



Opinion

Provinces to blame for Canada's broken international conservation promise

Canada didn't fulfil its previous conservation vows to the world. To keep our new promises, we must look to the provinces and territories to step up and stop holding us back.

BY SANDRA SCHWARTZ

This week, ministers from the federal, provincial, and territorial governments responsible for protecting nature will meet to address the nation's urgent need for a new conservation plan. Canada has promised to protect one-quarter of its land and ocean within four years, and at least 30 per cent by the end of the decade. To get there, we can't repeat the past. Canada didn't fulfil its previous conservation vows to the world. To keep our new promises, we must look to the provinces and territories to step up and stop holding us back.

Lack of provincial and territorial government commitment and action, according to a new Report Card on protected areas, was a major obstacle to Canada's recent failed effort to protect 17 per cent of its land and inland water by last year's 2020 deadline. That area-based target was agreed to in 2010 by most nations, including Canada, under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UN CBD)—an international accord to address the biodiversity crisis. Yet today, only 13.1 per cent of Canada's landscape is protected.

Now, Canada's reputation as a conservation champion is on the line again. Earlier this month, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau joined other G7 heads

of state vowing to protect at least 30 per cent of the Earth's land and ocean by 2030. It's a promise repeated from last September when he joined the Leaders' Pledge for Nature recognizing biodiversity's critical role in supporting human life, managing climate change, and fuelling the global economy. Canada is currently encouraging other nations to adopt the target as a global aim when the UN CBD meets in China this fall.

While these pledges are key to moving toward action, words are not enough to address the biodiversity crisis. Canada has one of the best opportunities in the world to lead, and the recent federal commitment of more than \$3-billion for nature conservation is a step in the right direction. But concrete action and investments from the provinces and territories are needed, not conservation foot-dragging and backpedaling.

Take Alberta, for example. Once a conservation leader, the Alberta government recently abandoned plans for a large new protected area that would have conserved the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River, tried to remove protection for 175 provincial parks, and opened the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains to coal exploration and mining.

Ontario exempted forest companies from rules to protect wildlife, downgraded its environmental assessment process, and recently announced legislation changes that will cut funding for the province's conservation authorities.

In the new Report Card assessing conservation performance in Canada, these governments earned an F, and several other provinces and territories have done little to help. Newfoundland and Labrador, Sas-



Quebec, alone among the provinces and territories with an A- grade in CPAWS' recent report card on protected areas, was close to delivering on its promise to protect 17 per cent of its land by 2020, and has also committed to 30 per cent protection by 2030, writes Sandra Schwartz. Pixabay photograph by Mario Léveillé

katchewan, British Columbia, and Manitoba added few new protected areas over the last decade, earning them an F, D, C, and C-, respectively.

Quebec, alone among the provinces and territories with an A- grade, was close to delivering on its promise to protect 17 per cent of its land by 2020, and has also committed to 30 per cent protection by 2030.

The federal government earned a B+ for keeping its promise to protect at least 10 per cent of Canada's ocean by 2020 (13.8 per cent is now reported as protected) and for its recent investments in ocean conservation. On the terrestrial side, where the federal government has limited jurisdiction, it earned an A- for international and domestic leadership, supporting Indigenous-led conservation, and two historic budget investments in conservation.

The wins in some jurisdictions were not enough to hold Canada to its previous conservation promise. For the federal, provincial, and territorial ministers meeting this week, an evaluation of past failures reveals important lessons: one, we need political will and conservation

ambition from all provinces and territories to resolve the nature emergency facing Canada and the planet; two, supporting Indigenous-led conservation is key; and three, federal conservation funding and leadership can offer vital support to other jurisdictions and their new protected-area initiatives.

The world is watching. We're the planet's second-largest country by size with vast tracts of wilderness and the world's longest coastline. We were the first industrialized country to sign the UN CBD, and we host its international secretariat in Montreal. When asked, Canadians consistently and overwhelmingly support protecting at least 30 per cent of our country by 2030.

When it comes to nature, if Canada is to keep its promises and be a model for the international community, our provinces and territories must step up, stop dragging their feet, and work together to become conservation leaders in this critical decade of conservation.

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