

Wilderness Watch

COP15 Update: Adoption of an International Framework on Biodiversity

A new Global Biodiversity Framework has been agreed upon, but action is still needed to halt and reverse biodiversity loss before it's too late. In December, nations from around the world gathered to discuss the protection of biodiversity. COP15, commonly known as the United Nations Biodiversity Conference, was hosted in Montreal, and attended by representatives from 188 governments. The result, after extensive debate, was the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, an agreement for international actions to protect biodiversity through to 2030.

The biodiversity crisis is not a new threat. Scientists have been warning for decades that biodiversity loss is an important issue requiring immediate attention, similar to — and interlinked with — the climate crisis. The 2022 Living Planet Report by the World Wildlife Fund indicates that wildlife populations worldwide have plummeted by an average of 69 percent since 1970, driven by land-use change (i.e., habitat destruction), overexploitation, climate change, pollution, and invasive species. In addition to the inherent value of nature, biodiversity is crucial to the ecosystem functions that support the survival and wellbeing of all living species on the planet. AWA and other conservation organizations were looking to COP15 to come up with a plan to tackle this crisis and lead towards a nature-positive future, where all organisms can thrive on this planet.

The most recent Global Biodiversity Framework describes four overarching goals: 1) to maintain and restore ecosystems, 2) species and genetic diversity; 3) to sustainably manage biodiversity for present and future generations; and 4) to share the benefits of genetic resources; and to secure funding, technology and scientific

knowledge to implement the framework, especially in developing countries. These goals are further divided into 23 targets aimed at specific actions to reverse biodiversity decline.

There were many positive targets in the framework that give us hope for the recovery of biodiversity so long as meaningful action is taken to achieve them. The agreement includes an ambitious target to protect 30 percent of lands and waters globally by 2030, a significant increase from the 15.3 percent of lands and 7.5 percent of waters protected worldwide as of 2020. Another target aims to restore 30 percent of degraded lands in the same timeframe, and to manage the remaining areas to avoid losing biodiversity.

According to 2022 data, only 15.6 percent of Alberta's landscape is protected as defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which means that Alberta needs to step up and do our part in protecting 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030. Further, to properly protect biodiversity, these protected areas need to be representative of each of Alberta's unique natural regions. The Foothills, Grasslands, and Parkland Natural Regions are severely under-represented in Alberta's protected areas network despite their ecological importance. Alberta's Grasslands Natural Region, for example, contains over 75 percent of Alberta's species at risk and is only 1.25 percent protected. In addition to creating new protected areas, it is important that our existing protected areas are maintained, meaning harmful industrial development and high-impact forms of recreation should not be allowed, particularly in areas that are sensitive to disturbance. To properly act on the target to protect 30 percent of land by 2030, we need to move forward on protection of Alberta's lands, not backwards.

The framework also pledges to reduce

harmful subsidies and incentives by at least US \$500 billion, and US \$200 billion is to be mobilized for the implementation of biodiversity strategies and action plans. Subsidies supporting agricultural or industrial development frequently incentivize the destruction of native habitats and ecosystems. According to the International Institute for Sustainable Development, Alberta's subsidies to the fossil fuel industry totalled \$1.32 billion in 2020-2021, and another \$658.7 million before February 2022. In addition to contributing to climate change, these subsidies encourage development, often in forests, grasslands or other habitats important to supporting biodiversity. Reducing such subsidies is necessary to prevent the harmful effects of climate change and further development into sensitive areas.

Importantly, the agreement includes significant mention of Indigenous rights, acknowledging their role as “custodians of biodiversity” and promising that the establishment of protected areas will respect these rights. According to the International Institute for Sustainable Development, Indigenous managed lands cover roughly 20 percent of Earth's land mass, but contain 80 percent of its remaining biodiversity, “a sign that Indigenous Peoples are the most effective stewards of the environment.” This trend comes as no shock when you consider that Indigenous peoples have been stewarding the land for millennia. In an Alberta context, a commitment to some form of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) at a place like Bistcho Lake would be a strong step in the right direction towards the dual goals of reconciliation and protecting biodiversity by enabling the Dene Tha' First Nation to steward their Traditional Territory.

There remain weaknesses in the framework. Several commitments made to halt and reverse biodiversity are unclear and lack numerical targets.



The Dene Tha' First Nation sent a delegation to Montreal for COP15. Matt Munson (pictured – second from the left) represented Dene Tha' as part of a panel on "Knowledge Sharing on Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas" at the Canada Pavilion. Photo © Jeremy Williams / River Voices Productions

One target addresses policy measures to “encourage and enable businesses” to monitor and report on impacts to biodiversity, although it does not make this mandatory. Many business activities increase biodiversity loss, and corporations should be held accountable for these impacts and the costs of reclamation. Stronger understanding, reporting and mitigation of industrial effects on biodiversity is important to reducing biodiversity decline. Altogether, despite the critical state of global biodiversity, the framework only aims to bring the loss of high biodiversity areas “close to zero by 2030.”

The Global Biodiversity Framework can provide a guide to protecting global biodiversity, but the plan itself is not enough. How the framework is implemented will be key in determining how our future on this planet looks. The previous Aichi Biodiversity Targets (adopted in 2010) led to Canada Target 1, which stated that “By 2020, at least 17 percent of terrestrial areas and inland water, and 10 percent of marine and coastal areas of Canada are conserved through networks of protected areas and other effective area-based measures.” Canada fell short of achieving this target, and no country succeeded in meeting all 20 Aichi

biodiversity targets. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework is another chance to do it right, and it's imperative that we succeed this time around because nature may not be able to afford another round of botched attempts. A nature-positive future depends on us and our leaders taking responsibility to take strong, perhaps difficult and uncomfortable, actions to shift the tides. It is up to Alberta and Canada to take action to achieve these targets and protect our biodiversity both provincially and nationally.

- By Ruiping Luo and Devon Earl