spite of the incredible work that the national-based organizations do, a huge load of the work has been done by local organizations on the ground, watch-dogging what's going on and doing cleanups, and so forth.

Do you think that the restoration of the federal funding for the Canadian Environmental Network could actually result in more constructive and informed input by local communities into federal decision-making on conservation of wildlife habitat?

Mr. Ian Davidson: It's interesting because we at Nature Canada are looking at a new strategy for the coming five to ten years, but when we look across the landscape what we don't see is this coming together of the naturalist organizations involved in various aspects of environment and nature conservation. In my humble opinion there is a need for something like the CEN. It did provide a valuable service to Canadians. It was a place where people could talk about those seminal issues in environment and nature conservation.

● (1015)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Ms. Duncan.

Committee members, in the orders of the day, we've indicated that the next half hour will be for in camera committee business. From what I can see, there's not a lot of committee business to take care of, and given the interest in this topic, I'm suggesting that we move it to 10:30, which will allow for three more questioners. Is there general agreement with that? Okay.

So we're going to move then to Mr. Lunney.

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

I thank each of the participants for bringing important information to us today and for your long years of experience in conservation matters.

Mr. Ugarenko, regarding your remarks on behalf of Wildlife Habitat Canada, as Bob mentioned earlier, you gave credit to the fact that the original stakeholders who founded conservation movements and paid for the bulk of the habitat conservation were the anglers and hunters. I do appreciate that being underscored, because I think often it's lost in the debate.

I want to pick up on where Mr. Pilon was at with the question of beaches and migratory birds, but will take it to the west coast context where I am from. We have the great Brant goose migration returning along the coast there. We have shallow beaches on the east coast of Vancouver Island. I think it's been 14 or 15 years now that we've had a Brant goose celebration. With the public engagement in this, we wore out the volunteers for a couple of years, but it's really gone through revitalization. Everybody knows that there are no dogs allowed on the beach during the Brant migration. We don't want to disturb the birds while they're feeding; we know how important that is. They have art shows and carving shows. We have the Vancouver Island University engaged, and BC Nature is there. We're doing herring spawn tours, looking at the birds that are out there feeding on the herring spawn, and then the ones that come 10 or 12 days later to feed on the young herring fry—I mean the newly hatched, if we want to call them that. It's quite an amazing event on the coast, and the public is really engaged at every level.

I wanted to underscore how important it is for all of us to engage people at the grassroots level. I think that was said by Mr. Davidson—and I want to echo Michelle's remarks here, in that we thank you for being here when you going through a significant family issue this morning.

But you mentioned also that you were going to speak to a naturalist group here in the Ottawa Valley. I wanted to say how important this grassroots engagement is, and I want to throw that back to you and ask if it's not important for everybody—for the government and our large organizations—to engage people at the grassroots level, and how can we encourage people at that level to do more?

Mr. Len Ugarenko: That's an excellent question. Wildlife Habitat Canada has actually been funding the Brant goose festival for a number of years, and we've watched the number of participants increase. Our funding from Environment Canada is restricted under the contribution agreement we get. Of the money we get, 95% has to go to North American waterfowl management projects, and the focus is supposed to be on wetlands and waterfowl.

What we've done since I've arrived at Wildlife Habitat Canada is to put in a grant category of networking. It's a blanket kind of category where small and large groups such as the Brant festival that you have out there in B.C., such as the cows and fish folk in Alberta, and other groups that don't have a lot of cash can apply for a grant.... They don't have to put money in; they put in-kind activities in. It engages the community, and we've been tracking for the past few years the number of people who are involved in these kinds of community projects, and they're increasing. As the word is spreading, these groups are realizing that Wildlife Habitat Canada can assist them with the activities that are going on.

We fund—or did fund, for a time—the important bird areas work that Ian's conservation organization was doing, specifically with community works in important bird areas. We're seeing more and more individuals coming and setting up waterfowl heritage days for young kids. They're teaching them for a week. There's a marsh watch program down in Port Rowan. The kids are out there and they're learning about hunting, fishing, biodiversity, and interactions. It started with about 50 students, and they're close to 500 now. We encourage that. I think that's the way the message is going to spread.

● (1020)

Mr. James Lunney: Thank you very much.

How much time is left?

The Chair: About 20 seconds.

Mr. James Lunney: Oh boy.

Mr. James Lunney: I had another direction I wanted to take it, but I think I'll let it go.

Mr. Ian Davidson: To reiterate a point that I made earlier, I think it's really critical to engage the non-traditional people in the business of habitat conservation, or conservation in general. We need to get out there and engage our youth. We also need to be engaging new Canadians, and, obviously, first nations and aboriginal communities, in this. They are the first naturalists after all, right?

The Chair: Madame Quach.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to pick up on what Mr. Davidson just said.

You mentioned engaging young people, first nations communities and so forth. In my riding, we have the Réserve nationale de faune du lac Saint-François, a national wildlife area. More money is being sought from the federal government to raise awareness among the residents there, and members of the Akwesasne Mohawk reserve, which is nearby. Both of those organizations, including the people of Akwesasne, want to put on more activities involving the public. The goal is to bring in more tourists and to raise more awareness around conservation by establishing non-motorized activities given the proximity to the water.

Mr. Hazell, you talked a lot about tools we no longer have and tools the government should acquire to conserve more habitats and meet the Aichi targets we aren't meeting now.

In your view, what should the government add to its toolbox, as far as standards and partnerships go, to achieve a better habitat conservation rate?

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Hazell: I think the best tool the federal government has is to provide a little bit of money. A little bit of money goes an awfully long way when you're talking about the naturalists' communities or the angler and hunter communities. They don't need much money to do an incredible amount of work. In some cases, I think Nature Canada gives $50 or $100 to a naturalist and this motivates a great group to do good conservation work such as monitoring piping plover habitat on beaches so we don't have ATVs zooming back and forth during the breeding season.

So small amounts of money can do an awful lot of good. There are lots of good ways in which the federal government has been involved in a number of programs, and Len has talked about a few of them. I think that's the key because it's hard for the federal government to engage at a local level in a particular conservation issue, or a beach, or whatever it might happen to be. That is one way, and by working through the not-for-profit community, if you're looking for bang for your buck, that is a good way to go.

We've also said that Parks Canada and the Canadian Wildlife Service have got very important roles because they manage huge amounts of land, but I think that working with the local not-for-profit organizations and providing a little bit of funding can go a long way.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Thank you.

Mr. Wareham, you mentioned a federal strategy to achieve the targets agreed to under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. The environment commissioner's last report shows that measures were not put in place.

What does your strategy include to meet those targets? Is it a matter of more expert consultation, among other things? Or is there another approach?

[*English*]

Mr. Bill Wareham: No, I think one of the key elements is engaging the broad suite of people who need to be involved in the realization of those conservation goals, including provincial governments, non-governmental organizations of many different stripes and different interests, and in some cases municipal and regional district governments as well. On the convening power and function of the federal government, that's where I agree with Stephen that a little money can go a long way.

A strategy that is hanging off a vision, a publicly stated vision and commitment to meet those targets, can go a long way. Then it's about having the federal government finance and engage their agencies in convening those broad groups of people who will, in the end, be needed to realize it. First nations, provincial governments, and federal governments often have to agree in a trilateral way to protect a certain area. When the dialogue isn't there, when there is no vision and no objective and the dialogue doesn't happen, we're stalled. That's where it is right now. We are stalled in so many places when there's creative energy, good science, good will, and good information on the table about what needs to be done. It's just not moving, so I think the federal government needs to take that leadership role, paint the vision, invest in convening those dialogues, and commit to the broad stakeholder engagement that will realize those lasting outcomes. Without that—and I've been working on the marine environment similarly, or on freshwater conservation issues where we have lost that convening opportunity—it really halts progress.

● (1025)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wareham and Madame Quach.

Our last questioner will be Mr. Storseth, please.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming forward today.

Mr. Davidson, you mentioned the northern boreal caribou, predominantly affected in northeast Alberta, in my part of the country.

As Mr. Wareham was just saying, having four different levels of government agree to priorities can be somewhat cumbersome. Which level of government would you recommend be the one to engage on this? Would it be the feds, the province, or...?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: In Alberta, the Alberta government has the primary responsibility for managing woodland caribou. For the provinces, that's their thing. It's complicated by the Species at Risk Act and the fact that the woodland caribou, such as the caribou in northeastern Alberta, is a listed species under SARA. The federal government does get involved to the extent that it develops recovery strategies and that sort of thing.

So there has to be a bit of a dialogue, but the provincial government really is the on-the-ground manager. The Energy Resources Conservation Board regulates oil and gas activity, and that's really what is affecting woodland caribou the most. It's the fragmentation of habitat from the incredible number of survey lines and pipelines.

Mr. Brian Storseth: That's where I'd like to go next. So then it's the survey lines, it's the traffic, it's the noise: those are some of the concerns you would have with the woodland caribou in northeastern Alberta and the interruption of their breeding grounds. Those are the concerns you have?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: As I understand it, that's the fundamental concern, because woodland caribou is very sensitive to these linear developments for all sorts of reasons. They're corridors for predators, etc., I think primarily, but also, woodland caribou don't like to cross roads.

Mr. Brian Storseth: What about the 2,000-pound bombs and the supersonic jets that have been flying over that area for 50-plus years? Is that not having an impact on their breeding grounds?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: I hadn't heard that. I can't comment on that.

Mr. Brian Storseth: It is the largest air weapons range in the world, that area.

● (1030)

Mr. Stephen Hazell: Is this around Cold Lake you're talking about? I'm not familiar with the—

Mr. Brian Storseth: It's Primrose Lake and all that area in northeast Alberta.

The other question I would have, then, is in regard to first nations and your no net loss policy. One of the big things that's happening in that part of Alberta is that first nation communities are actually developing a lot of the natural resources with their own companies and businesses.

If we're not going to have any loss of habitat, would you suggest that first nations should not be allowed to do this, or should be responsible to offset any development they have by creating rehabilitating somewhere else?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: If we're interested in having no net loss as a principle—and it is a principle, not a law—as part of the vision that Bill articulated, you have to have some sort of vision of where you're going or else you're not going to get there. I think it's clear that globally we can't go on the way we've been going.

I think that's the fundamental problem we have in this context, that there's a sense among many people in Canadian society, and perhaps in the government, that we can continue to do the things we've done before, that we can continue to increase the development of our fossil fuel industries, that we can continue to expand our cities, that we can do things as we have done them before. But from an ecological perspective, I think it's clear, given climate change science and the loss of biodiversity globally, that we can't keep on doing things the way we've been doing them.

So there's a real dilemma there.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Hazell, you're a better politician than I am—

Mr. Stephen Hazell: I doubt that very much.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Brian Storseth: —because the question was this: should we prohibit first nations from developing their land when it comes to oil and gas development, or should we, according to your no net loss policy, force them to rehabilitate somewhere off their reserve if they're going to be developing their land?

Mr. Stephen Hazell: I think we have the same rules for them as we have for everybody else, whatever those rules are. I was suggesting that if it's a principle, it's not necessarily a law.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Mr. Wareham, you had some interesting comments regarding the elimination of habitat on farm or private lands. You gave some great examples from your boyhood in Manitoba. You also mentioned tighter regulations for private landowners.

What would those regulations be? Can you give us an example of some of those tighter regulations you would impose?

Mr. Bill Wareham: As an example, you can regulate the riparian habitat conservation on waterways within private lands, or you can regulate against draining of wetlands—those kinds of things. So it's zoning and habitat conservation measures that—

Mr. Brian Storseth: Sorry, but we're running short on time. I just want to get one last one in, then I'll let you finish.

So in regard to beaver dams—

The Chair: Actually, you're out of time, Mr. Storseth. We're out of time, so we're going to have to discontinue that.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today. I especially want to thank Mr. Davidson for being here under very difficult circumstances. I want to assure you of our thoughts and prayers for you and your family.

At this point we're going to declare a two-minute recess to allow our witnesses to leave. Then we have a short in camera session to deal with committee business.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]