

Wildlife presentation to the working group for the Regional Assessment in the Ring of Fire Area

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The David Suzuki Foundation



FREE
REPORT

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CARIBOU NATION

Coast to Coast to Coast ... And Beyond Border



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Figure 1. Ontario's Boreal Caribou Ranges.

Boreal woodland caribou

- Boreal woodland caribou are assessed as “threatened” with extinction across Canada under the federal Species at Risk Act (the “SARA”).
- For species at risk in Canada, the driver of decline is habitat loss and fragmentation.
- Still, it’s often hard to know: how much habitat loss/fragmentation is too much?

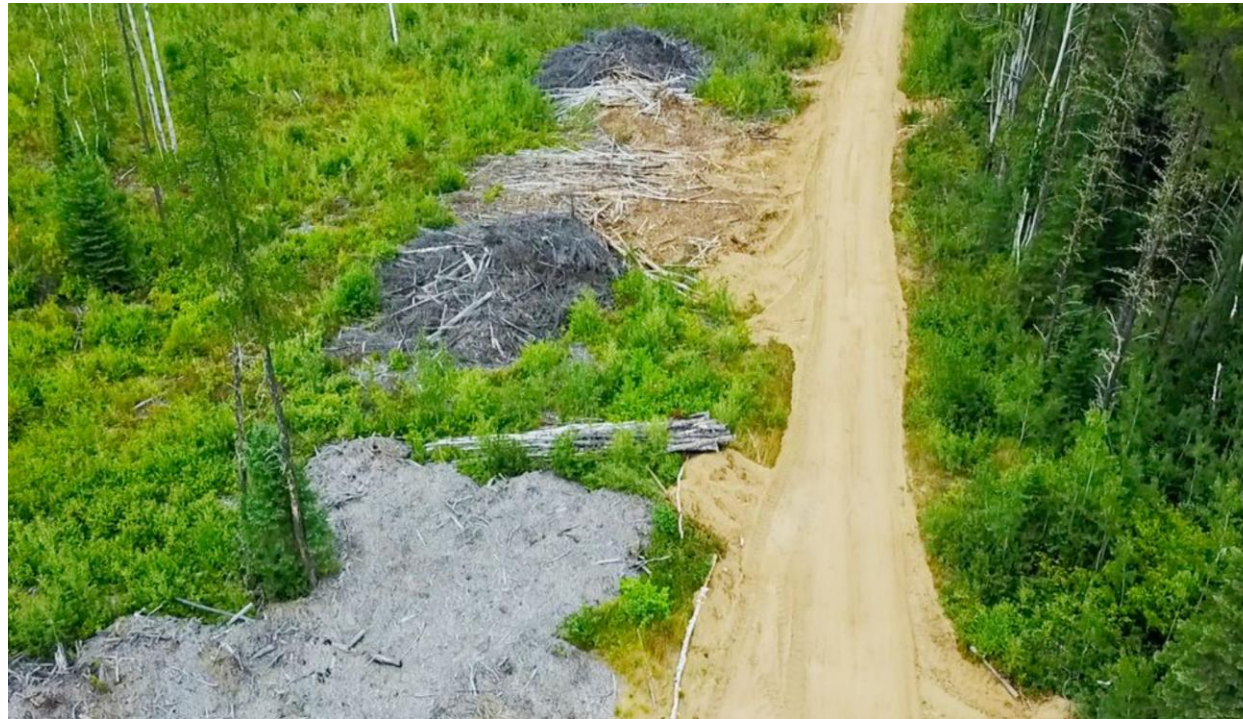


Photo credit: Trevor Hesselink, Wildlands League

Table 3. Threat assessment table for boreal caribou.

Threat	Level of Concern ¹	Extent	Occurrence	Frequency	Severity ²	Causal Certainty ³
Habitat Alteration (Disturbance)						
Habitat alteration (loss, degradation or fragmentation) as a result of human land-use activities	High	Widespread across Canada	Current	Continuous	High	High
Habitat alteration (loss, degradation or fragmentation) as a result of forest fire	Medium	Widespread across Canada	Current	Recurrent	Moderate	High



Scientific Review
for the Identification of
Critical Habitat for Woodland Caribou
(Rangifer tarandus caribou), Boreal Population, in Canada



Members of the Science Advisory Group:

Dr. Fiona Schmiegelow (Chair), Dr. Stan Boutin, Dr. Carlos Carroll, Dr. Réhaume Courtois, Dr. Vince Crichton, Dr. Marie-Josée Fortin, Dr. Mark Hebblewhite, Mr. Dave Hervieux, Mr. John Nagy, Dr. Tom Nudds, Dr. Richard Pither, Mr. Gerry Racey, Dr. Justina Ray, Dr. Jim Schaefer, Dr. Isabelle Schmelzer, Dr. Dale Seip, Dr. Don Thomas, Mr. Tim Trottier.

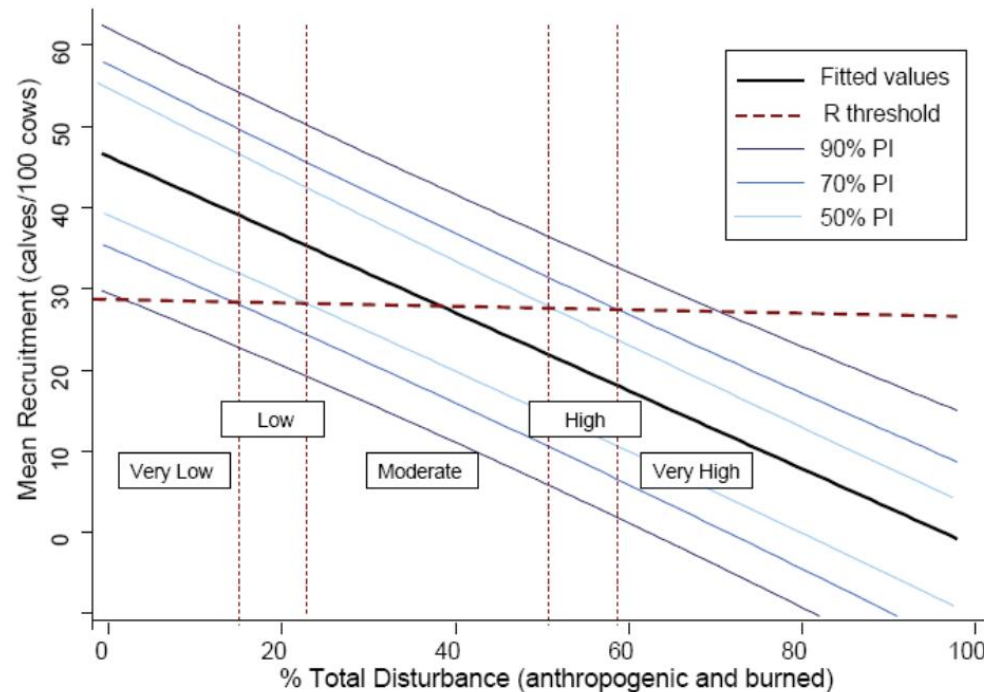


Figure 8. Disturbance states derived from the prediction intervals (PI) for the relationship between total range disturbance and boreal caribou recruitment, based on a recruitment threshold of 28.9 calves/100 cows (15% calves in total population).

Species at Risk Act
Recovery Strategy Series

Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*), Boreal population, in Canada

Woodland Caribou, Boreal population



2012

Canada



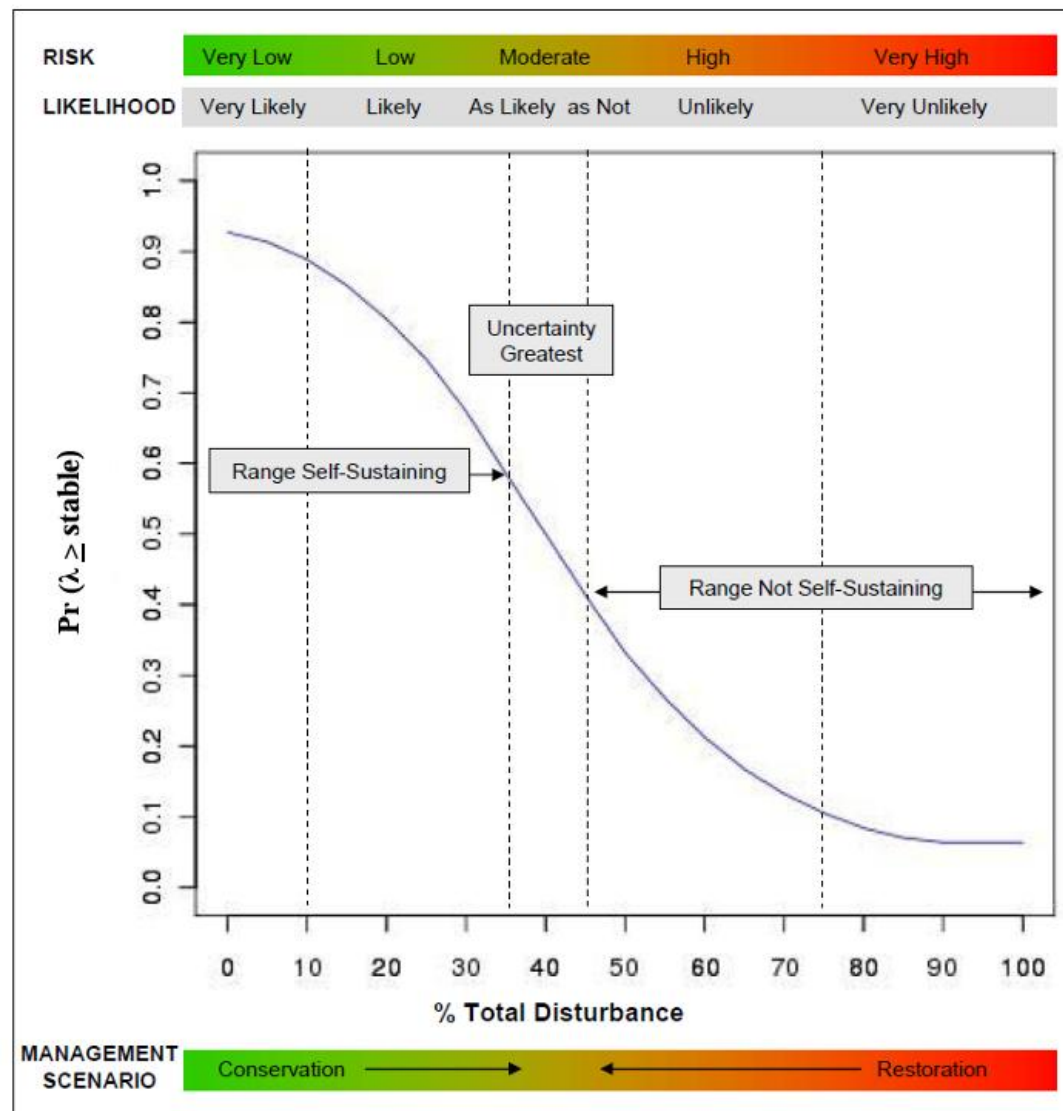


Figure E-1. Disturbance management thresholds: The probability of observing stable or positive growth ($\lambda \geq \text{stable}$) of boreal caribou local populations over a 20-year period at varying levels of total range disturbance (fires ≤ 40 years + anthropogenic disturbances buffered by 500 m). Certainty of outcome, ecological risk, and management scenarios are illustrated along a continuum of conditions.

Caribou critical habitat/range plans

In the absence of strong evidence to support lowering the undisturbed habitat threshold below 65%, the amount of critical habitat for all ranges is at least 65% undisturbed habitat. For management purposes, the amount of critical habitat may need to be maintained or restored, depending on the level of disturbance in a range.

- In ranges with less than 65% undisturbed habitat, initially, critical habitat is the existing habitat that over time would contribute to the attainment of 65% undisturbed habitat.
- In ranges with 65% or more undisturbed habitat, critical habitat is at least 65% undisturbed habitat in a range.
- The habitat that is included in the 65% undisturbed habitat will change over time given the dynamic nature of the boreal forest.

ii) biophysical attributes required by boreal caribou to carry out life processes.

Amended Recovery Strategy for the Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*), Boreal Population, in Canada

Woodland Caribou, Boreal population



2020



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada

Canada



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2020 Recovery Strategy edit

Critical habitat was not identified in the Boreal Shield range (SK1) in the 2012 Recovery Strategy due to a lack of data on population size and trend, and the uniqueness of the disturbance regime (i.e. high fire and very low anthropogenic disturbance). As required under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA), a schedule of studies was developed to identify critical habitat in SK1. That schedule of studies for SK1 is now complete.

Critical habitat for boreal caribou is identified as: i) the area within the boundary of each boreal caribou range that provides an overall ecological condition that will allow for an ongoing recruitment and retirement cycle of habitat, which maintains a perpetual state of a minimum of 65% of the area as undisturbed habitat in all ranges other than SK1, and a minimum of 40% undisturbed habitat in SK1; and ii) biophysical attributes required by boreal caribou to carry out life processes.

Impact of roads

- Alter predator prey dynamics by increasing sight lines
- Serve as gateways for more roads



Photo Credit: Trevor Hesselink, Wildlands League

Reporting on disturbance in caribou ranges

Source:

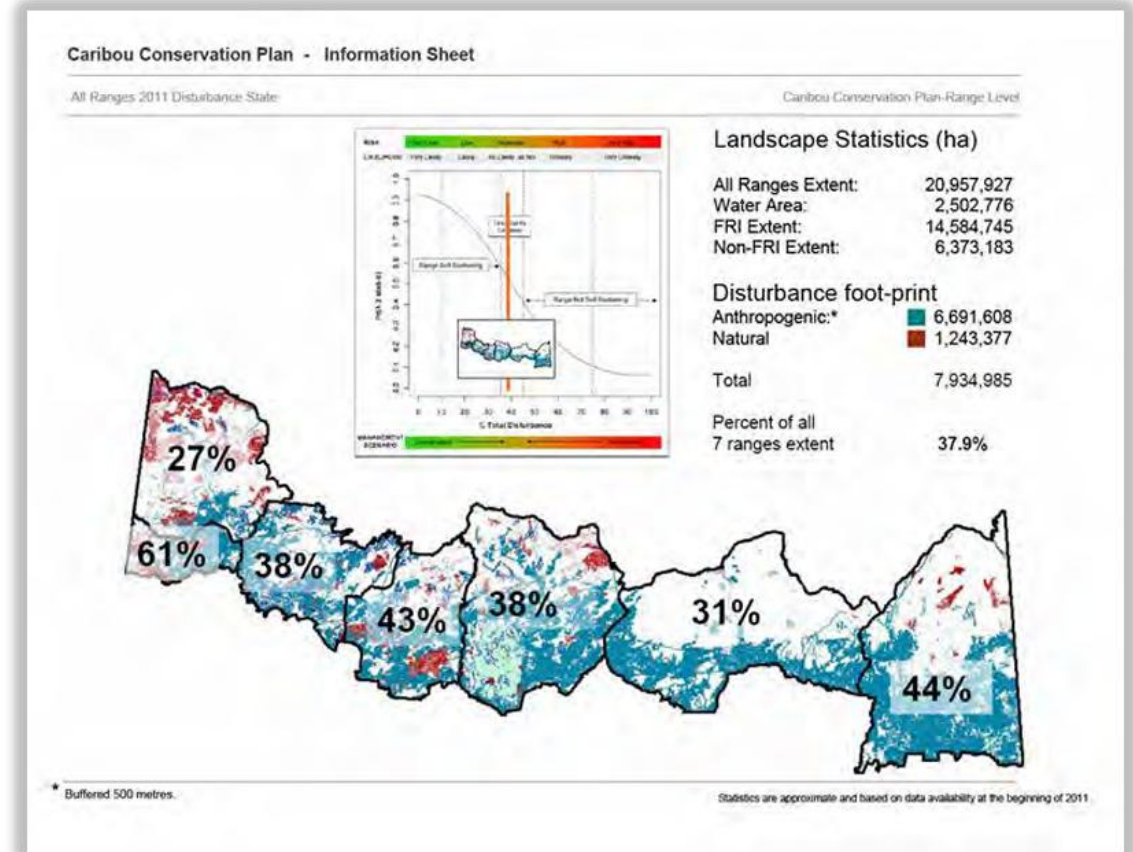


Figure 7 2011-2012 disturbance footprints in each of Ontario's seven ranges.

State of Caribou Ranges

Cumulative Impacts Monitoring 2018 Estimates

Disturbance Models and Simulated Ranges of Natural Variation

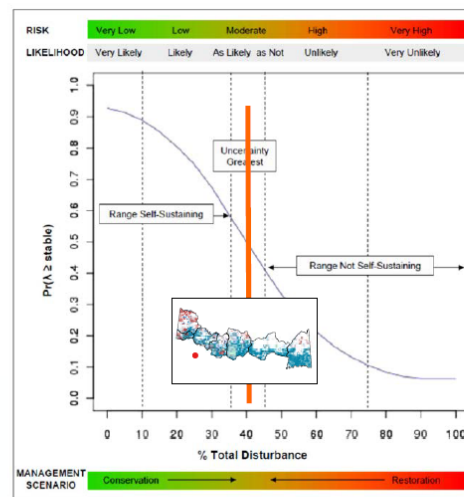
Phil Elkie and Kevin Green



State of Caribou Range - Information Sheet

Southern Ranges 2017 Disturbance State

2017



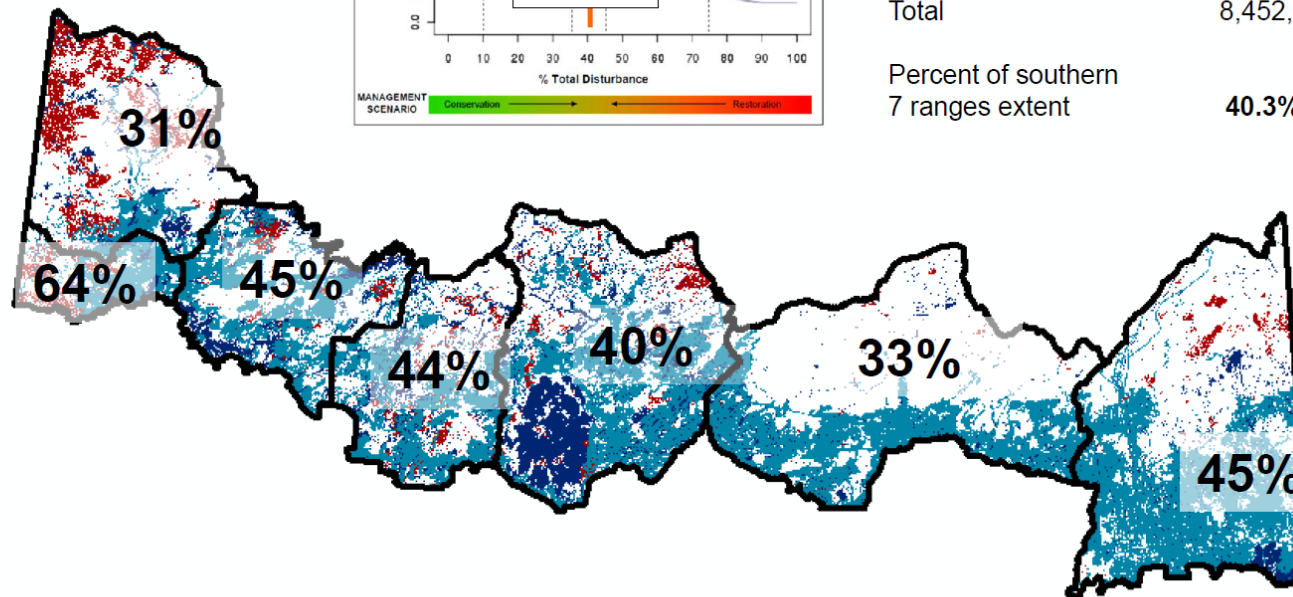
Landscape Statistics (ha)

Southern Ranges Extent: 20,957,927
 Water Area: 2,502,776
 FRI Extent: 14,584,745
 Non-FRI Extent: 6,373,183

Range disturbance indicator

Anthropogenic:* 7,300,814
 Natural 1,151,810
 Total 8,452,624

Percent of southern
 7 ranges extent 40.3%



* Buffered 500 metres.

Statistics are approximate and may contain estimates from forest management planning annual work schedules.

Policy/regulatory/legal wildlife protection tools

- ESA brought into force 2007, immediate forestry exemptions granted
- Permanent exemption for forestry from prohibitions under the ESA included in an Omnibus budget bill titled Protect, Support and Recover from COVID-19 Act (Budget Measures), which passed in 2020.
- In 2021, Minister of Environment Johnathan Wilkinson assessed that ON was not effectively protecting caribou habitat, recommended Cabinet to invoke a safety net order. Cabinet decided to grant the province more time to develop effective regulatory measures

cont'd

- In 2023, Minister of Environment Stephen Guilbeault again assessed that ON was failing to effectively protect caribou habitat
- A 2024 expert review of Ontario's progress under the Conservation Agreement concluded that "Experts were not provided clarity as to how the various provincial policies and regulations work together to inform caribou management and recovery and how it is intended to be implemented."
- This year, ESA replaced by Species Conservation Act. Definition of habitat significantly reduced.
- 2026 critical mineral "strategy" is more a give-away

Most recent data

“The 2023 aerial survey is limited in its ability to provide comprehensive understanding of distribution patterns because it includes information from one point in time and greater survey coverage in areas of the range where caribou are more likely to occur.”

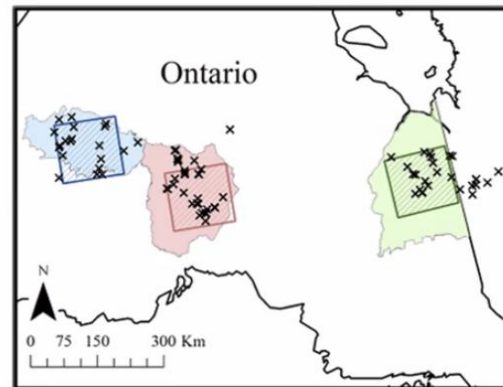
Ontario Boreal Caribou Monitoring Program 2023 Aerial Survey Results

May 2024
Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks



Some Good News (SGN)

Linear feature densities remain relatively low; caribou calf survival seems unrelated to linear feature density.

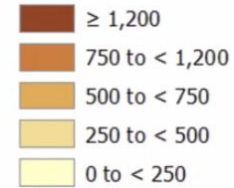


0.05km/km² (Pickle Lake)
0.42km/km² (Nakina)
0.31km/km² (Cochrane)

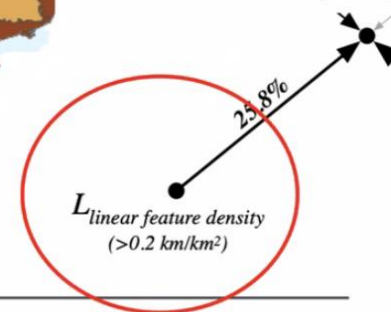


Linear feature density

Metres per square kilometre



Recall Wilson (2025):



Walker et al (2021), Journal of Wildlife Management

Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) Boreal population: Report on the progress of the recovery strategy implementation (period 2017 to 2022) and the action plan implementation (period 2018 to 2023)

Official title: Report on the Progress of the Recovery Strategy Implementation (Period 2017 - 2022) and the Action Plan Implementation (Period 2018 - 2023) for Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), Boreal Population, in Canada

Species at Risk Act

Recovery Strategy Report Series

2024

Key Components as Outlined in Range Plan Guidance: Managing 65% undisturbed habitat

Does not set a goal to maintain or achieve an explicit, range-scale minimum threshold of undisturbed habitat;

*IRAR: integrated range assessment report

Key Components as Outlined in Range Plan Guidance: Legally binding instruments and conservation measures

The Range Management Policy is intended to align with the *Endangered Species Act* and mentions some of Ontario's other legal tools that support implementation of the Range Management Approach, such as the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act*

Key Components as Outlined in Range Plan Guidance: Monitoring and reporting on habitat and population condition

The Range Management Policy identifies the use of IRARs to evaluate implementation success by monitoring caribou population and habitat states, but does not commit to timelines for completing them;

Ontario has not published updated IRARs since their initial release in 2014



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What's needed

- Cumulative impact lens
- Incorporation of disturbance threshold into regulations, policies
- Transparent reporting on disturbance levels, methodology for determining them
- Identification of priority areas for restoration
- Road decommissioning plans
- Mitigation hierarchy adoption
- Incorporation of FPIC into policies

Thank you

