

Evaluation of ECCC's Indigenous Guardians Initiative

Final report

August, 2024



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Accessibility Statement

As of the date of publication, the document has been verified for accessibility.

If you have any questions about this document, please contact us at: audit-evaluation@ec.gc.ca

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADM	Assistant Deputy Minister
CSFB	Corporate Services and Finance Branch
CWS	Canadian Wildlife Service
DFO	Department of Fisheries and Oceans
DM	Deputy Minister
DRF	Departmental Results Framework
ECCC	Environment and Climate Change Canada
FN	First Nations
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
G&C	Grants & Contributions
IG	Indigenous Guardians
ILNCS	Indigenous-led Natural Climate Solutions
ITK	Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami
JWG	Joint Working Group
MMF	Manitoba Métis Federation
MNA	Métis Nation of Alberta
MNC	Métis National Council
MSGC	Métis Settlements General Council
NWTMN	Northwest Territories Métis Nation
PAD	Protected Areas Directorate
PC	Parks Canada
SPD	Strategic Priorities Directorate
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings from the evaluation of Environment and Climate Change Canada's (ECCC) Indigenous Guardians (IG) Initiative. This evaluation covers a 5-year period from 2018-2019 to 2022-2023 under the following themes: relevance; results achieved; governance; design; efficiency; and use of performance information. The evaluation was conducted as required by the 2016 Treasury Board [Policy on Results](#).

1.1. Overview of the Initiative

The Indigenous Guardians Initiative provides Indigenous Peoples, through grants & contributions (G&C), with more opportunities for stewardship of their traditional lands, waters, and ice. Funding is provided to support Indigenous rights and responsibilities in protecting and conserving ecosystems, developing, and maintaining sustainable economies, and continuing the profound connections between natural landscapes and Indigenous cultures.

Funding and decision-making are implemented jointly with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis using a distinctions-based approach that respects and recognizes the unique perspectives, rights, responsibilities, and needs of Indigenous Peoples. This takes the form of three different approaches and structures to support Indigenous Guardians.

Two other federal departments also administer Indigenous Guardians funding: Parks Canada (PC) and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). These initiatives have different approaches and scopes. For example, Parks Canada works closely with Indigenous Guardians at PC-administered sites, while the DFO has linkages in its Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy.

1.2. Governance and Organization

At ECCC, accountability for the Initiative rests primarily with the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM), Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) as per the Departmental Results Framework (DRF). The Initiative falls under the Core Responsibility "Conserving Nature," with primary linkages to the departmental result "Indigenous peoples are engaged in conservation."

Within CWS, two groups have distinct but complementary roles:

- The Protected Areas Directorate (PAD) provides leadership for the IG Initiative. It holds the Secretariat role, administers the day-to-day of the Initiative, and is the principal interlocutor with the Indigenous groups;
- The Strategic Priorities Directorate (SPD), which houses the CWS Centre of Excellence, oversees approval of all grants & contributions within CWS, including the IG Initiative.

Finally, within ECCC, the Corporate Services and Finance Branch (CSFB), through its CSFB Center of Expertise, provides final review and coordination towards Deputy Minister (DM)'s and Minister's approval of G&C, per set limits.

Indigenous Partners

Central to the administration of the funding is the distinctions-based partnership approach with the three Indigenous groups: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. The approach prioritizes a shared decision-making process, with distinct governance bodies to determine priority-funding areas, assessment criteria and selection processes and methods.

For the First Nations, the First Nations-Federal Joint Working Group (JWG) was established, with membership from eight First Nations and four Government of Canada representatives, and co-chaired by a First Nation representative and ECCC.

For the Inuit, the Inuit Guardians Committee was established, with representatives from the four Inuit regions (land claims), and co-chaired by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and ECCC.

For the Métis, a mix of individual and bilateral approaches have been used with partners to determine the projects that best meet their needs.

1.3. Resources

Indigenous Guardians launched in 2017 and was transferred to ECCC in 2018 through [Nature Legacy](#), a Government of Canada wide initiative that sought to protect Canada's biodiversity, ecosystems, and natural landscapes. It included a Government of Canada investment of \$25 million over four years to support an Indigenous Guardians Pilot. From 2018-2019 to 2021-2022, funding for the Pilot supported over 80 Indigenous-led Guardians initiatives across Canada for First Nations, Inuit and Métis. In Budget 2021, with the [Enhanced Nature Legacy](#), the Government of Canada announced up to \$100 million over five years (2021-2022 to 2025-2026) to support new and existing initiatives and support the development of Indigenous Guardians networks. As of January 2024, over 230 projects have been funded by the Initiative.

Annual expenditures managed for the IG averaged \$12.5M between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023. Additional information is provided in Section 2.4 of this report.

1.4. About the Evaluation

The evaluation of ECCC's Indigenous Guardians Initiative is part of ECCC's [Audit and Evaluation Plan 2022 to 2027](#). This evaluation covers a 5-year period from 2018-2019 to 2022-

2023 under the following themes: relevance; effectiveness and results; design and governance; efficiency; and use of performance information.

The evaluation matrix can be found in [Annex A](#).

Multiple lines of evidence were used, including:

Document and File Review: The primary focus of the document review was ECCC's program-specific documents and Government of Canada policy and program documents, complemented by other publicly available sources.

Analysis of Administrative, Performance and Financial Data: Project and performance data on program outputs and outcomes were reviewed. This includes three evaluation reports that each of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit groups completed towards the end of the pilot phase of the Initiative.

Key Informant Interviews: 7 interviews were conducted with ECCC program representatives that play a role in the delivery of the Initiative.

Partner Interviews: 8 interviews were conducted with Indigenous partners that play a key role in the administration and/or delivery of the Initiative.

- **Sample of Files:** 16 recipient files were selected as part of a sample to allow the evaluation to gain a more complete understanding of the IG projects that were funded. The sample provides good representation across First Nations, Métis and Inuit projects, the provinces and territories, and Pilot and Tier 1, 2, and 3 First Nation initiatives. Of note, 3 of the partner interviews noted above were part of the sample.

2. Findings

2.1. Relevance

Summary of Findings: The Indigenous Guardians Initiative continues to be relevant. There are strong linkages with Government of Canada and ECCC priorities, as well as key commitments made under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Global Biodiversity Framework. Furthermore, a recent survey found that three quarters of Canadians support Indigenous Guardians and the role they play. The evaluation further noted the new increased funding is in line with increased demand for these initiatives. The Indigenous partners that were interviewed all highlighted a strong need for guardians and more stable, long-term funding for the future.

The evaluation found that the Indigenous Guardians Initiative continues to be relevant. Indigenous Guardians was a component of the [2021 Mandate Letter to the ECCC Minister](#): “Work with First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners to support new Indigenous Guardians programs and establish new Indigenous Guardians Networks (...).” The mandate letter further directs the Minister to “implement the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) and to work in partnership with Indigenous Peoples to advance their rights.”

There is a strong alignment of the Indigenous Guardians Initiative with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), especially with Article 29, which states: “Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources. States shall establish and implement assistance programs for indigenous peoples for such conservation and protection, without discrimination.”

The Indigenous Guardians Initiative is also in alignment with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), which has the following mission: “To take urgent action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss to put nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of people and planet by conserving and sustainably using biodiversity and by ensuring the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from the use of genetic resources, while providing the necessary means of implementation.” Several targets of the GBF are in direct alignment with the IG, such as reducing biodiversity loss (Target 1) and ensuring knowledge is available and accessible to guide action (Target 21). Further, the targets have clear language around the important roles Indigenous groups play towards achieving these goals.

A [2023 survey](#) conducted by Abacus Data found that 75% of Canadians support Indigenous Guardians and the role they play, while 73% also support federal investments in Indigenous

Guardians. The survey sought perceptions with regards to the functions Indigenous Guardians perform on the lands, which were generally viewed as important by Canadians, with the highest being “Test and protect water quality near IG communities” with 84% viewing this as important (Very important + Important + Somewhat important); and the lowest being “Build infrastructure and interpret cultural sites for local tourism economies” at 78%.

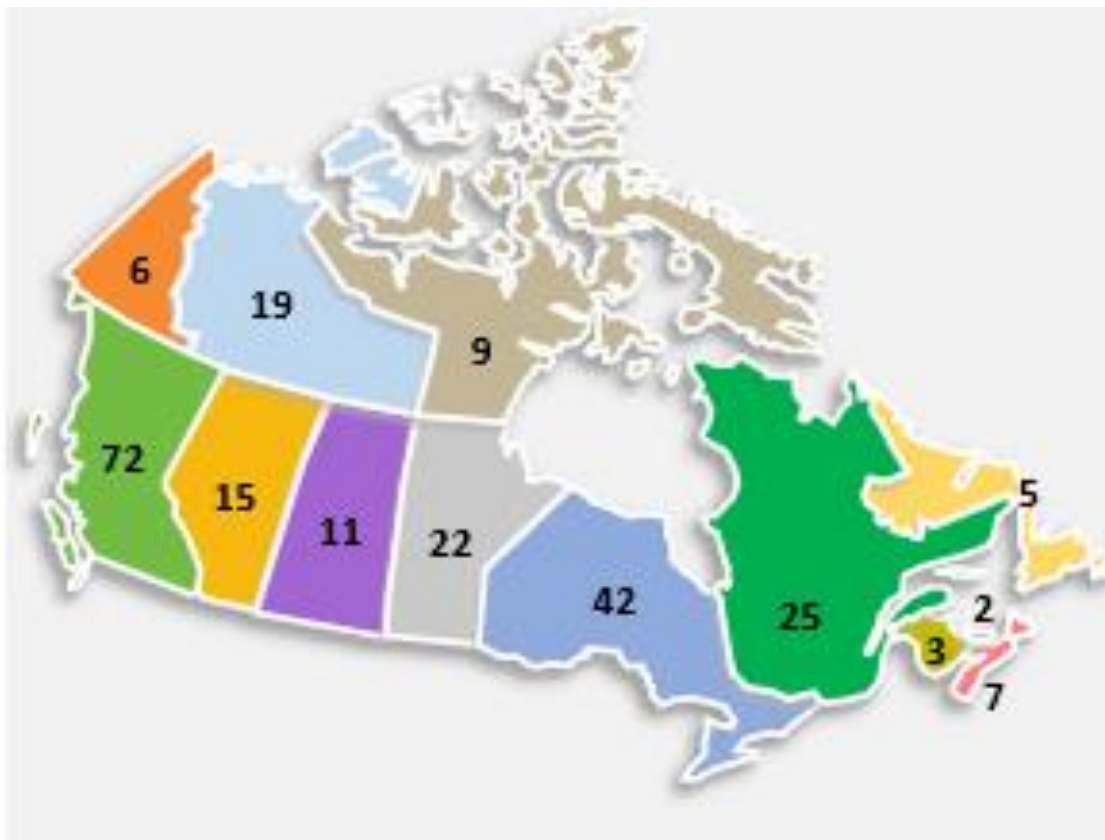
The survey also noted agreement with the helpfulness of the role IG could play in a variety of areas, for example: wildlife and fish habitat damage (74%); increased wildfires (70%); increased flooding (64%); and more frequent infrastructure repair after extreme weather events (61%).

Finally, the survey also indicated that: “Canadians prefer Indigenous Guardians led conservation over having federal departments spend money on more staff. Our survey found that 7 in 10 Canadians prefer leveraging Indigenous Guardians programs to add more northern coverage, over having the federal government hire more conservation officers.”

As noted through several documents and highlighted in interviews, Indigenous Peoples have been guardians of their lands over hundreds of years, well before the introduction of the Indigenous Guardians Initiative. In Canada, examples of local-scale, organized guardians that have paved the way include the Haida Gwaii Watchmen, launched in the early 1980s. Similarly, in the mid-2000s, Australia invested significant funds to support Indigenous Rangers programs. As noted in the introduction, the federal funding for Indigenous Guardians launched in 2017.

Since its inception, there have been steady increase in the number of projects being funded by ECCC under the Indigenous Guardians Initiative, from about 80 at the pilot stage via Nature Legacy to over 230 in early 2024. This is in line with the funding, which began with an initial \$25 million funding envelope for 2018-2022, that grew to a \$100 million envelope for the 2021-2026 period. The figure below presents the number of projects funded up to 2023, per province and territory.

Figure 1. Indigenous Guardians Projects funded to date, by province and territory



Because funding evolved over two envelopes and per the preferences of the three individual distinctions-based groups, there were differences in the approaches for both the applications and the disbursement of funding. Notwithstanding that, there has been steadily increasing interest from all Indigenous partners and their three respective groups. For example, while on average a little over 100 applications were received for each open call for applications for First Nations, the 2022-2023 call received 133 applications, an all-time high.

All three evaluations of the Pilot, led respectively by the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, noted the important needs of guardians that allowed the initiation of new activities not usually supported by, or underfunded in, past programming. All three evaluations have, in one way or another, highlighted the continued need for funding to support IG type activities in the future, with a desire for long-term, multi-year funding.

In interviews, Indigenous partners shared about how the Indigenous Guardians Initiative allowed communities to take a key role in advancing guardians projects that could target specific areas of interest of their communities, something that was viewed as a strength. Indigenous partners also flagged the program as being a great example of how reconciliation

needs to advance the Indigenous opportunities, through a Nation-to-Nation approach, with the support of the federal government. Further, it was highlighted that the IG Initiative provided a lot of flexibility in using funding available for their projects, which constitutes a major advantage when compared with other funding programs. Several Indigenous partners did point to the need for a long-term commitment to funding, without the need for frequent renewals.

Finally, the evaluation noted linkages to the Integrated Climate Lens, with numerous projects having climate change impacts monitoring as part of the activities they were undertaking. Additionally, in 2021, ECCC launched the Indigenous-led Natural Climate Solutions (ILNCS), for which Indigenous organizations can be the recipient, and which has a climate change centric focus. The administration of the ILNCS rests with the same ECCC secretariat supporting the IG.

2.2. Results

Summary of Findings: The Initiative resulted in numerous activities with strong linkages to their objectives, such as supporting Indigenous rights and responsibilities, protecting and conserving ecosystems, developing and maintaining sustainable economies, connecting to natural landscapes and Indigenous cultures, and knowledge generation and sharing between youth and Elders. It further supported hundreds of employment opportunities. Indigenous groups, both during interviews and in their own evaluations, noted the overall positive impacts of the initiatives.

Challenges with regards to the delivery of the initiatives were primarily tied to very lengthy processes from application to receiving the funding. Both ECCC and Indigenous partners noted this as an important issue. However, this was mitigated by the Secretariat's ability to be flexible and provide adjustments to support the achievement of results with the partners.

The evaluation found a strong alignment between the objectives and the results of the IG Initiative. As already stated, the objective of the IG is to provide Indigenous groups with a greater opportunity to exercise responsibility and stewardship of their traditional lands, waters, and ice, by providing funding to support: protecting and conserving ecosystems, developing and maintaining sustainable economies, and continuing the profound connections between natural landscapes and Indigenous cultures. In the review of case studies' files and reports, we found strong linkages with these themes, as demonstrated by the following examples:

Indigenous Rights and Responsibilities: With the Munaqsi project, Inuvialuit Guardians exercised their rights and responsibilities by identifying areas of interest and concern in their Inuvialuit Settlement Region, using local and traditional knowledge in

combination with historic empirical data to inform stewardship of Inuit lands and waters and the preservation of Inuvialuit culture.

Protecting and Conserving Ecosystems: A strong component of the Anishinabek Traditional Ecological Guardians of Georgian Bay's project was to expand the river and fish monitoring program by developing partnerships, and to better understand and identify habitat threats/pressures from development and climate change.

Developing and Maintaining Sustainable Economies: Beyond providing employment through becoming Guardians, there are also examples such as the Coastal Stewardship Network, designed for facilitating the transition towards a conservation-based economy, as economies of member Nations depend on healthy and resilient ecosystems.

Continuing Connections Between Natural Landscapes and Indigenous Cultures: With the Metis Youth Boreal Forest Stewardship initiative, an important number of activities under their educational programming took place to allow members to spend time on the land, share experiences and learnings, and make connections to lands of importance, such as Kettle Hills.

Wildlife/Species at Risk: A majority of projects have wildlife and/or species at risk identified as important species to monitor as part of their initiatives. For example, in the Dene Tha' Guardians project, over 40 species of interest were identified, with 13 of them being identified as listed under the *Species at Risk Act*.

Protected Areas: A few projects had ties to established or forthcoming protected areas, like the Aviqtuuq Inuit Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) Terrestrial Guardians Program, where guardians were hired to be on the land for activities like monitoring and sampling and developing harvesting plans, all to support the potential IPCA.

Youth and Elders: Several projects laid an important emphasis on knowledge transmission between youth and Elders, which was apparent in activities like youth stewardship programs, outreach in schools, training from Elders to youth in traditional activities like fishing, and guardians and researchers engaging with Elders, especially to understand the land and species. The Nunavik Guardians Program had a specific goal with Uumajuit Wardens to educate young hunters about the traditions and values of Inuit Elders.

Governance of Land/Water/Ice: Projects have noted that the data gathered by their guardians will support the governance of the land with partners, such as for the Central Coast

Indigenous Resource Alliance, where data collected will be used to support the broader Central Coast Marine Plan and the Nations' Marine Use Plans.

Indigenous Knowledge Generation: While present in the majority of projects, the Pimachiowin Aki World Heritage Site Guardians Program provided a good example with the research and creation of two places name maps that are the result of Elders who shared their knowledge over several years to help document the personal and collective histories of their First Nations.

Climate Change: Funding provided to the Central Coast Indigenous Resource Alliance, a group of coastal First Nations in British Columbia (the Heiltsuk, Kitasoo/Xai'Xais, Nuxalk and Wuikinuxv Nations), focused on the monitoring of climate change impacts on nearshore ecosystems, which is of great importance to the group, with their culture and well-being inextricably tied to the sea and the resources it provides.

Furthermore, the Secretariat has recently begun tracking some metrics for the overall initiatives. It estimates that for 2022-2023, it supported over 550 employment opportunities. Additionally, several projects have target species identified as priorities, for example Boreal Caribou (27), Southern Mountain Caribou (2), Barren-Ground Caribou (9), and Wood Bison (3). Finally, it also identified projects that addressed Food Security (7), Fire Protection (2), and Flood Prevention (1).

The above examples are in line with what we heard from the Indigenous partners interviewed, which all testified to the positive results of the initiatives within their respective groups.

Similarly, the evaluations conducted by the Indigenous groups also found positive results. For example, the First Nations Guardian Initiative Evaluation Report indicated: "These included increased engagement, transmission of culture, knowledge and language, monitoring and stewardship based on Nations' values, and supporting self-determination goals. Connecting Elders and youth was seen as key highlights in most initiatives (...). Building partnerships and meaningful relationships was another key benefit of Guardian initiatives. (...) A final key benefit of Guardian initiatives is the rebuilding of Nationhood." Equally, the Métis National Council Evaluation of the Métis Guardians Program noted: "We heard that the Guardians Program values the distinct needs of the Métis by investing in Métis-driven Guardians Programming. The Program's support generated cultural, environmental, and economic investments in the future. The Métis Guardians' work has provided significant positive impacts on Métis citizens, communities, and the well-being of the Nation."

The current evaluation noted some good examples of unexpected outcomes as part of the review of case studies, as well as through interviews. These included the fact that having

established guardians can support individuals with good capacities to participate in search and rescue operations in cases of a missing person on the land. Another example was how the guardians now offer unique perspectives that combine both traditional knowledge and western science, which is of immense value. The initiatives have also allowed more Indigenous groups to connect together, exchange knowledge and share tools. At a personal level, we have heard numerous interviewees share how the guardians provided a great sense of pride and purpose in the lives of those who have taken on the guardian role. This has been something Indigenous peoples have been able to also share with their communities.

Interviews and project reports both noted similar, recurrent issues and challenges. The main issue flagged was the fact that agreements and funding were occurring very late in the fiscal year, thus severely impacting project successes and hampering the recipients' ability to deliver initiatives. The second biggest challenge was the global pandemic, which severely hampered several activities for a host of reasons, including the impossibility of travel due to local restrictions and lockdowns and, similarly, the impossibility of gathering in person.

With that said, it was recognized by Indigenous partners that ECCC proved to be very flexible, allowing changes to the contribution agreements to either extend the funding, or find alternative activities that supported the IG Initiative. This was further evidenced by the review of case studies, where most files had been provided funding extensions. Further, it was frequently mentioned in interviews, with partners commending the support received from the Secretariat at a personal level, even while they were waiting for final decisions or funding.

2.3. Design and Governance

Summary of findings: ECCC's distinctions-based approach, where specific governance approaches have been established for First Nations, Métis and Inuit, was viewed very favourably by all Indigenous partners and ECCC personnel. The approach accounts for Indigenous cultural realities, was viewed as effective, and allowed groups to be centered in decision-making.

However, some challenges were noted in the governance at ECCC of the Indigenous Guardians Initiative, with important delays in the approval of agreements and disbursement of funds. The recent findings of the Audit of the Administration of Grants and Contributions at ECCC recognized this, and the Department is developing an action plan to address internal governance processes.

Finally, there is evidence that some groups might not be able to receive Indigenous Guardians funding, as there is a requirement to be recognized by one of the three governing bodies to be

eligible for funding. There is recognition, within ECCC, of a need to consider modern treaty and non-affiliated groups in future programming.

As stated earlier in the Relevance Section (2.1), Indigenous Guardians have been on the land for centuries, and support from governments for these types of activities is in its early stage, drawing from the experiences of Australia, and some specific local successes in Canada. Recognizing these past experiences, ECCC consulted with Indigenous partners to establish initiatives that sought to respect and recognize the unique perspectives, rights, responsibilities and needs of Indigenous Peoples.

When funding for Indigenous Guardians was announced in 2017, Parks Canada was identified as the lead. However, with Nature Legacy announced in 2018, an important component was transferred over to ECCC. From the onset, there was a strong interest to have processes in place that would reflect each group's preferences. While funding was directed by ECCC for its first year (2018), ECCC worked in 2018 with all three groups to establish governance and processes specific to each. This resulted in using a distinctions-based approach, whereby each Indigenous group (First Nations, Inuit, and Metis) has an important leadership role in orienting, establishing criteria for, and selecting the projects that get funded.

For **First Nations groups**, a First Nations-Federal Pilot Joint Working Group (JWG) was established in 2018, which was comprised of 8 First Nations members, and four federal representatives. The JWG established three tiers of funding, based on the stage of the Guardian initiative development. Tier 1 funding targeted development of new initiatives, while Tier 2 funding targeted three-year proposals for the enhancement or expansion of established or emerging community initiatives. Finally, Tier 3 funding targeted regional networks.

First announced in late 2022, and in place for the 2023-2024 funding application process, the new First Nations National Guardians Network is set to connect First Nations Guardians across the country, with more independence from ECCC. This Network established a new JWG and took over the responsibilities with regards to the review and selection of projects and overall administration, thus decreasing reliance on the CWS-PAD and its Secretariat.

For the **Inuit**, the Inuit Guardians Committee was established in 2018, comprised of ECCC, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), and representatives from the four Inuit regions (land claims): Inuvialuit, Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut. The committee has responsibilities with regards to funding priorities, assessment criteria, application and selection process, and evaluation.

For the **Métis**, decisions were first taken through bilateral discussions between the Métis National Council (MNC) and ECCC, with a decision to use a non-competitive call for proposals from the five Governing Members at the time. In 2021, with the renewal of IG funding, the IG

Initiative was given the authority to include other Métis Nations and organizations. Three Métis partners were added: the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF), the Métis Settlements General Council (MSGC) and the Northwest Territories Métis Nation (NWTMN). Changes were made to add the above three Métis organizations, in addition to the MNC and its four Governing Members, resulting in the establishment of bilateral relationships with ECCC for their respective IG initiatives.

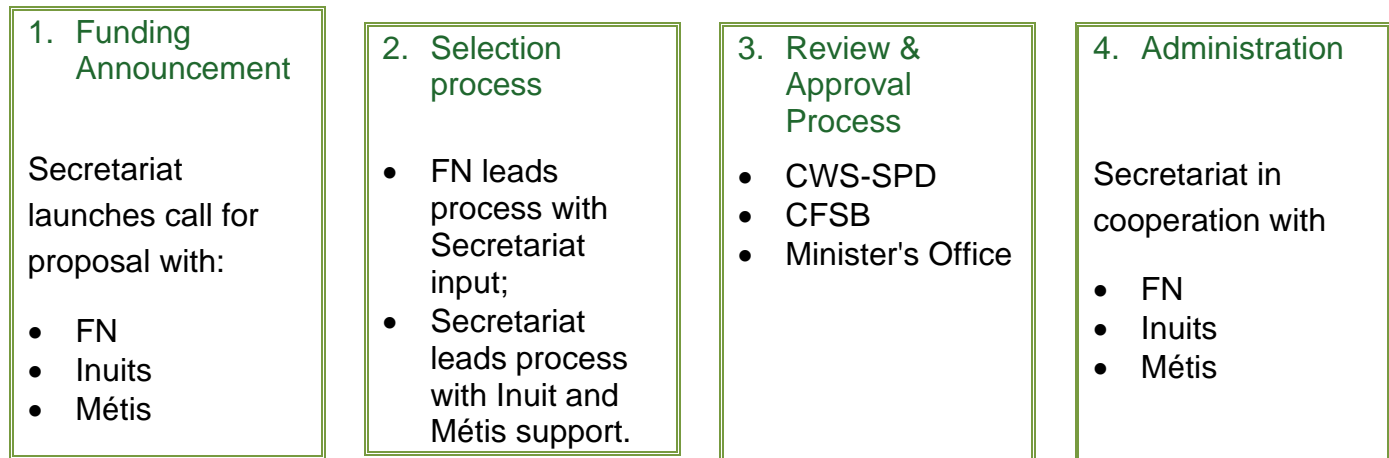
Indigenous partners shared a positive opinion on the IG's design, mentioning that the intentions of the initiatives were really good, and that the initiatives have gone really well. Also, it was noted that there was a big joint effort and a lot of collaborative work with ECCC being done, even though it was not always simple and required a lot of effort and trust building. In addition, the new Network model whereby First Nations will manage the IG contribution funds instead of ECCC is viewed favourably. Establishment of networks of Métis and Inuit is also an objective for the future, but the feasibility and governance structure will have to be determined in partnership with the Indigenous partners.

The evaluation also found that the Initiative accounted for Indigenous cultural realities. The key informants testified to this as being a strong point of the IG's design. It was heard from a few partners that the initiatives encourage Indigenous learning. For example, through one of the Métis Nation of Alberta's (MNA) initiative named Askîy, a team of four MNA Youth (aged 18-29) were recruited through an essay contest to participate in a week of dedicated ice-fishing with MNA staff and harvesters, during which they learned both scientific monitoring techniques and traditional ice-fishing methods and ways of assessing fish health.

Several partners have indicated that overall, the governance was effective and allowed groups to decide for themselves. One partner noted a lot of trust building went into the process with good dialogue and open discussion on challenges. Another partner shared that it felt like a Nation-to-Nation approach. When asked, partners found that the governance supports Indigenous participation and decision-making. One partner did note that having one committee for all three Indigenous groups could have been more efficient in hindsight.

ECCC Administration and Governance

Beyond the distinctions-based approach and governance noted above, ECCC still had important functions in the administration of the IG Initiative. As shown in the figure below, ECCC has a role to play in the funding announcements, review and approval processes, and administration:

Figure 2. Indigenous Guardians Process

With regards to the governance of the review and approval process at ECCC, numerous partners and ECCC staff indicated that there were important delays in approvals that create downstream challenges for Indigenous partners, principally due to delays in funds transfer. Section 2.4 provides more evidence of these delays.

The recent Audit of the Administration of Grants and Contributions at ECCC also identified similar findings to the evaluation's file review and interviews, such as:

- The need to review the roles and responsibilities of the G&C Centre of Expertise, considering there are similar functions operating in other branches.
- The need for timely funding decisions being an important success factor, for example because many projects involve field work in warmer weather. Funding delays can cause the warm weather window to be missed.

The Department has acknowledged these issues and is working towards resolving them.

Flexibilities

Based on discussions with partners and ECCC staff, as well as the review of files, we noted factors that could impact the flexibility in project delivery. The major challenge has to do with the late timing of the funding, and resulting communication, which could be improved. Numerous individuals highlighted the challenges of late funding, and the difficulty associated with securing status updates on decisions, as the decision-making process can be long at ECCC. This was counterbalanced by the program's willingness to use flexibilities allowed under Appendix K of the Policy on Transfer Payments. This has allowed for ECCC to be more flexible in face of numerous challenges, such as late funding, global pandemic related restrictions, or unforeseen events in communities.

A final observation on the design of the Initiative's reach is that while there was a willingness to have a broad reach, it was not designed for maximum reach. We were informed that some groups may not be informed of opportunities because they are not represented by one of the 3 recognized national Indigenous organizations. An example of this is groups that have modern treaties in place. Similarly, while conversations first began with the Métis National Council (MNC), only four Métis Nations are represented by the MNC, a fact that was recognized by the program and led to the establishment of bilateral agreements with Métis groups not represented by MNC. Moving forward, there is recognition by ECCC of a need to consider modern treaty and non-affiliated groups when using a distinctions-based approach.

2.4. Efficiency

Summary of findings: The IG Secretariat at ECCC was initially established to administer the Indigenous Guardians Initiative, and then went on to administer the Indigenous-led Natural Climate Solutions (ILNCS), in 2021, using a similar approach. Expenditures for the Initiative increased as expected, with the vast majority going towards the contributions to the Indigenous partners. Salary expenditures were relatively stable over the evaluation period and more than \$50M of contributions were provided to Indigenous organizations, which represents over 92% of the total expenditures. There is recognition by all that ECCC needs to increase its efficiency in allowing for faster, earlier availability of funds to minimize impacts on Indigenous partners receiving late funding.

To administer the Indigenous Guardians Initiative, ECCC has established a dedicated Secretariat that started with four full-time equivalents (FTE), funded by B-base (sunsetting) funding. Staffing levels increased slightly as a result of the Initiative's expansion over the years. With the creation of the Indigenous-led Natural Climate Solutions (ILNCS)¹, in 2021, the Secretariat also took on responsibilities for administering this \$76.9M fund with the addition a few FTEs. As of late 2023, there were 8 FTEs working for the Secretariat of both initiatives.

ECCC changed the way it was tracking allocations to the Indigenous Guardians as a result of different funding envelopes being used. For the period 2018-2019 to 2021-2022, under the Nature Legacy envelope, complete tracking by CFSB was taking place. However, for the Enhanced Nature Legacy envelope from 2021-2022 onwards, tracking

¹ Initially called Nature Smart Climate Solutions Fund, Indigenous partnership stream.

of actuals ceased. However, CWS-PAD continued tracking the programs expenditures, but they do not account for Employee Pension Benefits, Information Technology services, and accommodations. As a result, the expenditures below are a combination of both CFSB and CWS-PAD, not including Employee Pension Benefits, Information Technology services, and accommodations:

Table 1. Distribution of Spending from 2018-2019 to 2022-2023

Actuals (\$)	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
Salary	\$446,153	\$537,000	\$597,395	\$678,912	\$677,904
Operation & Maintenance	\$837,623	\$172,007	\$78,703	\$119,709	\$51,241
Contributions	\$5,779,889	\$4,470,144	\$5,457,294	\$11,535,626	\$23,285,204
Total Expenditures	\$7,063,665	\$5,179,151	\$6,133,392	\$12,334,247	\$24,014,349

Expenditures reflect the realities of the funding envelopes that were allocated to the IG Initiative, with the Pilot (using Budget 2017 funding), running from 2018-2019 to 2021-2022, and then increased level per the 2021 Budget funding under the Enhanced Nature Legacy. To note, as a result of the global pandemic and other circumstances, expenditures under Budget 2017 amounted to \$27M, and were expended until 2021-2022. We also noted that salary expenditures were relatively stable over the period, with a small increase in line with the increased interest in the program, applications, and the contributions. Over the evaluation period, over \$50M of contributions were provided to Indigenous organizations, which represents over 92% of the spending.

Table 2. Planned vs. Actual Spending From 2018-2019 to 2022-2023

Spending	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
Planned	\$7,129,387	\$5,386,851	\$6,390,497	\$12,345,391	\$21,420,852
Total Expended	\$7,063,665	\$5,179,151	\$6,133,392	\$12,334,247	\$24,014,349
Variance (\$)	-65,722	-207,700	-257,105	-11,144	2,593,497
Variance (%)	-0.92%	-3.86%	-4.02%	-0.09%	12.11%

It is also important to assess, per the table above, the variance between the planned and actual expenditures. Overall, we can see that these amounts were generally within reasonable margins, with 2022-2023 being the anomaly with \$2.6M of overspending (representing 12.1%). This was mainly the result of a late expenditure towards the establishment of the First Nations National Guardians Network.

During interviews with ECCC personnel, management noted that they worked hard to keep the Secretariat small and efficient, so that a bigger share of the funds is distributed

to the Indigenous organizations. As the program started from scratch, more work was needed to establish processes and create forms and mechanisms. Now they are more experienced, and this allowed ILNCS to leverage existing structures and resources for more efficiency.

Another measure that was noted by both ECCC and Indigenous partners to increase efficiency was the switch to an oral/recipient-based approach for reporting. Instead of filling out a form to report back on the progress of the initiatives, ECCC offered to have discussions and go through the components of the report to alleviate the pressure on recipients. Indigenous partners have indicated that this was really appreciated and more efficient for them.

Areas identified that could improve efficiency included moving away from single-year projects to a more multi-year horizon, as the time required to prepare proposals and set up the contribution agreements are the same. Wherever possible, the IG Secretariat encouraged their Indigenous partners to opt for multi-year calls for proposals. Another potential improvement, noted previously, is to ensure funding is available at the beginning of the fiscal year; otherwise, this inevitably leads to unspent funding requiring more administrative work to carry forward the funding to the next fiscal year. We found that for the sample initiatives we reviewed, the agreements were on average signed in September, 6 months after the start of the fiscal year.

Finally, as noted in both interviews and the recent Audit of the Administration of Grants and Contributions at ECCC, there are a host of systems and trackers in places within ECCC, but none of them communicate with each other, thus resulting in potential inefficiencies through a duplication of efforts between CWS-PAD, CWS-SPD and CFSB. Work is ongoing to find solutions in this regard.

2.5. Performance Information

Summary of findings: The Indigenous Guardians Initiative supports the core responsibility of Conserving Nature with activities towards all three Departmental Results of: 1) Canada's wildlife and habitat are conserved and protected; 2) Canada's species at risk are recovered; and 3) Indigenous Peoples are engaged in conservation. While there is limited direct data that measures any of the above results for the Indigenous Guardians Initiative, interviewees, case studies and internal evaluations have all pointed to meaningful engagement of Indigenous partners.

Nonetheless, there is a need at this juncture to improve the collection of data to demonstrate results, especially with the dual role the Initiative seeks to have with regards to conservation and reconciliation. Work is already taking place to advance this.

The Indigenous Guardians Initiative supports the Department's core responsibility "Conserving Nature." Under this core responsibility, there are three Departmental Results:

- Canada's wildlife and habitat are conserved and protected;
- Canada's species at risk are recovered; and
- Indigenous Peoples are engaged in conservation.

While there is some evidence, as highlighted in the results section (Section 2.2), that the Indigenous Guardians Initiative has had positive impacts and results in all three areas, the primary focus, and linkage, is with Indigenous engagement in conservation. The following table shows, for this departmental result, the result indicators, the target, and the actual results for the three most recent fiscal years for which actual results are available.

Table 3. Departmental Reporting on Indigenous Engagement

Departmental Results: Indigenous people are engaged in conservation

Departmental Result Indicator	Target	2020-2021 Actual result	2021-2022 Actual result	2022-2023 Actual result
Percentage of Indigenous peoples engaged with ECCC who indicate that the engagement was meaningful	61%	64%	70%	66% ²

Source: [Departmental Results Report 2022 to 2023, Department of Environment - Canada.ca](#)

From the survey to measure departmental results indicators, data in relation to this indicator showed that engagement was meaningful. Nevertheless, results shared about meaningfulness couldn't be attributed to specific programs, in order to ensure anonymity of respondents. However, through content analysis from our evaluation's

² The type, frequency and scope of engagement varies each year depending on program activities. The target was established using the results of the first year of the annual survey of Indigenous partners (2018-2019) as the baseline. Results for this indicator have fluctuated from year to year, with results ranging between 61% and 70% since 2018-2019.

work of both reporting in the case studies and in partner interviews, it can be stated that engagement for the Indigenous Guardians was meaningful.

The evaluation noted that the Indigenous Guardians Initiative currently has a foundational logic/theory of change model that depicts its design in terms of causal linkages among its key inputs, activities, outputs, and intended outcomes, which can be found in [Annex B](#). However, there is no performance measurement strategy in place to report against it.

Findings from all data collection methods show partial performance information collected by the program, which prevents a full appreciation of what has been achieved and leads to challenges in creating the narrative for the success story of the program.

Key informants highlighted the fact that there are no precise indicators collected systematically for the Initiative. Indicators were never established for the IG, beyond those for the broader expected result "Indigenous Peoples are engaged in conservation" applicable for all the Department. It was also noted that beyond conservation, the Initiative also has a central role in advancing reconciliation and Indigenous self-governance. As such, there could be need to adjust or collect data that balances those dual goals. The evaluation does recognize that it is challenging to demonstrate results for conservation initiatives such as these that take several years to advance and show long-term outcomes materializing. The same can be said about reconciliation and Indigenous self-governance.

Information from the administrative data review shows limited result reporting in general, despite the success stories heard through interviews and illustrated in project files. Referring to results reporting, the key informant interviews revealed that quality reporting requires time and resources. It was clear that the leadership understands the need to demonstrate results. To that end, departmental presentations on the Indigenous Guardians Initiative have been organized in early 2024. Further, a contract is being established to assess the Initiative's return on investment using specific methodologies.

When asked, Indigenous partners noted that they appreciated the approach being taken where discussions could take place at year end, as it is much easier to tell a story than to fill out forms and report by activity, especially where oral traditions are prevalent. Some interviewees noted that producing videos are considered a way of documenting proven results, by thinking about citizens first, not just the Government of Canada.

Recommendation: The Assistant Deputy Minister of CWS should develop, in collaboration with Indigenous partners, a performance measurement framework that

identifies the data required to monitor progress against pre-established targets in order to report on Indigenous Guardians achievements and performance.

3. Conclusions

Relevance

The Indigenous Guardians Initiative continues to be relevant. There are strong linkages with Government of Canada and ECCC priorities, as well as key commitments made under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Global Biodiversity Framework. Furthermore, a recent survey found that three quarters of Canadians support Indigenous Guardians and the role they play. The evaluation further noted the new increased funding is in line with increased demand for these initiatives. The Indigenous partners that were interviewed all highlighted a strong need for guardians and a more stable, long-term funding for the future.

Results

The Initiative resulted in numerous activities with strong linkages to their objectives, such as supporting Indigenous rights and responsibilities, protecting and conserving ecosystems, developing and maintaining sustainable economies, connecting to natural landscapes and Indigenous cultures, and knowledge transmission and generation with youth and Elders. It further supported hundreds of employment opportunities. Indigenous groups, both during interviews and in their own evaluations, noted the overall positive impacts of the initiatives.

Challenges with regards to the delivery of the initiatives were primarily tied to very lengthy processes from application to receiving the funding. Both ECCC and Indigenous partners noted this as an important issue. However, this was mitigated by the Secretariat's ability to be flexible and provide adjustments to support the achievement of results with the partners.

Design and Governance

ECCC's distinctions-based approach, where specific governance approaches have been established for First Nations, Métis and Inuit, was viewed very favourably by all Indigenous partners and ECCC personnel. The approach accounts for Indigenous cultural realities, was viewed as effective, and allowed groups to be centered in decision-making.

However, some challenges were noted in the governance at ECCC of the Indigenous Guardians Initiative, with important delays in the approval of agreements and disbursement of funds. The recent findings of the Audit of the Administration of Grants and Contributions at ECCC recognized this, and the Department is developing an action plan to address internal governance processes.

Finally, there is evidence that some groups might not be able to receive Indigenous Guardians funding, as there is a requirement to be recognized by one of the three governing bodies to be eligible for funding. There is recognition, within ECCC, of a need to consider modern treaty and non-affiliated groups in future programming.

Efficiency

The IG Secretariat at ECCC was initially established to administer the Indigenous Guardians Initiative, and then went on to administer the Indigenous-led Natural Climate Solutions (ILNCS), in 2021, using a similar approach. Expenditures for the Initiative increased as expected, with the vast majority going towards the contributions to the Indigenous partners. Salary expenditures were relatively stable over the evaluation period and more than \$50M of contributions were provided to Indigenous organizations, which represents over 92% of the total expenditures. There is recognition by all that ECCC needs to increase its efficiency in allowing for faster, earlier availability of funds to minimize impacts on Indigenous partners receiving late funding.

Performance Information

The Indigenous Guardians Initiative supports the core responsibility of Conserving Nature with activities towards all three Departmental Results of: 1) Canada's wildlife and habitat are conserved and protected; 2) Canada's species at risk are recovered; and 3) Indigenous Peoples are engaged in conservation. While there is limited direct data that measures any of the above results for the Indigenous Guardians Initiative, interviewees, case studies and internal evaluations have all pointed to meaningful engagement of Indigenous partners.

Nonetheless, there is a need at this juncture to improve the collection of data to demonstrate results, especially with the dual role the Initiative seeks to have with regards to conservation and reconciliation. Work is already taking place to advance this.

4. Recommendation, Management Response and Action Plan

Recommendation 1: The Assistant Deputy Minister of CWS should develop, in collaboration with Indigenous partners, a performance measurement framework that identifies the data required to monitor progress against pre-established targets in order to report on Indigenous Guardians achievements and performance.

Management Response:

Agreed

The Indigenous Guardians Initiative reports on the percentage of Indigenous Peoples engaged in conservation. The performance measure of the Initiative does not include any specific target related to conservation objectives.

Action 1: The Indigenous Guardians Initiative will develop a performance measurement framework to collect qualitative data related to the activities identified in the Contribution Agreements in place for 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 to be reported on in the annual and final reports.

Deliverables	Timeline	Responsible
Develop a list of potential qualitative targets to be included in the annual and final reports.	September 30, 2024	Indigenous Guardians Secretariat
Consult with Indigenous Partners on the proposed targets and finalize a list of targets that could be included in the annual and final reports.	November 30, 2024	Indigenous Guardians Secretariat, Indigenous Governance members: Inuit (ITK and 4 Inuit Treaty Organizations), Métis (MNC and 4 governing

		members, MMF, MSGC, NWTMN), First Nations National Guardians Network
Modify the annual and final reports to include section on qualitative targets.	December 15, 2024	Indigenous Guardians Secretariat
Send new reports for annual/final reporting to 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 funding recipients.	March 14, 2025	Indigenous Guardians Secretariat

5. Annexes

5.1. Annex A – Evaluation Matrix

Relevance

Questions

1. Are the Initiatives relevant?
 - a. Is there a continued need for the Initiatives?
 - b. Are the Initiatives aligned with federal government priorities?
 - c. Are the Initiatives consistent with federal roles and responsibilities?

Indicators

- Evidence of need addressed by the Initiatives.
- Evidence of gaps fulfilled by the federal government.
- Evidence of linkages to the integrated climate change lens.

Sources/Methods

- Document and File Review
- Interviews
- Case Studies

Results achieved

Questions

2. What results have been achieved by the Initiatives?
 - a. Have there been any unintended (positive or negative) outcomes?
 - b. Have there been other effects from the Initiatives' activities, including group-specific impacts?
 - c. To what extent have the Initiatives been responsive to emerging challenges?
 - d. Have gaps in programming been identified?

Indicators

- Evidence of achievement of expected outcomes, per the logic model.
- Evidence of other results and benefits achieved by the Initiatives
- Evidence of action towards emerging issues, challenges and developments.
- Internal and external perspectives, on responsiveness of the Initiatives and suggestions for improvement.

Sources/Methods

- Document and File Review

- Interviews
- Case Studies

Governance

Questions

3. Has the governance of the Initiatives supported the achievement of results?
 - a. To what extent is the governance structure clear, appropriate and efficient for achieving expected results?
 - b. Does the governance structure support Indigenous participation and decision-making?

Indicators

- Evidence of the existence of a defined governance structure, internal coordination, and roles and responsibilities.
- Evidence of clear accountability and processes to make decisions.
- Perspectives on the clarity of roles and responsibilities and efficiency of internal collaboration in delivery.

Sources/Methods

- Document and File Review
- Interviews
- Case Studies

Design

Questions

4. Are the Initiatives design appropriate for achieving the intended outcomes?
 - a. Are any improvements to the design needed to facilitate the achievement of outcomes?
 - b. Were the partners involved in the design of the Initiatives?
 - c. What lessons have been learned that could inform adjustments to the design of Initiatives?

Indicators

- Evidence that relevant partners have been appropriately involved in the design of the Initiatives (e.g., distinctions-based approach)
- Evidence that lessons from past initiatives were taken into account in the design.
- Evidence of flexibility to adjust the design and delivery when unexpected elements occur.
- Evidence that the design made it possible to reach out to a maximum of Indigenous groups/organizations.

Sources/Methods

- Document and File Review
- Interviews
- Case Studies

Efficiency

Questions

5. Have the Initiatives used resources efficiently?
 - a. Have the Initiatives been undertaking specific activities and delivering products at a reasonable cost?
 - b. Have the Initiatives used resources as planned?
 - c. How have the Initiatives adjusted the approach from the pilot to post-pilot?

Indicators

- Comparison of planned and actual spending.
- Evidence of measures taken to deliver activities efficiently or improve efficiency.
- Internal perspectives on additional measures or mechanisms for improving efficiency.

Sources/Methods

- Document and File Review
- Interviews
- Case Studies

Use of performance information

Questions

6. To what extent do the Initiatives have quality performance information (accessible, sufficient and reliable) that was accessible to decision-makers?
 - a. Was it adequate to support this evaluation?

Indicators

- Evidence that performance information is accessible, sufficient and reliable for decision-makers, evaluators and partners.

Sources/Methods

- Document and File Review
- Interviews
- Case Studies

5.2. Annex B – Logic Model

Theory of Change – Indigenous Guardians Pilot

Climate change, proximity and materiality of industry, provincial regulatory environment, cultural strength, varying ideas about what a Guardian does/is	What /Who Changes?	Ultimately	Greater Indigenous Knowledge, influence and responsibility over land and marine management that leads to enhanced sustainability of local land-based economies				
		Later	Better land, water and ice governance and stewardship led by Indigenous peoples; greater Indigenous access to and governance over territorial management where Indigenous Knowledge is valued and integrated; enhanced Indigenous Guardians Program sustainability				
		Soon	More knowledge and skills are produced, used and shared for land and water management decision making; more integration of cultural knowledge in land/marine management	Meaningful Indigenous engagement and authority in land-based decisions; spin off activities; more and stronger partnerships or collaboration on land and marine management		Better decision-making based on an integration of Indigenous and western knowledge	
	What Activities?	Outputs	Information systems and data, stories, images	#/quality of training, outreach, educational efforts; materials produced; #youth/Elder connection opportunities	Ecological observations and interventions, changes to policy and practice	#jobs, local economic activity; efforts to engage partners	Indigenous Knowledge and science used in land and marine-based decisions
		Activities	Information Gathering and Management/ Monitoring	Capacity Building	Species and Habitat Management	Indigenous Guardians Program sustainability	Cultural preservation, revitalization and integration
		Inputs	Federal funding, knowledge inputs and guidance from Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners, partnership development, distinctions-based co-management processes.				

Assumptions: The Pilot's design is culturally and community appropriate. Indigenous Guardians have, or are developing, the skills they need to do the work. Sufficient Indigenous decision-making influence leads to improved lands, water and ice. Partnerships will be secured to ensure initiative sustainability.

5.3. Annex C – Reference List

Environment and Climate Change Canada's [Audit and Evaluation Plan 2022 to 2027](#) (March 2022)

[2021 Mandate Letter to the Environment and Climate Change Canada Minister](#) (December 2021)

[United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (2007)

[Public Opinion on Indigenous Guardians](#) - Abacus Data on behalf of Indigenous Leadership Initiative (October 2023)

[Departmental Results Report 2022 to 2023](#), Department of Environment (2023)