



Opinion

New conservation roadmap shows Canada's potential as nature's champion

As the planet's second-largest country by size, with vast tracts of irreplaceable natural heritage, Canada can lead other nations in the needed push to protect almost one-third of land and ocean everywhere.

BY SANDRA SCHWARTZ

Last week's announcement that Canada will host perhaps the most critical meeting ever in the race to save nature is an opportunity for this country to show its colours as a conservation champion. If the provinces and territories do their part, Canada's leadership on protecting our country's land and ocean could inspire the world to save the planet's life-support system that wildlife and people everywhere need to survive.

After more than two years of delay, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity confirmed that its COP15 biodiversity summit has been moved to Montreal for Dec. 5-17 after China's zero-COVID policy upended that country's plans to host the meeting in Kunming. The summit of the world's nations is expected to adopt a post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework—an agreement akin to the Paris Accord on climate change—to halt the collapse of the world's ecosystems by the end of the decade and to restore a healthy planet by 2050.

The news comes less than a week after the release of our new Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) report that Canada is within reach of protecting 30 per cent of land and ocean by 2030—a core pillar of efforts to save nature. Our new conservation roadmap shows dozens of proposed or planned

new protected areas—including many Indigenous-led conservation initiatives—that have already been identified to essentially get the country to the 30 per cent benchmark. That is, if provinces and territories, not just Ottawa, act quickly to help.

If all the prospective areas are eventually designated, the country will more than double its currently protected areas from around 14 per cent of land and marine areas to almost one-third.

A pledge by world nations to protect 30 per cent of land and

ocean by the end of the decade is expected to be a key plank of the new UN biodiversity framework set for signatures in Montreal. Scientists say saving natural spaces is critical to ending the habitat losses responsible for most extinctions.



On June 22, Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault confirmed Canada will host December's COP15 biodiversity summit in Montreal, after the event had to move from its original venue in China. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Canada's hopes of keeping its 30 per cent promise.

These jurisdictions, many of which have given short shrift to conservation in the past, need to turn their attention to nature's well-known environmental, economic, and health benefits. Protected forests, grasslands, and wetlands, for example, can slow or reverse greenhouse gas emissions. The World Economic Forum credits nature for pollination, water purification, and other services that are worth about half of the global gross domes-

tic product. Health researchers, meanwhile, say stopping the destruction of nature can help prevent deadly pandemics, such as COVID-19.

There are other advantages. For example, many of the identified prospective protected areas across Canada are Indigenous-led initiatives, creating opportunities for reconciliation and more support for Indigenous stewardship of their traditional lands. Importantly, research suggests Indigenous-managed landscapes do better than others to protect wildlife, including species at risk.

Canada's federal efforts, meanwhile, are critical to establishing

marine protected areas, and the five-year, \$3.2-billion conservation investment in the 2021 federal budget offers support to protection efforts throughout the country, including those of provinces and territories. Recently, Ottawa committed to creating 10 new national parks, 15 new national urban parks, and 10 new national marine conservation areas across Canada. Earlier this month, on World Oceans Day, it announced a new marine refuge for the Eastern Canyons east of Sable Island, N.S., bringing the total area of ocean protected to 14.6 per cent.

More is needed, especially from the provinces and territories. CPAWS is urging these jurisdictions to prioritize Indigenous-led conservation, take advantage of available federal financial support, and increase their own provincial and territorial funding to speed up the process of designating existing prospective sites as protected areas by the end of the decade.

In Montreal, this country will be in the spotlight. Canada has long been seen as an international conservation leader. We were the first industrialized nation to sign the Convention on Biological Diversity, and we host its secretariat in Montreal. As the planet's second-largest country by size, with vast tracts of irreplaceable natural heritage, Canada can lead other nations in the needed push to protect almost one-third of land and ocean everywhere.

We know how to do it. We have a roadmap. Now, provinces and territories need to follow through on areas identified for protection so Canada can be an example to the world of how to safeguard nature and our own well-being.

Sandra Schwartz is the national executive director for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.

The Hill Times