

Canada's biodiversity report card:

Progress made towards the Aichi Targets, 2015-2019

By Grace Wark, AWA Conservation Specialist



Public awareness of environmental issues has changed and evolved over time. In the early 1960s, Rachel Carson may have christened the modern environmental movement with her book *Silent Spring*. There she detailed the devastating environmental effects of pesticide use. Dozens of international environmental agreements were signed over the next few decades. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (1971), the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (1973), the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), and the Montréal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1987) are just a few of those efforts. Then, in the early 1990s, climate change grabbed international attention during the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) is now more than 27 years old. Some of these agreements have obtained impressive results. The Montréal Protocol stands out in this respect. Others, such as the Convention on Climate Change, are very disappointing. As the Climate Action Network reminded the leaders of the G7 nations in August, their existing policies aren't doing nearly enough to realize the temperature increase targets set in Paris in 2015.

Amidst this growing international environmental attention, the global collapse of biodiversity has largely gone unnoticed. It has only recently started to gain recognition as a nascent global environmental disaster. Intimately linked, biodiversity loss and

climate change have moved into the spotlight of global policy discussions and media. Demands are increasing on the world's governments to stifle widespread wildlife population loss, degradation of ecosystems and, the impacts of ecosystem degradation on human populations.

Global biodiversity declines are far reaching. They currently impact countless species across all of the world's major biomes. A massive intergovernmental report, assessing over 15,000 scientific and government sources, found there are at least one million species currently threatened with extinction across the globe (IPBES, 2019). Unlike previous mass extinction events, today's is primarily due to human causes. Threats of extinction are echoed in Canada, where WWF Canada's *Living Planet Report* (2017) found that half of Canada's vertebrate species, assessed between 1970 and 2014, are in decline; for species in decline, their populations have decreased by a staggering average of 83 percent.

Global action has taken the form of intergovernmental panels and summits. In turn they have proposed actions and reduction targets deemed palatable to government leaderships and the economies they support. Coming out of the 2010 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, these are the Aichi Biodiversity Targets.

Canada committed to meeting the Aichi Targets, agreed upon at the 2010 Convention on Biological Diversity held in Aichi, Japan. However, it wasn't until 2015 that Canada took action on the targets by setting the *2020 Biodiversity Goals and Targets for Canada*. Then, in 2016 the federal gov-

ernment announced *Pathway to Canada Target 1*, Canada's action plan for achieving Aichi Target 11.

Canada Target 1: "By 2020, at least 17% of terrestrial areas and inland water, and 10% of marine and coastal areas of Canada are conserved through networks of protected areas and other effective area-based measures."

With 2020 on the horizon, it's an excellent time to look back at Canada's record. How much has Canada achieved for biodiversity and landscape conservation since Target 1 was set in 2015? How much of Canada's land base is currently protected? How does Canada plan to achieve 17 percent protection? Is 17 percent really sufficient to protect Canadian biodiversity?

The Aichi Biodiversity Targets consist of five strategic goals and 20 targets to address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss, reduce biodiversity pressures and promote sustainable land use, safeguard ecosystems, and enhance the benefits from ecosystem services. Set in 2010, the deadline for the Aichi Targets is December 2020.

An 'A' for Aspiration

You may recall from a previous article on wild spaces (*Wild Lands Advocate, September 2018*) that Canada's progress on protected areas has been incremental since Canada Target 1's inception. In 2015, 10.5 percent of Canada's terrestrial landscapes were protected under parks and other conservation measures; in the last four years, that share

only has increased by 1.3 percent. This isn't to say that Canada hasn't done anything to create new protected areas – look to Canada's new commitments to Marine Protected Areas and the \$1.3 billion Nature Fund – but is on-the-ground progress rapid enough to curb declines?

Scientists certainly don't think so. This summer, 32 scientists from 23 different universities and organizations wrote to the federal Minister of the Environment and Climate Change urging the government to accelerate the rate of protection if we are to meet Canada Target 1 by the 2020 deadline. While the federal government has protected a further 130,000 km² in four years, as of August 2019, there's another 492,981 km² left to achieve 17 percent protection; this is an area roughly three-quarters the size of Alberta.

While the government has allocated \$1.3 billion towards conservation for the coming years, it's important to note where this money will be going. Of the \$1.3 billion, \$500 million will go towards conservation partnerships, with the remaining \$800 million to support the creation of new protected areas. However the \$500 million earmarked for conservation partnerships will only be met if matched by “philanthropic, corporate, provincial, territorial

and other partners” willing to spend the same amount on land acquisitions and new protected areas. As you can imagine, getting the matched funds needed is not easy; this could be a barrier to uptake and so it's possible that not all of the committed money will actually be spent.

The federal government has been criticized for being long on aspiration, but short on action to meet their targets. Beyond the barriers to accessing funds, the 2015 Canada Targets alone may not be enough to meet the commitments made in Aichi. Hagerman and Pelai's 2016 review found that within the existing government policy framework, the Canadian government is on track to complete only 28 percent of Aichi target incentives. The remaining 72 percent of the Aichi incentives do not have any actionable policies behind them. Hagerman and Pelai's primary critique was that Canada has focused on spatially quantifiable goals (i.e. 17 percent protection under Aichi 11), while other measures like equity (Aichi 16), Indigenous rights (Aichi 18) and collaboration with non-governmental partners have fallen by the wayside.

'B+' for Barrier Reduction

Since Hagerman and Pelai's review was published in 2016, the federal government

has made strides to incorporate Indigenous conservation and traditional land-use into Canada Target 1. However, we're still in a *wait and see* phase. Federal Indigenous conservation efforts began with the establishment of an Indigenous Circle of Experts. These experts provide support and guidance for creating these relatively new and unprecedented protected areas in Canada. This was followed by new provisions to allow for the creation of 'Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas' (IPCAs), “lands where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems.” Here it's important to note that Indigenous Peoples have lived with and conserved the land for generations, and that the federal government is only now catching up with this fact.

So, it *seems* as though some institutional barriers to Indigenous conservation are being reduced, but as so few Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) currently exist, we don't yet know if the outcome will match the aspiration. There are a number of barriers that may stand in the way of IPCAs becoming a success. The first is the finicky relationship between provincial and federal land claims. While the federal government may be willing to

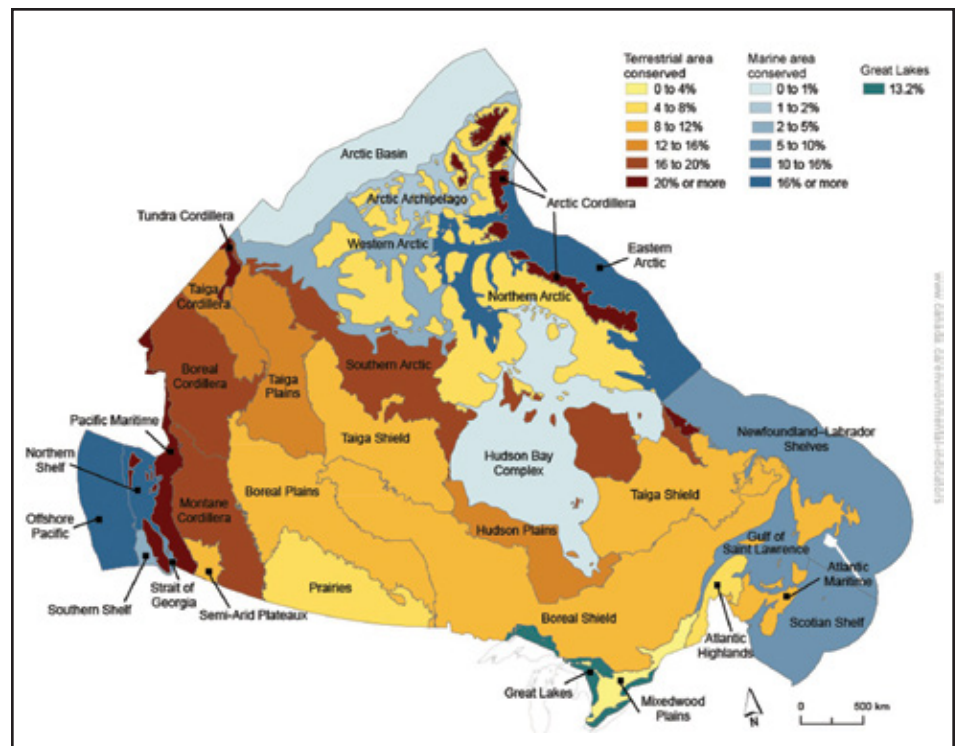


While well-known for our vast wilderness and diverse wildlife, Canada is not immune to the biodiversity losses currently being experienced across the globe. Canada has taken initiative to protect its biodiversity, but, as the ferruginous hawk in this photo wonders, are our actions fast enough, substantive enough, to combat declines? PHOTO: © C. OLSON

recognize Indigenous governance in the creation of new protected areas, the question remains whether the provinces and territories will step up to the plate. The second challenge is access to sustainable long-term funding to implement and manage these spaces. Indigenous groups are able to access funding through the Canada Nature Fund, but remember that most of this funding is only available if matched. Finally, do the proposals put forward match the government criteria for protected areas? This can be complicated by the traditional and current uses of the landscape. Only in recent years has the federal government begun to consider how traditional and current Indigenous land uses can occur simultaneously to landscape protection.

One good example of a collaboratively managed protected area is the newly announced Thaidene Nēné National Park Reserve in the Northwest Territories – to be managed by Parks Canada, the Government of Northwest Territories, the Łutsël K'e Dene First Nation, and the Northwest Territory Métis Nation, and with the Deninu K'ue First Nation and Yellowknives Dene First Nation. The new National Park Reserve answers many of the challenges posed above: Thaidene Nēné involves management by federal, territorial and Indigenous governments, \$40 million will be provided for infrastructure and operations in the first 12 years and \$3.4 million annually in the years that follow, and the National Park Reserve will continue to allow many activities such as hunting, berry picking and gathering, alongside numerous recreational activities.

While Thaidene Nēné is an excellent beginning to Canada's journey towards IPCAs, it's a near-standalone example. There is still a fair distance to go before IPCAs become a commonplace and recognizable form of protection. Incorporating Indigenous governance into conservation should be seen as a long-term and thoughtful undertaking. It needs to properly incorporate the principles of reconciliation and create meaningful relationships with the Indigenous groups leading the charge.



Percent protection by ecoregion in Canada. Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2018.

‘C-’ for Pan-Canadian Collaboration and Conservation Priorities

The growing pains with new forms of protection are not unique to IPCAs. They are also currently being experienced with what the federal government calls ‘Other Effected Area-Based Conservation Measures’ (OECMs). OECMs are a form of third-party protection, led by groups and organizations that acquire private land for conservation. They differ from legislated protected areas, as they are stewarded privately and are often found within the working landscape rather than remote wilderness areas. Seeing as some of Canada's most imperiled species are found within heavily subdivided and already developed landscapes, OECMs will be a critical piece of Canada's protected areas network.

The growing pains lie in recognizing and accounting for these spaces. Disjointedness currently exists between the federal vision of OECMs and their application within the provinces and territories. While land trusts have been helping to place conservation easements on private lands for years, generally no Canadian province or territory has included OECMs under their count

for provincial protection. The exceptions are the Northwest Territories (30,119 km²) and Ontario (33 km²).

This seems to contradict the four year, \$100 million Natural Heritage Conservation Program (NHCP) proposed earlier this year by the federal government and Nature Conservancy Canada (NCC). This fund, directed towards private land conservation, signals that in the years to come Canada will be leaning on OECMs to achieve the 17 percent target. But this won't happen unless the provinces and territories begin recognizing them as protection. The federal government has even produced a decision support tool to help provincial governments decide “what is protected enough?” However, since the tool's release there has been no little to no change in the number of OECMs recognized across Canada.

The need for OECMs is underscored by WWF-Canada's report *Protecting space for wildlife: A national habitat crisis*. The report found that Canada's current protected areas network omits many of the species and habitats with the greatest need for protection. This includes 84 percent of the areas in Canada with highest concentrations of species at risk. Look to the Canadian prai-

ries, one of the most developed yet diverse ecoregions in Canada, which has only between four and eight percent protection. OECMs could help address protecting the prairies, characterized as they are by a patchwork of private and public ownership. On the prairies, large provincial protected areas simply aren't feasible to create.

Unified action between the federal government, provinces and territories, private stakeholders and non-governmental organizations is needed to protect Canada's most at-risk areas, and this action is needed... well, now.

From setting goals to saving species

Looking beyond 2020 into the next decade, scientists and environmental non-governmental organizations have re-

iterated that 17 percent is only the beginning. Frankly, that protection target was more political than scientific. There's nothing particularly reassuring about the negotiated 17 percent protection target since the scientific literature has shown that global biodiversity may in fact need much more. Canada Target 1 should only be the launching point for a much broader conservation plan, wherein Canada establishes a comprehensive network of protected areas. A healthier biodiversity future demands large, intact habitat cores, landscape connectivity, climate refugia and equal representation of our many diverse Natural Regions.

The next meeting of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity is likely to increase the target to 30 percent. This would be a significant challenge for Canada given our current rate of protection. In the

meantime, while Canada is trying to get its act together, remember we're in the throes of a biodiversity and climate crisis.

There is overwhelming evidence that we're simply not moving fast enough to stem the species decline. Our aspirations, however, could be greatly aided by institutional and non-institutional collaboration, enabling Indigenous-led conservation efforts, and prioritizing the areas at greatest risk. The biggest concern right now is that Canada is treating the 2010 Aichi Targets as the end goal, without recognizing the marathon that lies ahead. Now is the time for Canada to improve upon its conservation record, as many species probably don't have a decade left to wait and see if we figure things out.▲