



SAVING THE ICE AGE GRASS:

First Nation community involvement in managing species at risk

The forked three-awned grass (*Aristida basiramea*) stands about 15 cm tall and is quite unremarkable. The people of the Beausoleil First Nation had lived with the plant for thousands of years and they didn't distinguish it from other grasses. But now the First Nation residents are active stewards for this endangered species.

Living at the limit

An annual grass that is more common in parts of the United States, forked three-awned grass is at the northern limit of its range in Canada, where it occurs at only a few restricted locations in Ontario and Quebec. "Awns" are bristles, which help protect the plant's flowers. The grass's sand barren habitat is very restricted and shrinking in area. It is naturally maintained by phenomena such as fires, storms and drought. Land development has eliminated much of this habitat. In the absence of natural disturbance factors, particularly fire, what remains is steadily being lost.



Georgian Bay Islands National Park of Canada

A large concentration of forked three-awned grass is found on Christian Island in Georgian Bay, on Beausoleil First Nation territory. The species also occurs in Georgian Bay Islands National Park of Canada, so Parks Canada has taken the lead in preparing a federal recovery strategy for the species.

A close call

A recent proposal by the First Nation to build a community centre fell within an area where three-awned grass occurs, without anybody realizing the species was there. If not for a chance encounter, construction could have proceeded with serious consequences for the endangered plants. Tim Tully, a biologist working with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources happened to contact BFN Development Officer Melvin King about another matter involving three-awned grass. The two came to realize that the proposed location of the community centre was a serious threat to the three-awned grass at the site. The building's footprint was subsequently altered. The band and Environment Canada successfully re-located plants from the affected area to suitable habitat nearby.



Forked three-awned grass sign ceremony © Beausoleil First Nation

Teaming up to protect the species

Following the species' listing under the Species at Risk Act in 2005, a three-awned grass recovery team was set up, chaired by Parks Canada, with members from the BFN, Environment Canada and the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The experience at the community centre and the grass's unassuming nature convinced the team that something must be done to raise the species' profile: communication was the key. At the BFN's request, biologists met with the Chief and Council at Christian Island to discuss the species' recovery needs,



SARA requirements and the First Nation's concerns that future development of the island not be unduly hampered by conservation measures. An important issue that arose was that few people on the island knew anything about the endangered plants. This was a big concern for the plants' long term survival.

A special connection

Parks Canada Species at Risk coordinator Gary Allen reports that, with growing scientific knowledge of the three-awned grass, has come evidence of a "cosmic connection" between the plant and the First Nation people. "A traditional method of land clearing, involving fire, and burial practices involving excavating and mounding the sands on site, has been practiced over hundreds or thousands of years. This has likely served to maintain the sand barren habitat the species depends on", says Gary.



Sand barren habitat that the three-awned grass depends on for survival. © Gary Allen - Parks Canada

To address the information gap of the Beausoleil First Nation people about this important species on their island, Parks Canada, in cooperation with BFN, funded a fact sheet on *Aristida*. Local kids distributed the fact sheet to all residents. This information piece also describes historical relationships between BFN peoples and the forked three-awned grass, helping build a sense of pride and ownership within the community. Now, everyone knows the little grass, and is proud to be hosting a healthy population!

The BFN now refers to three-awned grass as the "ice age grass," and the community has erected prominent signs describing the species and telling people about its history and conservation needs.



Sign to welcome visitors to their community, home of the largest population of Forked Three Awn Grass in Canada © Beausoleil First Nation

Everyone benefits

This special relationship has had clear benefits for a fragile species, for First Nations people and for Parks Canada. Species recovery needs are being addressed, and the future looks brighter for the forked three-awned grass. The BFN has also developed a sense of pride and stewardship for this otherwise unremarkable plant.

For more information:

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