
Nations Gather in Montreal to Discuss the Global Biodiversity Crisis

From December 7 to 19, the United Nations Conference on Biodiversity, including the fifteenth Conference of the Parties (better known as COP15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), will be held in Montreal. This Conference will gather government officials and other representatives from around the world to address the protection of species and ecosystems.

Biodiversity is crucial to healthy ecosystems and the essential ecosystem services that support all life on our planet. A range of species is needed to produce fertile soils, to filter toxins from air and water, regulate pests and diseases, and buffer against natural disasters. Unfortunately, biodiversity is declining

at an unprecedented rate. In 2019, the International Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) released its Global Biodiversity Outlook 5 report which emphasized this decline and warned that species extinction rates were accelerating at an alarming rate. This is the situation that COP15 hopes to rectify.

The *Convention on Biological Diversity*, first adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, was an international agreement for the “conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources.” It has been ratified by 196 nations, and encourages cooperation between nations to conserve threatened species, establish protected areas and manage important biological resources. CBD further encourages support for developing countries towards biodiversity goals, and the preservation and sharing of Indigenous knowledge. The Conference of the Parties is the governing body of CBD and meets every two years.

The 2022 conference is not unique in attempting to establish a framework for biodiversity. In 2010, COP10 introduced the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, presenting five strategic goals and twenty targets around addressing biodiversity loss, promoting sustainable use, protecting ecosystems and species, sharing biodiversity benefits, and implementing conservation efforts. Canada responded by producing a set of national targets, including protection for 17 percent of terrestrial and 10 percent of marine areas to align with the international target. In 2015, Alberta showed leadership in co-chairing the Pathway to Canada Target 1 process and promising that 17 percent of lands in Alberta would be protected by 2020.

However, by 2019, not a single Aichi Biodiversity Target had been met globally. Canada, although managing considerable progress towards protected areas, struggled to meet the remaining targets. Alberta, despite the earlier enthusiasm, had protected only 15 percent of lands as of 2020. These protected areas are

not representative of Alberta’s diverse natural landscapes, with the foothills, parkland, and grassland severely underrepresented. With each year that protection and conservation is delayed, recovering biodiversity will only become more difficult.

The *Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework* – a new set of guidelines for biodiversity, is expected to be adopted at COP15. Alberta and Canada need to take this opportunity to implement changes that emphasize conservation, protect sensitive habitats and halt further biodiversity loss. With the recent decline in many species worldwide, preventing further biodiversity loss is more important now than ever.

Some important steps for Alberta to take to protect biodiversity are to complete land-use planning and increase provincially protected areas. Effective land-use planning includes cumulative effects assessments and science-based limits on human footprint and development to preserve ecosystem values. The land-use planning process in Alberta is far behind schedule, with only two out of seven regional plans completed since the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* was established in 2009. Completing the remaining five regional plans and the more focused subregional plans beneath them needs to be prioritized. As well, Alberta should commit to increasing protected areas; a good first step would be to finalize the protection of areas such as the Twin River Natural Heritage Rangeland expansion that was approved in the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan, and to reintroduce a measure for “protected and conserved areas” back into the Government of Alberta Business Plan Standards. Alberta should also expand conservation measures to ensure the protection of species-at-risk including greater sage-grouse, woodland caribou, and native trout. Along with the commitments made at the upcoming UN Conference on Biodiversity, these may be the first steps towards finally halting and reversing biodiversity loss.

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