



Opinion

A COVID-busting fiscal plan should put nature first

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Sandra Schwartz

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When Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland delivers her fall economic statement—widely anticipated in the coming days—most expect a first-time glimpse of Canada's long-term plan to battle back the pandemic gloom. Many hope the outlook will echo the COVID-focused message from a special summit of the UN General Assembly a few weeks back: one antidote to the sickened state of the planet and its people, the UN group declared, is nature.

The Biodiversity Summit—a first for the annual UN gathering—was attended (virtually) by scores of world leaders, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and followed weeks of grim news of the COVID-19 second wave, a near-record melting of Arctic sea ice, wildfires across California and the Amazon, and multiple reports of life's vanishing diversity. The leaders

confirmed what scientists now know well: a common culprit behind the lethal pandemic, catastrophic climate change, disappearing species, and even economic uncertainty, is our reckless disregard for the natural world.

Conservation is now recognized as critical to addressing some of the greatest existential threats humanity has ever faced. Saving nature is key not only to protecting the planet but also to saving lives and preserving prosperity.

Earlier this year, for instance, the World Economic Forum listed biodiversity loss among the top five threats to the global economy. Half of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the group said, is moderately or highly dependent on nature and the services it provides.

Meanwhile, deadly pandemics such as COVID-19—so far responsible for more than 260,000 cases in Canada and more than 10,000 deaths—are an example of what can happen when nature is pushed into a corner. Experts warn that three-quarters of all emerging viral diseases in people originate with animals, including wildlife.

Protecting and restoring forests, grasslands, and wetlands are also viewed as essential to slowing or reversing the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. The burning, loss and degradation of tropical forests alone account for about 15 per cent of all the carbon people release to the atmosphere.

Conservation is essential. Yet, as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) reported last month, a decade of collective effort by the convention's almost 200 signatory nations, including Canada, failed to meet



Canadians need to speak up now to urge Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland to follow through on the government's conservation commitments, writes Sandra Schwartz. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

a single one of the agreement's 20 main targets. More is needed—and fast.

Canada may be uniquely qualified to lead a worldwide conservation charge. We are the planet's second-largest country by size with vast tracts of irreplaceable wilderness. Canadians have long been seen as champions of nature. We were the first industrialized country to sign the CBD, and we host its international secretariat in Montreal.

In the past five years, Ottawa has increased Canada's marine protected areas more than tenfold, and in 2018, an historic \$1.3-billion federal commitment for conservation provided support for Indigenous nations and other partners to protect more of Canada's natural landscapes, and inspired hundreds of partners to step forward. The prime minister has since pledged to protect 25 per cent of Canada's land and ocean by 2025 and 30 per cent by 2030.

He repeated the promise just ahead of the UN summit when he joined the heads of France, the United Kingdom, Germany,

and 70 other nations in signing the "Leaders' Pledge for Nature" to reverse biodiversity loss by 2030.

Canada also linked with the 30 countries of the "High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People," pushing to make the protection of at least 30 per cent of Earth's land and ocean by 2030 a central plank of a new biodiversity convention framework next spring.

Along with pledges to plant two billion trees, ban many single-use plastics, and protect wetlands, Trudeau's remarkable pledges to the international community sounded a lot like conservation leadership. But the only languages nature understands are meaningful action and financial support.

Canadians need to speak up now to urge Freeland to follow through on the government's conservation commitments. We need to insist that Canada put nature—our life-support system—at the centre of any long-term fiscal strategy and post-COVID economic recovery plans. Supporting Indigenous leadership on conservation is also vital to success.

Global leaders, including our prime minister, have already agreed that nature conservation offers one of the clearest paths forward from under this cloud of contagion, crises and consternation. Ottawa, which has been ramping up its commitment to nature for years, should deliver an economic statement that reflects this view: Canadians are ready to lead the world to make way for nature.

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