

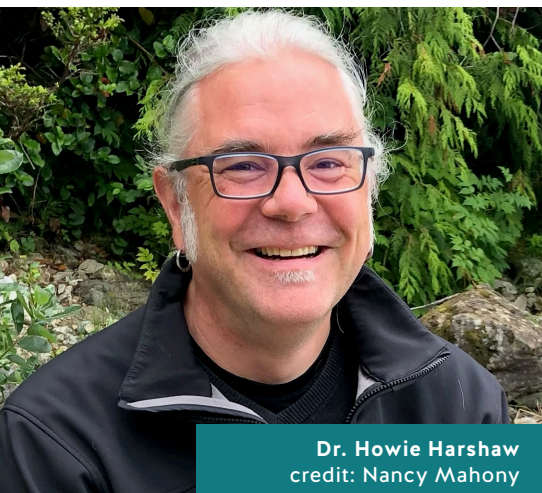


# SCIENCE STORIES

SERIES NO. 8

## DELVING INTO THE HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF BIRD HABITAT CONSERVATION

TO ADVANCE BIRD HABITAT CONSERVATION, THE NORTH AMERICAN WATERFOWL MANAGEMENT PLAN (NAWMP) IN CANADA IS STRIVING TO ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT WITH REGULAR FOLKS ON CONSERVATION ISSUES. THAT'S WHERE THE EXPERTISE OF UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA PROFESSOR DR. HOWIE HARSHAW COMES IN.



**Dr. Howie Harshaw**  
credit: Nancy Mahony

Harshaw specializes in the human dimensions of natural resources, and he has been examining stakeholder behaviours, perceptions and values for NAWMP for more than a decade. The results from these studies are helping the Canadian regional NAWMP partnerships – known as ‘joint ventures’, such as the Prairie Habitat Joint Venture (PHJV) – in their efforts to achieve key outcomes in conserving habitat for waterfowl and other birds.

For instance, human dimensions findings can help the joint ventures to develop programs that include stakeholder perspectives while following the ecological and biological imperatives of bird habitat conservation. The findings can also help in designing outreach programs to increase stakeholder understanding of conservation actions. Such efforts, in turn, could boost public participation in local conservation activities, increase donations for conservation programs, and strengthen the social licence for habitat conservation.

The Alberta NAWMP Partnership's Science Fund has been helping to support some of Harshaw's NAWMP-related human dimensions projects. That includes funding for a recent project, composed of three studies, led by Harshaw and Dr. Katherine Sainsbury, a researcher in Harshaw's research group.



**Dr. Katherine Sainsbury**  
credit: Nigel Sainsbury

### WILLINGNESS TO PAY FOR HABITAT CONSERVATION

The first of the project's three studies to be completed provides a fascinating look at Canadians' willingness to pay for bird habitat conservation.

Although NAWMP itself does not solicit donations, Harshaw explains that asking about people's willingness to pay for the things that NAWMP does is a useful way to assess the level of support for NAWMP's activities.

In this study, Harshaw's group surveyed over 2300 Canadians, asking about their willingness to make a one-time donation to support NAWMP's activities, how much they would be willing to donate, which donation mechanism they would prefer, what types of conservation actions they would prefer to support, and other related questions.

“About one-third of participants were willing to make a one-time donation to NAWMP to protect and conserve bird habitats. The average donation amount was \$33.59. If we scale that up to the Canadian population, it suggests that the donation potential is over \$270 million,” notes Harshaw.

This finding establishes that many Canadians support the activities of NAWMP and its partner agencies and provides a clearer sense of the social licence for these activities.

Another interesting finding was that participation in bird watching was associated with a higher willingness to donate to NAWMP. Furthermore, this association is stronger among birdwatchers who also participate in other types outdoor recreation activities such as plant gathering and hunting.

Among those who were not willing to make a donation, almost 70 per cent indicated that they could not afford to pay the donation amount that was posed to them.

Surprisingly, waterfowl hunters were disproportionately likely to indicate that it is not their responsibility to support conservation of birds and their habitats or that they didn't believe that birds and their habitats needed additional protection or management. This finding goes against anecdotal evidence that waterfowl hunters are willing to support waterfowl conservation. So, Harshaw and his group are launching a new project to take a deeper dive into what waterfowler views and actions underlie this finding. One possibility might be that NAWMP's successes in the recovery and maintenance of waterfowl populations may be leading some hunters to believe that no further actions are needed to maintain current waterfowl populations or to recover populations of other birds.

Among those willing to donate, the most popular activity for funding (almost 29% of respondents) was the purchase of new conservation lands. The next-most-popular choices (each preferred by about 18% of respondents) were: funding bird habitat conservation on public land; funding public outreach to increase awareness about bird habitat conservation; and funding science about how birds use their habitat and how to recover bird populations.

These are all activities that the Canadian joint ventures are already doing. "This is a good news story, affirming that NAWMP is doing things deemed relevant and useful by members of the public," says Harshaw.

More information about this study and its findings is available in the researchers' [2025 journal article](#).

## WETLANDS IN AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPES

In another of the project's studies, Harshaw and Sainsbury are working with the [Canadian Wetlands Roundtable](#) to characterize and understand constraints to wetland conservation in agricultural settings.

Harshaw emphasizes that Prairie agricultural landowners are essential players in wetland conservation because much of the wetland habitat in the settled parts of the Prairies is on private land. Information from this study could help Alberta NAWMP and its Partners to better understand and engage with agricultural producers on conservation issues.

The study's main component is a survey of Prairie agricultural producer preferences for strategies to conserve wetlands. Harshaw's group is currently analyzing the data from the survey.

The other part of this study is a comprehensive review of the scientific literature worldwide about agricultural landowner preferences related to wetland conservation on their lands.

IN A SURVEY OF OVER 2300 CANADIANS, PARTICIPATION IN BIRD WATCHING WAS ASSOCIATED WITH A HIGHER WILLINGNESS TO MAKE A DONATION FOR BIRD HABITAT CONSERVATION.

Harshaw highlights a few of the key findings from this review, which is now complete. "Roughly one-tenth of the 549 studies that we reviewed really focused on what farmers think, feel and do about wetland conservation. There seems to be a small but growing body of research that is investigating producers' perspectives on wetland conservation," he notes.

"We looked at these studies very carefully to understand what they did, what they found, and what were some characteristics of the research that would be useful in thinking about investigations we might do here in the Prairies, and to identify gaps in our understanding about conservation on agricultural lands."

For instance, most of the studies were quantitative, number-focused studies that are typically researcher-led. Although these types of studies are very important, there is a gap in terms of qualitative studies. "Qualitative research is typically focused on people's experiences, behaviours and

thoughts, and allows opportunities for participants' voices to be heard, including the words they use to reflect their ideas," he explains. Increased qualitative research could enhance understanding of how producers view conservation issues, which could help in planning producer engagement efforts.

The researchers are currently preparing a paper on their literature review findings for a scientific journal.

## TRACKING HUMAN DIMENSIONS PROGRESS

In the project's third study, Harshaw and Sainsbury are working with the PHJV's Human Dimensions Committee. "We are aiming to identify a suite of indicators that will help us understand and measure the [human dimensions] outcomes of PHJV and Partner activities on the ground," says Harshaw.

At present, they are establishing a baseline of current public attitudes towards conservation behaviours and towards the PHJV and its Partners. Having this baseline will allow the PHJV to track changes in these attitudes and to determine if and how PHJV or Partner initiatives are moving the needle on public engagement.

Overall, Harshaw concludes, "The habitat conservation activities of Alberta NAWMP, the PHJV, and the other Canadian joint ventures are a really interesting, supportive and collaborative place to be engaged in social research, with lots of consequential questions to ask. ...Moreover, these NAWMP partners are willing to put research findings into action to achieve key conservation outcomes."

## FUNDING

In addition to Alberta NAWMP's support, Wildlife Habitat Canada (WHC) and Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), which are both ongoing funders of Harshaw's research, helped fund this project. The project's willingness-to-pay study also received funding from Environment and Climate Change Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Sainsbury's position was funded by Alberta NAWMP, WHC, Mitacs, DUC and the University of Alberta.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:



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