Opinion

Biden’s protected-area push highlights Canada’s conservation opportunity

We need to stand with our neighbour and other nations to stem the tide of vanishing wildlife and safeguard the planetary life support system on which we all depend.

BY SANDRA SCHWARTZ

At the Feb. 23 bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, U.S. President Joe Biden’s first remarks sounded a bit like a friendly taunt: Canada should keep up as he rolls out his bold, new agenda: “We’re all best served when the United States and Canada work together and lead together,” he said.

Considering the president’s first efforts in office include an extraordinary push to save nature, Canada needs to up its game to meet Biden’s challenge. Ambitious investments in nature in the upcoming 2021 budget represent the Trudeau government’s chance.

Within a week of his inauguration, Biden launched an unprecedented conservation push that includes returning legal safeguards to public lands and expanding protection to cover 30 per cent of U.S. lands and ocean by 2030. This signals a clear departure from the past four years of the previous administration. The United States were among the top five threats to the global economy and said half of the world’s gross domestic product (GDP) is moderately or highly dependent on nature and the services it provides. The World Health Organization, too, warned that mistreatment of nature risks more deadly wildlife-linked pandemics in the future. These are warnings we cannot ignore.

Protecting and restoring nature is also critical to the fight against climate change. Scientists say doing so could provide more than one third of the emissions reductions needed to prevent the rise in global temperatures from topping 2°C by 2030.

Many have argued that the COVID-19 economic slowdown offers a unique opportunity to change the way we live and do business—a chance to ensure a nature-positive, carbon neutral more equitable future.

For Canada, this means investing big in the next federal budget, expected to be presented to Canadians in the coming weeks. Nature advocates are urging the government to invest $4.8-billion over five years to protect nature and fully support Indigenous-led conservation. These investments are critical now if Canada is to keep its promise of a network of federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous protected areas covering at least 30 per cent of Canada by 2030.

At the Feb. 23 bilateral meeting, Biden again signalled that the U.S. is back at the frontline in the fight to save nature. We need to stand with our neighbour and other nations to stem the tide of vanishing wildlife and safeguard the planetary life support system on which we all depend.

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