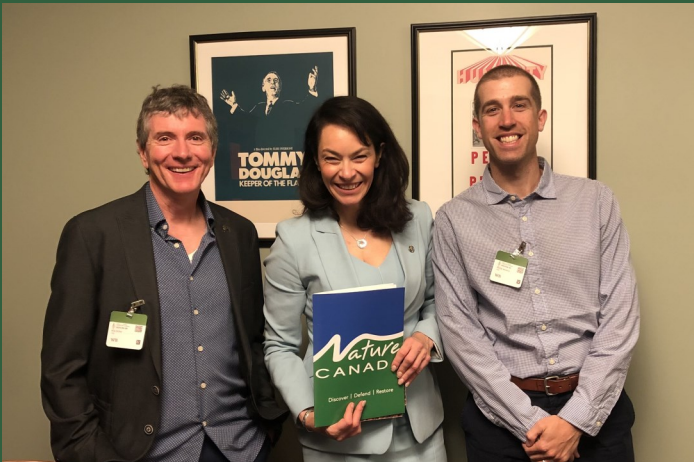


A trip to the capital and lobbying inequalities

I recently had the pleasure of attending Nature on the Hill in Ottawa on behalf of AWA. Nature on the Hill, held from April 29 to May 2 this year, is Nature Canada's flagship annual event that brings together environmental delegates from across Canada to present a unified voice



Phillip Meintzer, right, meets with Rob Miller, left, and MP Heather McPherson. Photo © R. Woodward

for nature in front of federal decision-makers in Ottawa. This was my first-time visiting Canada's capital, and my first experience engaging in deliberate lobbying.

Nature Canada hosted delegates representing all 10 provinces and Yukon and arranged more than 50 meetings with members of Parliament, senators, and cabinet ministers across two days of condensed lobbying.

This year's Nature on the Hill focused on the soon-to-be-released National Biodiversity Strategy and the accompanying *Nature Accountability Act*. At the 2022 United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) in Montreal, Canada and 195 other countries signed the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which commits Canada to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 and protect 30 percent of Canada's land and ocean by 2030.

The National Biodiversity Strategy is already overdue, and part of our group lobbying effort was to emphasize to MPs across all parties that this strategy needs to be released and enshrined in law as quickly as possible, and ideally before an upcoming federal election (and potential change in leadership).

The other major aspect of this year's lobbying effort was to demand that Canada's biodiversity strategy be

implemented in an equitable way that honours Indigenous Rights, with adequate funding, and that it includes legislation that holds the government accountable to meeting its commitments with consequences for potential failure.

On accountability, we are concerned about instances where the federal government has failed to meet previous commitments (e.g., the Aichi Biodiversity Targets), or how loopholes in existing legislation can permit increasing harm to biodiversity from industrial activities so long as the economic benefits are considered justifiable — like we often see with the *Species at Risk Act* and the *Fisheries Act*.

This often means that the only realistic option for environmental non-government organizations (ENGOS) to hold the government accountable is through lawsuits in partnership with public interest law firms like Ecojustice. Unfortunately, ENGOS don't have the resources to take the Crown to court on every missed commitment, and legal processes can be so lengthy that biodiversity suffers in the interim. The Government of Canada needs to impose legally binding consequences on itself to ensure that this latest set of commitments are met.

I had four meetings scheduled on Parliament Hill; three with members of Parliament: NDP MP Heather McPherson (for Edmonton-Strathcona, AB), and CPC MPs Branden Leslie (Portage-Lisgar, MB) and Blaine Calkins (Red Deer-Lacombe, AB). I was also set to meet with a deputy policy director from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Unfortunately, the PMO cancelled our meeting at the last minute, but we rescheduled an online meeting in mid-May.

Heather McPherson was the first of my three meetings, and it was nice to finally meet her in person after she has previously supported AWA's work including our efforts to protect the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex, as well as our calls to reform the Alberta Energy Regulator. MP McPherson committed to presenting Nature Canada's demands for the National Biodiversity Strategy in front of the NDP caucus the following morning, and she also offered to send a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Steven Guilbeault in support of our demands.

While it's certainly nice to meet with decision-makers who support our demands from the get-go, "preaching to the choir," as they say, is not always the best use of our time. The only way we can make real gains on any environmental issue is to get more and more people

onside with our struggle, and you can't do that by only engaging with your supporters. In my discussions with the two Conservative MPs — Leslie and Calkins — our perspectives weren't as diverged as some may expect. All of us shared concerns about the numerous broken promises and missed commitments made by the current government, as well as fears about how top-down policymaking can often have unintended (or unexpected) consequences for everyday working people and their livelihoods. This is partially why Nature Canada is advocating that the National Biodiversity Strategy needs to be structured equitably and considers diverse perspectives including Indigenous communities and even local grassroots stewardship groups. We emphasized how — as the opposition — the Conservative Party can review the National Biodiversity Strategy when it's eventually tabled and hold the government accountable to ensure that these policies include consideration for people from diverse perspectives. Instead of working to prevent much-needed biodiversity protections, they could use their position to strengthen what comes out.

While neither MP left our meetings willing to explicitly support Nature Canada's demands, I felt that they both seemingly came away from our discussions with a warmer perception of environmental groups than they had beforehand. I was also pleasantly surprised when MP Calkins asked for us (ENGOs) to come back and speak with him more often, or at least more than just once per year because he thinks that these sorts of discussions are valuable. While that would be great in theory,

unfortunately, ENGOs can't afford sustained lobbying that for-profit industries can take on. For example, Environmental Defence Canada has developed an oil and gas lobby "bot," which automatically tracks instances where oil and gas companies have lobbied politicians in the Government of Canada. According to this data, in 2023 alone, oil and gas lobbyists had at least 1,173 meetings with Canadian government officials. That's more than three meetings per day, every single day across 2023 for only a single industry. That doesn't include forestry, agriculture, fisheries, or any other extractive industry which puts biodiversity at risk. ENGOs just don't have the same resources or capacity available to compete at that level.

We will need to wait and see if our lobbying was successful, but I think Nature on the Hill is successful in other ways regardless. I think that one of the major benefits of this sort of event is the opportunity for environmentalists from across the country to build meaningful in-person relationships and to begin building solidarity across our organizations. Many of us are dealing with similar issues — albeit with regional differences — so it can be helpful to understand what people are trying in each of their regions to make meaningful conservation happen. We will need all the tools at our disposal if we are going to ensure that Canada meets its biodiversity commitments. None of us can do this alone.

-By Phillip Meintzer