



WERAC

*Wilderness and Ecological
Reserves Advisory Council*

Advising government on the creation and management
of wilderness and ecological reserves

Annual Report 2020-2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Message from the Chair.....1

Overview.....2

Highlights and Partnerships.....3

Report on Performance.....5

Opportunities and Challenges8

Financial Information.....9

Appendix A.....10

Appendix B.....12

Appendix C.....13

Message from the Chair

The Honourable Bernard Davis
Department of Environment and Climate Change
P.O. Box 8700
St. John's, NL
A1B 4J6

Dear Minister Davis:

As Chair for the Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Council (WERAC), I am pleased to submit the Annual Performance Report for WERAC for April 1, 2020 to March 31, 2021. This report meets the requirements of the **Transparency and Accountability Act** for a Category 3 entity.

Under the authority of the **Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Act**, WERAC advises government on the establishment, management and termination of wilderness and ecological reserves within the province. WERAC is committed to examining areas of the province for reserve designation and to ensuring that all public and private interests are considered when reserves are being planned and established. WERAC made progress towards its annual objectives as outlined in the WERAC Activity Plan of 2020-2023. WERAC's activities are in support of efforts to make progress on protecting biodiversity, mitigating climate change, and in support of healthy environments and living, and improved tourism travel experiences.

I acknowledge WERAC members' dedication to the protection of our province's natural heritage, as well as their extremely generous commitment of volunteer time. Furthermore, WERAC thanks the staff of the Natural Areas Program for their support and guidance. We are excited about the opportunities of the coming year to advance the system of protected areas in our beautiful province. As the Chair, and on behalf of WERAC, I accept accountability for the preparation of this report and the achievement of its objectives. My signature on behalf of WERAC signifies WERAC's accountability for the reported results of its activities for 2020-2021.



Graham Wood, Chair

Overview

The Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Council (WERAC) advises Government through the Minister of Environment and Climate Change on wilderness and ecological reserves in the province. The **Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Act**, 1980, under Section 7, establishes and mandates an Advisory Council (WERAC), to advise the Lieutenant-Governor in Council (through the responsible Minister) on the establishment, management and termination of wilderness and ecological reserves.

WERAC, with support from the Department of Environment and Climate Change's (ECC) Natural Areas Program staff, works to ensure that all public and private interests are considered when reserves are being planned and established. Local public consultations are required as part of the establishment process, as outlined in section 16 of the **Act**. WERAC then makes its recommendation to Government with the Lieutenant-Governor in Council making the final decision. Conducting public consultations regarding the establishment of wilderness and ecological reserves, and advising government on the development and management of a system of properly designed and legally designated protected areas are two of the key ways WERAC works to ensure the preservation of Newfoundland and Labrador's natural heritage. Appendix A includes further detail on the legislated mandate of WERAC. Additional information on WERAC's vision and lines of business are included in Appendix B.

WERAC consists of up to 11 members appointed by the Lieutenant-Governor in Council for a three-year term. In order to complete work undertaken during this reporting period, WERAC appointments were extended in May 2020 by the responsible Minister. Council appointments will continue until the consultation activities are completed and a new council can be appointed. A list of WERAC membership for 2020-2021 is included in Appendix C.

In addition to the roles of Chair and Vice-Chair or Co-Chair, WERAC members may participate in subcommittees as required. Over the past fiscal year there was one subcommittee. The Labrador subcommittee met to discuss Labrador specific issues and recommendations in support of the development of a Recommendations Report on the Protected Areas Plan for the Island of Newfoundland.

WERAC members serve as volunteers; however, travel, accommodations, and related costs are covered and reported through the budget of the Natural Areas Program, ECC. Please refer to the section on WERAC financial information for an explanation of expenditures during the reporting period.

Typically, WERAC meets several times a year at various locations around the province and through conference calls. During this reporting period, however, WERAC conducted a much higher number of WERAC and public meetings than usual, almost all of which were held virtually due to pandemic restrictions, and also completed a vast amount of work over email. The council met face-to-face once for a two-day meeting in November 18-19, 2020, took part in 28 conference call or video WERAC meetings, and conducted

an additional 18 conference call meetings with town councils, members of the public, and organizations throughout the island portion of the province.

On May 28, 2020, WERAC publicly released the provincial government's Natural Areas System Plan (NASP) for the Island of Newfoundland, entitled 'A Home for Nature: Protected Areas Plan for the Island of Newfoundland'. The Council met virtually with town and regional councils, interested individuals and organizations, conducted media interviews and other educational and communications activities, reviewed submissions from the public, and drafted a public 'What We Heard Report'. The council also worked on development of the WERAC Recommendation Report for submission to the Minister.

WERAC Secretariat support is provided through the Natural Areas Program and the Natural Areas Planner:

Natural Areas Planner
Natural Areas Program, Policy, Planning and Natural Areas Division
Department of Environment and Climate Change
P.O. Box 2006,
Corner Brook, NL, A2H 6J8
Phone: (709) 636-6836
Email: werac@gov.nl.ca
Twitter: @nl_WERAC
Instagram: @nl_werac
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/WERACNewfoundlandandLabrador/>

Copies of this report can be obtained in alternate format at the address above.

Highlights and Partnerships

During this reporting period, WERAC continued to work closely with the staff of the Natural Areas Program, Policy Planning and Natural Areas Division, ECC. Through the WERAC Secretariat, the Natural Areas Program provided administrative, planning, writing, and mapping support to WERAC.

A Home for Nature: Protected Areas Plan for the Island of Newfoundland

WERAC's main focus at the beginning of this fiscal year was the public release of the provincial government's proposed Protected Areas Plan for the Island portion of the Province for public comment.

In early 2020, the Minister of Fisheries and Land Resources (the Minister responsible at the time) directed WERAC to release government's proposed Plan for a 30-day consultation period. The public consultation (known as Phase 1) was intended as an opportunity for the public to consider the Plan as a whole. Each proposed reserve must also go through its own local public consultation before an area is formally protected under the **Act**.

On May 28, 2020, “A Home for Nature: Protected Areas Plan for the Island of Newfoundland” was released by WERAC for a Phase 1 public consultation. In order to allow more people to submit comments, the public consultation was extended to October 1, 2020 shortly thereafter to enable wider public engagement.

Due to the COVID-19 health pandemic, plans for a public launch were revised to develop an online engagement strategy. This included a press release, contacting people directly through a contact list, engaging with media, posting on social media, hosting 18 virtual meetings, and developing an online presence and feedback process through engageNL.ca and through WERAC social media. Through the public consultation, WERAC received almost 900 individual submissions as well as hundreds of form letters and a petition.

Through the Phase 1 public consultation period, WERAC worked to engage Indigenous groups, communities, organizations, and individuals. WERAC hopes to develop positive collaborative relationships and potential partnerships for moving forward with proposed areas, and working together on boundary revisions and management planning.

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, WERAC met 28 times to review documentation, prepare for meetings and media interviews, consider submissions, respond to requests and discuss process and management considerations. Documents developed by WERAC in support of this process are available online at: www.gov.nl.ca/ecc/homefornature.

WERAC Efforts in Support of Government Strategies, Commitments, and Actions

There are a number of ways in which the activities of WERAC support broader government strategies, commitments, and actions.

The efforts of WERAC to establish new protected areas and guide management played a supportive role in provincial efforts to mitigate climate change. Protected areas help reduce climate impacts by storing carbon and supplying ecosystem services for disaster risk reduction, water supply, and public health. WERAC’s public consultation communications about the benefits of protected areas referenced their role in climate change mitigation, and the importance of acting on climate change.

The activities of WERAC this year also moved the province closer to protecting habitats and species as a means to help stem biodiversity loss. The creation of a protected areas network helps reduce biodiversity loss, and supports recovery efforts for species designated under the provincial **Endangered Species Act**. WERAC’s work supported provincial efforts to move closer to federal commitments as a signatory to the Convention of Biological Diversity. The efforts of WERAC to establish new protected areas and guide management can play a vital role in provincial efforts to protect our biodiversity and support efforts to reach Canadian protected area targets.

The provincial government has increased its focus on creating policies, practices, and

environments that are supportive of health and well-being, and taking actions for healthy living. Natural areas and contact with nature are crucial for our physical, mental, social, and spiritual health and wellbeing. WERAC recognizes that continuing traditional activities that bring people out on the land in a respectful manner is part of maintaining the well-being of Newfoundland and Labradorians. WERAC supported the goal of healthy people and communities in its efforts to establish a system of protected natural areas for the public of Newfoundland and Labrador to experience and enjoy.

Lastly, WERAC's efforts supported tourism goals and the need to develop and improve upon tourism travel experiences in the province. Newfoundland and Labrador tourism marketing features nature and wilderness as part of the core ecocultural experience of the province. Wilderness and ecological reserves are a large part of our tourism branding and among some of this province's significant 'travel demand generators', particularly Witless Bay Ecological Reserve, Mistaken Point Ecological Reserve/UNESCO World Heritage Site, and Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve. WERAC regularly advised on management of wilderness and ecological reserves to support the goal of enhancing the experience of visitors to reserves and the maintenance of the ecological integrity of these sites. Through the council's efforts to establish a network of protected areas for the Island portion of the province, WERAC supported the larger tourism goal of expanding upon and improving the tourism experience.

Report on Performance

During the 2020-2021 reporting year, WERAC focused on activities associated with the public release of 'A Home for Nature: Protected Areas Plan for the Island of Newfoundland'. The Council finalized the Plan and released it to the public on May 28, 2020, conducted a Phase 1 public consultation from May 28 to October 1, 2020, completed a review and assessment of public submissions and drafted a What We Heard document and a What We Heard Summary. Additionally, the Council began work on developing a Recommendations Report to government on the Plan.

Objective Indicators for the 2020-21 Year

The following objectives and indicators outline accomplishments achieved for the 2020-21 fiscal year. The two following objectives (1-Establishment and Management and 2-Education and Awareness of Protected Areas) reflect WERAC's vision and are based on the advancement of proposed protected areas through the government system, and increased public awareness and participation in the activities associated with the establishment and management of protected areas in Newfoundland and Labrador. These activities help government achieve its objective of enhanced management of our Province's natural environment and support efforts to reach Canada's protected area targets. The following objective and indicators will be applied in 2020 and 2021. WERAC reports on these objectives annually.

1. Establishment and Management

WERAC advises government on the establishment, management, and termination of the province's wilderness and ecological reserves. WERAC succeeded in meeting this objective over the 2020-2021 reporting period.

Objective 1: By March 31, 2021, WERAC will have advised government on the establishment and management of wilderness and ecological reserves in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Indicators	Accomplishments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided reports to the responsible Minister of the results of the assessments for proposed reserves and recommendations on reserve establishment or modification, as required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WERAC assessed the submissions received from the Phase 1 public consultations, and began drafting a Recommendation Report to the responsible Minister on the Protected Areas Plan.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advised the Natural Areas, Policy, Planning and Natural Areas Division on reserve management, as required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WERAC advised Natural Areas and Environmental Assessment Division regarding monitoring of the Bay du Nord transmission line. • WERAC began drafting recommendations on management of proposed reserves and the establishment process, as part of the draft Recommendation Report.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluated and responded to public suggestions for areas to be protected as a reserve 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WERAC received over 100 proposals for protection during the Phase 1 public consultation process. The council responded to these submissions and included them in a draft What We Heard report. These publicly proposed areas were also referenced in the draft Recommendations Report. • WERAC began evaluation of Grant's Pit and Lloyd's River Valley nominations received during public consultations. • WERAC began evaluation of a proposal to amend the boundary of Fortune Head Ecological Reserve in order to allow for the development of a hiking trail.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted public consultations and feedback processes as needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WERAC publicly released the provincial government's Protected Areas Plan for the Island of Newfoundland for public consultation from May 28 to October 1, 2020. • WERAC hosted information about the Plan and provided an online feedback process through the engageNL website. A Question and

	<p>Answers document, issue-specific summaries, and a GIS-based story map were also developed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback was received through the online feedback form, a printable feedback form, phone, email, and letter. • WERAC conducted 18 public virtual meetings with interested municipalities and organizations, including co-hosting a webinar with Municipalities NL. • WERAC drafted a public What We Heard Report and Summary, detailing public submissions. • WERAC replied to questions from respondents submitted during the Phase 1 public consultation process, either by phone or email.
--	--

2. Education and Awareness of Protected Areas

During the 2020-21 reporting period, WERAC increased public awareness and participation in activities associated with the establishment and management of protected areas in Newfoundland and Labrador, specifically about the value of protected areas, the Protected Areas Plan for the Island of Newfoundland, and reserve management. While WERAC succeeded in meeting the indicators for this objective, WERAC does not feel that it met the level of education or outreach required for the release of the Protected Areas Plan. COVID-19 related restrictions, and limited governmental education and communication support in advance of the public release of the Plan negatively impacted WERAC’s ability to effectively engage the public in improving awareness regarding the Protected Areas Plan. WERAC recommends that transparency, communications, and education about protected areas be priorities for WERAC and for government as implementation of the Protected Areas Plan moves forward.

Objective 2: By March 31, 2021, WERAC will have promoted an awareness and understanding of protected areas around the province and the role of the Council.

Indicators	Accomplishments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicated knowledge about protected areas and WERAC through public consultation and correspondence and discussion with primary clients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WERAC communicated knowledge about protected areas and WERAC through the engagenl.ca website, background documentation on that website, direct emails, and news media during the Phase 1 public consultation on the Protected Areas Plan. • During the Phase 1 public consultation,

	<p>WERAC met with municipalities, organizations, and individuals interested in discussing the proposed Plan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WERAC maintains a presence on social media (Twitter: @WERAC_nl, Instagram: @nl_WERAC, and Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Wilderness-and-Ecological-Reserves-Advisory-Council-WERAC-NL-846818648698446/). Social media presence this year was geared toward communicating knowledge about protected areas, the Plan, and WERAC. • WERAC held an information session for MHA's on September 18, 2020.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted outreach activities in communities interested in proposed and established protected areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No in-person community outreach activities were conducted in 2020-21 due to COVID-19 restrictions. • WERAC met virtually with interested town councils and regional councils to provide an opportunity for public comment on the Plan and to answer any questions they had. • WERAC co-hosted a webinar with Municipalities NL in September 2020 to engage municipalities across the province in the Protected Areas Planning process. • Graham Wood (WERAC Chair) participated in numerous media interviews and "open line" conversations throughout the Phase 1 public consultation to discuss the Protected Areas Plan.

Opportunities and Challenges

The past year has been both one of the most challenging and the most rewarding in WERAC's history. As volunteer members, WERAC members devoted more time and effort this year than any other year since the Council was established. A normal volunteer commitment for the Council requires attending four meetings per year in addition to some email work. The 2020-21 year required countless hours of meetings, document writing and review, and engagement with the media. This council has dedicated much of the past year in order to make sure that the Protected Areas Plan was released to the public and that the public had ample opportunity to submit comments, despite the less-than-ideal circumstances associated with the COVID-19 health pandemic and a smaller council. The Council also withstood a number of personal threats as a result of the public consultation.

Another challenge was the lack of capacity and support for moving forward with a specific education and communications program for the Phase 1 public consultation. Despite releasing a question and answers document, issue-specific summaries, a GIS-based story map, and hosting virtual information sessions, feedback received during the Phase 1 public consultation process suggest there was widespread misunderstanding about what was being proposed in the Plan, who developed the Plan, what the process is for establishing reserves (including opportunities for engagement), and how reserves can be managed. This significant challenge also provides a wonderful opportunity. With an improved focus on education, communications, and engagement, we can build on the conversation that has been started regarding protected areas in this province.

WERAC is very pleased that the Protected Areas Plan for the Island of Newfoundland is finally on the public record. Now that the public is aware of the Plan, and there is substantial public support for moving forward with Phase 2 public consultations, an opportunity exists to make significant strides forward with protecting our province's natural areas. The province has an excellent opportunity to establish a comprehensive system of protected areas that helps combat climate change, stems biodiversity loss, supports tourism, rural economic development, and the health and well-being of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. The comprehensive system of protected areas proposed by the government, and presented by WERAC, will help the province move closer to meeting National protected areas targets.

Moving forward with a comprehensive system of protected areas for the province in a transparent, engaging, and inclusive way also provides an opportunity to build support for and understanding about protected areas and to support the province in Indigenous reconciliation efforts.

WERAC remains committed to pursuing its mandate and acknowledges that competing priorities for Secretariat staff and resourcing for implementation of the Protected Areas Plan may continue to be a challenge for the Council. Subject to government direction regarding next steps for implementation of the Protected Areas Plan and public consultations, WERAC will work with ECC to address these challenges.

Financial Information

WERAC does not have a stand-alone budget and as a result, audited financial statements are not required. Expenses associated with WERAC members are funded through ECC. WERAC met once in person and 46 times via conference call, Zoom or Webex during the 2020-2021 fiscal year (including 28 meetings to review documentation as a Council and 18 times with members of the public.) There was also an in-person briefing with the Minister on September 28, 2020, attended by several WERAC members. WERAC spent \$2,250 this year for travel, and \$714 for training. Costs for conference calls were not always tracked separately but were calculated to be approximately \$3,020 for the whole year.

Appendix A: Legislated Mandate

(Source: Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Act)

Advisory Council

6. The Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Council is continued for the purpose of advising the Lieutenant-Governor in Council through the minister on matters in relation to the establishment, management and termination of reserves and for the better administration of this Act.

Powers of council

11. (1) The advisory council may examine an area of the province in order to determine which areas are suitable for the establishment of a reserve.

(2) The advisory council may accept recommendations from the public in relation to the establishment of or a change in a reserve.

Duties of council

12. (1) The advisory council shall give information on the areas determined as suitable for the establishment of a reserve under section 11 to interested departments of the governments of the province and Canada and to interested Councils, commissions or other bodies, whether incorporated or unincorporated, members of which or the members of the Council of management or Council of directors of which, are appointed by an Act or by the Lieutenant-Governor in Council.

(2) Where, in the opinion of the advisory council, the comments received under subsection (1) from the interested departments and bodies do not change the opinion as to the suitability of the area for the establishment of a provisional reserve, the advisory council shall give a report to the Lieutenant-Governor in Council.

Information on reserves

15. Within one year from the date of the establishment of a provisional reserve, the minister shall prepare and publish, in a newspaper in circulation in the area of the provisional reserve, a notice that contains

(a) a boundary description of the area of the proposed reserve;

(b) an outline of the management plan of the proposed reserve; and

(c) a statement indicating that the minister requires written notice within the next 30 days where a member of the public intends to participate in a public hearing on the establishment of the reserve.

Public hearing

16. (1) The minister shall set a time and place for the holding of a public hearing by the advisory council to consider submissions, representations and objections respecting the establishment of a reserve including the boundary description and management plan of the proposed area.

(2) The time of the holding of a public hearing shall be within 90 days of the date of publication of the notice referred to in Section 15 but after 30 days notice has been given to the public of the time and place of the hearing.

Report to Lieutenant-Governor in Council

17. (1) The advisory council shall report in writing to the Lieutenant-Governor in Council, through the minister, on the advisability of the establishment of a reserve including a review of the benefits and disadvantages of the establishment, and with a review on public hearing proceedings held under section 16, including its assessment of objections or reservations raised at the hearing.

(2) A report under subsection (1) shall be made within 120 days of the public hearing.

(3) Where the advisory council in its report made under subsection (1) recommends the establishment of a reserve, it shall include in that report

(a) the boundary description, management plan and proposed regulations in relation to that proposed reserve as revised in consideration of the public hearing; and

(b) comments on the rights and interests affected by the establishment of a reserve and an estimate of the compensation for those rights and interests.

Appendix B: WERAC Vision and Lines of Business

WERAC's vision is the conservation and preservation of natural landscapes and seascapes in Newfoundland and Labrador for current and future generations through the timely establishment of a functioning network of protected areas throughout the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The council's lines of business include:

- Examining areas of the province in order to determine which areas are suitable for the establishment of a reserve (i.e., three criteria guide reserve creation; large wilderness areas, ecosystem representation and rare natural phenomena).
- Accepting recommendations from the public in relation to the establishment of, change to, or termination of a reserve (i.e., through presentations, letters of nomination, etc.).
- Consulting stakeholders and conducting public hearings to consider submissions, representations and objections respecting the establishment, change to, or termination of a reserve.
- Reporting to the Lieutenant-Governor in Council, through the Minister, on the advisability of reserve establishment. This includes a review of the benefits and disadvantages of the establishment, and with a review of the public hearing proceedings.
- Making recommendations to the Minister on the management of existing reserves.

Appendix C: WERAC and Subcommittee Membership

WERAC Membership 2020-2021

Name	Residence	Term
Mr. Graham Wood, Chair	Lewisporte	6/30/2017- current
Mr. Joe Brazil	Pasadena	6/30/2017- current
Ms. Lanna Campbell	St. John's/Prince Edward Island	6/30/2017- current
Dr. Evan Edinger	Torbay	6/30/2017- current
Dr. Luise Hermanutz	Portugal Cove-St. Philips/British Columbia	6/30/2017- current
Mr. Stanley Oliver	Happy Valley – Goose Bay	6/30/2017- current
Mr. Thomas Philpott	Corner Book	6/30/2017- current
Mr. Bryn Wood	Happy Valley – Goose Bay	6/30/2017- current
VACANT		
VACANT		
VACANT		

WERAC Subcommittees 2020-2021

Subcommittee Name	Members
Labrador Subcommittee	Stanley Oliver, Bryn Wood, Luise Hermanutz