

## FEATURE

# ‘It’s going to happen’: Minister Guilbeault doubles down on conservation targets

By PETER MAZEREUW OCTOBER 31, 2022

Canada is currently not on pace to meet its conservation targets for 2025 and 2030. Guilbeault says there are protection projects in the works that will change that.



Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault will play host as countries from around the world come to Montreal in December for a UN biodiversity summit. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

- Canada’s government has been undertaking an ambitious environmental project that has often fallen under the shadow of the debate over climate change. The project is about conservation: creating national parks and wildlife areas, and using a surprising variety of other means to rope off natural areas from damage and development.
- Canada has committed to conserving 30 per cent of its land and 30 per cent of its ocean territory by the year 2030, and to hit the 25 per cent milestone by the year 2025.
- The government missed its 2020 target for protecting land, but under the Trudeau Liberals has dramatically increased the amount of protected ocean. Hitting the 2025 and 2030 targets will be a major challenge, however—one that Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault will be talking about plenty as he serves as the host of UN biodiversity summit that is coming to Montreal in December.



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Guilbeault (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, Que.) spoke to *Hill Times*' executive editor Peter Mazereeuw last week about his work to meet Canada's conservation targets. He hinted that there would be some major announcements coming between now and December, and said he was "100 per cent" confident that his government would meet its 2025 mark.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Let's start with the upcoming biodiversity summit in Montreal. What are you hoping to achieve there?**

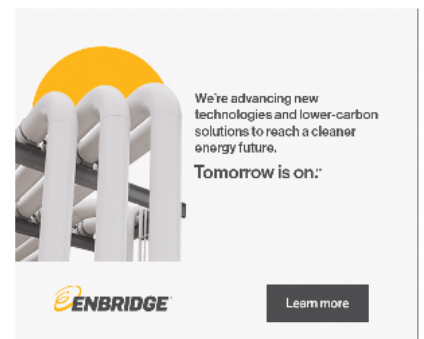
"So, Canada with a number of our international allies, launched, a few weeks ago, during the United Nations General Assembly meeting, what we call the High Ambition Coalition [for Nature and People]. That's a coalition of about [100] countries, both North and South: Ecuador, Costa Rica, Colombia, Chile, Gabon, the United Kingdom, France, the U.S., and obviously, Canada. And together, we were trying to achieve a number of things for the Montreal meeting. One of them is that there's an international agreement to protect at least 30 per cent of our lands and oceans by 2030. Which is a Canadian objective, and an objective shared by many countries. But we wanted to make it part of this new international agreement."

"We want to halt and reverse biodiversity loss, so that we start that at the latest in 2030, and so that by 2050, we have a planet that's nature positive. As opposed to what we're seeing now, where we're losing biodiversity. We're losing species, animals, plants, insects, every year, after year, after year. We want to reverse that trend. And there are examples in the world where we have been able to do that. But we have to collectively agree, we have to give ourselves the means to be able to achieve that."

"A third very important objective is to ensure that we mobilize financial resources, to help countries in the south to be able to do the type of things that need to happen on conservation. And we need to mobilize public financing in countries like Canada and Europe and Japan, but also private sector philanthropy. So we need hundreds of billions of dollars to tackle the biodiversity crisis. And we have to remember that one of the best tools we have to fight climate change is nature. The more we invest in conserving and enhancing and protecting nature, the more we invest in fighting climate change, at the same time."

**What's the money going to be used for?**

"Restoration. Conservation. Species at risk in southern countries. Protecting habitat. A whole range of different things. But also, it will be used to support local communities, Indigenous communities, where we are putting in place a protection initiative so that they have a livelihood that is associated, not with destroying nature, but with protecting it."







Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault says one of the objectives of the upcoming UN biodiversity summit in Montreal is getting more countries to agree to protect at least 30 per cent of lands and oceans by 2030. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

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Your government has had some success protecting ocean territory fairly quickly, which allowed you to meet your 2020 target for ocean. But a big chunk of that was accomplished using fishery closures, which are not the same as marine protected areas. Canadians might be wondering: how strong are those protections? So how strong and how—

“—They’re very strong. In order for us to be able to count them as part of Canada’s total, they have to be able to meet international standards, there’s no two ways about it. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to use them as part of our target. So they are they are very, very strong, and they meet international standards in terms of protection.”

Now, going back to what you’re saying just a moment ago, about Montreal. If I heard you correctly, one of your objectives is to have this ‘30 by 30,’ to have that enshrined as a formal international target, not a sort of aspirational target as it is now. Is that right?



Then-environment minister Jonathan Wilkinson, from left, pictured Nov. 19, 2020, with then-heritage minister Steven Guilbeault, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and former MP and cabinet minister Catherine McKenna. Guilbeault says the Liberals have achieved significant protections in the seven years in government. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

“It is more challenging on land, because there are different usages of the land: forestry, mining. And we have to find new economic models, where it pays to conserve, it pays to protect, and that’s what we’re doing. But as I said, it takes time. You need investment, and we’re making record-level investment to enable these projects to happen. But typically, you know, it can take three, four, or five years to create a new protected area, and in some cases, some projects, Parks Canada has been working on [these] for 15, 20 years. So it’s normal that it takes some time. But we will get there.”

**You talking about [how] we have to pay to protect. How do you approach those discussions? If you’re dealing with a community, say, or a level of government that says, ‘We could build a mine here and make billions.’ Can federal funding ever compete with that?**

“Well, I think we are seeing that... if you look at ecotourism, for example. And if you look at the success that Parks Canada has throughout the country, tens of millions of people visit our national parks every year, and tourists come from all over the world to visit some of our protected areas and some of our national parks. So there is a good business case.”

“That’s correct. ... A number of countries agree that this should be an international target. But now we need for the world to agree. And that’s one of the objectives for the Montreal conference.”

**Looking at the pace of land protection Canada, as you push to make 30 per cent our target for 2030, we’re not on pace to go anywhere close to that target right now. Why is that?**

“So we’re a little bit above 14 per cent of land production in Canada, but we have a target of being at 25 per cent by 2025. And through historic investment in Budget 2019 and in 2021, more than \$4-billion in conservation, we’re now working with a number of provinces, territories, Indigenous nations on massive conservation projects that will enable us to achieve our [20]25 targets, which is to protect 25 per cent of land and ocean by 2025 en route to meeting our 2030 targets.”

“There’s a couple a reports that were published recently—I know one by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, I think there was another one, I believe, by Nature Conservancy Canada—which both came to the conclusion that we can meet our 2025 targets and 2030 targets.”

“I’m not saying it’s a done deal, we have to do the work. And we are working with our partners in the NGO world as well as Indigenous [peoples] and philanthropies, and as I said, provincial and territorial governments, to ensure that we achieve those goals.”

**I would guess that most Canadians are on board with this. It’s not a particularly partisan issue. You’ve been environment minister for a year, but your government has been working on this for seven years, and the Harper government was on board with this 2020 target before that. And yet, we’ve seen that the pace of protection for land, it’s been slow. What are the obstacles that you’re trying to work through to protect land in Canada?**

“The Harper government wasn’t working on that when we came into power in 2015. Canada wasn’t protecting [even] two per cent of its coastlines and oceans. We’re at more than 15 per cent now, and we did that in seven years. But it wasn’t happening before.”



“But it’s a non-traditional, or certainly less traditional than resource exploitation, which we’ve been doing for decades and decades. So I think, as much as it is about investment, it’s also about changing our mindset about these things and looking at these things differently than we have in the past where environmental protection was always opposed to development. And what we’re saying is, it doesn’t have to be like that. We just have to think about it differently.”

**Could you give me an example for people who hear you say that and think, ‘Well, what does that mean? Are we going to be strip mining a national park?’ You’re not proposing that, but just how do you think about it differently? How do you make it work for both parties?**

“We’re looking at developing critical mines across the country, because we need those minerals for the energy transition. We need it for our computers, our cell phones, our electric vehicles. But we need to do this in a way that makes sense, both from an Indigenous perspective, because most of these resources are on traditional Indigenous lands, and we need to do this in a way that makes sense for nature.”

“So maybe we’ll decide that, even though there are deposits of certain critical minerals, we wouldn’t go in certain places because they are of great cultural or historical value for Indigenous people. Or, there’s critical habitats for certain species. But in other places, less sensitive in terms of environmental impact, less sensitive in terms of Indigenous rights, and in some cases Indigenous communities are in favour of developing these projects.”

“I think we just have to be smart about it. I don’t think we can do the energy transition that needs to happen by acting like a bulldozer on environmental issues or on Indigenous issues. Instead of allowing projects to go forward, we will only create a backlash, and projects will get dragged into the courts and opposed by local communities, by Indigenous communities, by environmental groups. It’s not a smart way to be doing that.”

**Last year, the environmental group CPAWS [Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society] issued report cards for all levels of government, looking at their progress on conservation and protection. The federal government got an A- for protecting land, a B+ for ocean. Three provinces got failing grades: Alberta, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador. And Saskatchewan got a D.**

**Will the federal government be able to meet its protection targets—I’m thinking on land in particular—if those provinces continue their approach to protection?**

“As I said, it’s an all-hands-on-deck approach, to be able to achieve those goals. And I’m happy to say that, certainly with Newfoundland and Labrador and Ontario, there’s lots more happening in terms of conservation. We have ongoing discussions with them about specific projects. We signed an agreement last year with Ontario for caribou protection. We’re working with them on new protected areas. They’re working on some provincial protected areas as well.”

“I think we are seeing a shift in attitude at many, many different provinces and jurisdictions in Canada on conservation, in part because the federal government is willing to invest billions of dollars with provinces and territories to do that. So it’s not only about money, but money can certainly help.”

**You didn't mention Alberta or Saskatchewan. Do you see any progress on those fronts?**

"Actually, yes. I didn't mention them, because I couldn't recall any specific projects. But we are having conversations with these provincial governments. But in the case of Ontario, and Newfoundland, I can think of a number of projects, concrete projects we're working on right now."

**What kind of pushback from industry [and] business interests are you getting as you look for new places to protect?**

"Typically, you know, it will be about buying back forest permits. Or saying, you know, 'You can't go in and log there anymore.'"

"I mean, one of the reasons these projects take time is, you can't just show up and say, 'Okay, this is what's happening.' You need to sit down with local communities, with Indigenous communities. You need to show them, and work with them on these new economic models. It's not something you can impose from the top down."

"But as I said, we are seeing a greater appeal and greater desire for these projects to take place. And you will, as we move toward Montreal, I suspect we will see provinces and territories saying 'Hey, this is what we're doing.' Announcing new projects, new targets, sometimes in collaboration with the federal government, sometimes on their own. And I think that will show Canadians how much progress we're making at all levels of government."



Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault, centre, says there is 'real momentum' protecting Canada's land, with the government in the process of creating 15 new urban national parks. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

“We’re in the process of creating 15 new urban national parks: I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re in a position to announce that four or five of them are very advanced by the time the Montreal meeting starts.”

“So there is real momentum happening and I think Canadians are going to start seeing that very soon.”

**When I have conversations with people who are dug into this file, inevitably, the conversation turns to the involvement of First Nations and how that is going to be very important in accomplishing these goals. Can you explain why?**

“I’ve spoken about it a couple of times, but the reality is, the vast majority, if not all of these new conservation areas will be on traditional Indigenous lands. So they have to be part of it from the get-go. They have to be partners at the table, equal partners, with the federal government, with provinces and territories, and other stakeholders as well.”

“I think in Canada we’ve developed a very interesting model of Indigenous-led conservation projects and protected areas, and a model that is creating some envy around the world. People are looking at what we’re doing. And I’m not saying everything is perfect when it comes to our relationship with Indigenous peoples. But clearly when it comes to conservation and the programs like the Indigenous Guardians program, for example, I know people around the world are looking at that [and] saying, ‘This is what leadership looks like,’ when talking about Indigenous-led conservation.”

**Our 2025 target just a few years away now. There’s a long way to go in terms of protection. How confident are you that your government will be able to make that target?**

“One hundred per cent confident. I quoted a couple of independent organizations’ reports that stated that they see a path to Canada reaching our 2025 targets. And it’s going to happen. We’re hard at work, and it’s going to happen.”

*The Hill Times*