

## Conservation group using technology to engage with 'citizen scientists'

The South Coast Conservation Program developing mobile app to report endangered species

By Brandon Barrett



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**ENDANGERED LIST** The great blue heron is one of more than 260 endangered species that the South Coast Conservation Program is trying to protect. The organization held a workshop in Whistler on Sunday, March 29 that explored ways to increase public engagement on conservation issues.

It may seem like an oxymoron to use digital technologies to connect people with their natural surroundings, but that's exactly what a South Coast conservation group is attempting with a new mobile app.

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The South Coast Conservation Program (SCCP) is a collaborative of government and non-government interests with the goal of protecting the more than 260 endangered species found in the Sea to Sky corridor, Squamish-Lillooet Regional District, Lower Mainland and Sunshine Coast.

Part of that mandate is building engagement with the general public, and a recent workshop held by the group at the Whistler Public Library delved into some of the challenges around increasing awareness of conservation issues in an age with more distractions than ever.

"As an organization we're exploring new tools to engage and re-engage the average person who may not really feel connected to the conservation idea," explained SCCP coordinator Pamela Zevit. "The approach we're using now is looking at the burgeoning international community of citizen scientists. It's basically providing a level of mentoring, and taking the more applied, hardcore science aspects of conservation and figuring out a way to make them more digestible and interesting."

One of the ways the SCCP hopes to engage with the public is through a new app being developed for Android phones that will allow users to track wildlife sightings and report any endangered species they encounter.

It's part of a growing trend in conservation circles that relies on digital technologies to bring amateur scientists into the fold, said Claire Ruddy, executive director of the Association of Whistler Area Residents for the Environment (AWARE).

"I think that's an exciting way technology is being used for conservation," she said, pointing to another mobile app developed by Alberta-based Foothills Research Institute that encourages users to collect bear scat samples to determine the population size, abundance and distribution of grizzly bears.

"With that they're creating a massive influx of data around grizzly bears and black bears, and, normally, there would have been no way to do a project of that scale on the ground," Ruddy added.

With a group of about 20 attending, Zevit said the workshop inspired some "very important and engaging" discussion on conservation. But she still believes there's a growing disconnect between the average Whistler resident's understanding of major conservation issues and the reality on the ground.

"If you go to Whistler there are a lot of people who are utilizing the natural world and paying a lot of money to do it, but it doesn't necessarily translate into understanding there are endangered species they are sharing this landscape with that need to be considered," she said.

"Part of the problem is people confuse the outdoor recreation experience with being engaged in conservation."

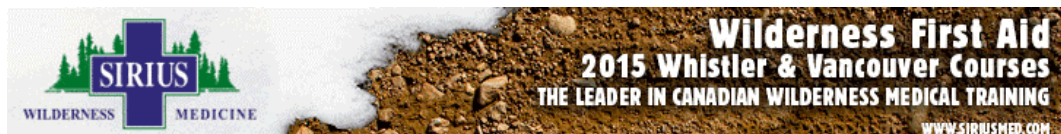
While Ruddy agrees the community is less attuned to its natural surroundings than in the past, she has seen a subtle shift in conservation priorities in recent years.

"Where people used to be really active in going on nature hikes, or going out on bird counts, those sorts of things, now people are looking for action in their own homes: waste or energy reductions — things they can control," she said. "Sometimes with conservation, the issues are big. Pushing off lights is easy; deciding not to build new trails is a tough choice, but in some key areas of habitat, it's important.

"We are outdoorsy, we're in the backcountry a lot, but we also have to be mindful of the consequences of our choices."

For more information, or details on the release of the SCCP's mobile app, visit [www.sccp.ca](http://www.sccp.ca).

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