
Wildlife Habitat Assessment Tools

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Extended Abstract: An ongoing issue with legislative requirements to manage for species at risk in British Columbia has been a lack of capacity among land stewards to recognize these species and their associated habitats. To help address this need, the Conservation Biology Extension Program of FORREX–Forest Research Extension Partnership has undertaken a collaborative venture to develop a series of extension products called Wildlife Habitat Assessment Tools, or WHATs, to facilitate and support ecosystem-based management decisions.

Two different types of WHATs have been developed. The Habitat Element WHATs identify habitat structural components that are important for many species. These WHATs help resource managers identify species of concern within a habitat at scales most commonly used when forming resource management plans and conducting habitat assessments. The Habitat Element WHATs have been structured around twelve habitat components (e.g., dead and dying trees, riparian areas, hardwoods). The Species WHATs, which complement and feedback into components of the Habitat Element WHATs, provide managers with specific details on required and recommended management options for species of concern based on the Identified Wildlife Management Strategy, Best Management Practices, certification requirements, and integrated research results. Both types of WHATs provide users with descriptive and geographical information that can be used to identify species of concern and their associated habitat. Additionally, the tools highlight relevant legislation pertaining to the species being managed, impacts of management recommendations on growth and yield, methods for monitoring and evaluating success of management efforts using indicators and sampling techniques, modeling approaches, cultural importance of the species, information gaps, and recovery planning status.

The WHATs will form part of a multi-disciplinary decision-making process that links management activities with higher-level habitat and species conservation objectives. WHATs are useful for fine filter management activities such as field identification of species and habitat features, and for setting landscape unit objectives, developing sustainable forest management plans, establishing Wildlife Habitat Areas, supporting recovery team extension to encourage stewardship, and understanding certification requirements.

WHATs are adaptable to users' needs; thus, various extension products are available including, but not limited to, a web-based database, field cards, and regional manuals. Through collaboration with stewardship groups and resource managers, FORREX plans to identify and address the specific extension needs of the priority target audiences (e.g., field practitioners, government agents, and private landowners) to help minimize the impacts of land use activities on species at risk.