



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 as the previous administration led what has been called the largest elimination of protected areas in American history and helped push the United States to the back of the environmental pack.

At the same time, Canadian conservation efforts and commitments secured our country's reputation as an international champion in the fight to protect nature and harness its power to help tackle climate change.



Considering the U.S. President Joe Biden's, right, first efforts in office include an extraordinary push to save nature, Canada needs to up its game to meet his challenge. Ambitious investments in nature in the upcoming 2021 budget represent Prime Minister Justin Trudeau government's chance, writes Sandra Schwartz. Screenshot courtesy of YouTube/The White House

For example, in 2018, Ottawa invested an unprecedented \$1.3-billion in conservation across the country, encouraging Indigenous governments, provinces, territories, and hundreds of other partners to join in saving Canadian wild lands.

In late February, Canada and the United States were among the G7 nations who pledged to "build back better for all" in the global recovery from COVID-19, making climate change and biodiversity central to economic plans.

Ahead of last September's United Nations Summit on Biodiversity, the prime minister was an impassioned voice among more than 80 world leaders who signed the Leader's Pledge for Nature, which makes the same case for a central role for nature and climate change in recovery plans and investments. Canada also joined the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People—a group of more than 50 countries committed to protecting at least 30 per cent of the planet's land and ocean by 2030.

In the past five years, Canada has taken promising steps, expanding our marine protected areas and our protected lands

and inland waters to approximately 13 per cent. As stewards of almost a quarter of the planet's last intact forests, a quarter of its wetlands, a fifth of its fresh water, and almost a third of its coastlines, Canada's leadership matters.

So does our relationship with the United States. Our countries have a long history of shared conservation success, such as today's Migratory Birds Convention Act, which was first adopted in 1917 in both the U.S. and Canada to stop the decimation of birds by unregulated market hunting.

As the U.S. ramps up, Canada must keep up. Biden's swift conservation actions reflect the urgency of the looming biodiversity and climate crises: scientists say at least half of earth's land and ocean need to be protected and restored to safeguard nature and stabilize the climate. Protecting 30 per cent by 2030 is a significant step towards that goal.

But it's not just about nature. Last year, the World Economic Forum listed biodiversity loss 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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