

TOWARDS A FEDERAL ACTION PLAN TO HALT AND REVERSE NATURE LOSS:

PROCEEDINGS OF AN EXPERT WORKSHOP

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In April 2022, biodiversity experts from across Canada gathered in Ottawa to discuss an action plan for meeting Canada’s commitment to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030. These proceedings capture the main discussions from the two-day workshop, including emerging points of agreement, outstanding questions and remaining uncertainties identified by participants.



The workshop occurred at a critical time for nature. The world is in the midst of a biodiversity crisis unparalleled in human history, and Canada is no exception. Between 1970 and 2014 in Canada, mammal populations dropped 43 percent, amphibian and reptile populations dropped 34 percent, and fish populations declined by 20 per cent. Monitored populations of grassland birds dropped 69 percent, aerial insectivores fell 51 percent, and shorebird populations declined by 43 percent. Fifty-nine percent of Canada's International Union for the Conservation of Nature red-listed species have declined, including among species listed as at risk under the *Species at Risk Act*. Habitats such as wetlands, Prairie grasslands and old-growth forests continue to lose ground every year.¹ To become nature-positive by 2030 we must bend the curve of biodiversity loss, and we must do it now.

Meeting the challenge will not be easy. Canada's biodiversity-related laws and policies are a patchwork quilt that has proven to be too piecemeal and unfocused, undermining our ability to meet our targets. Our economy and society are driven by a mindset that values extraction and growth above all else, meaning short-term gains for some are prioritized at the expense of our future well-being or the survival of species. Colonialism, a key driver of the biodiversity crisis, remains deeply entrenched in Canada's political, economic and social fibres.

At the same time, we have an historic opportunity to act. The federal government has made notable biodiversity-related commitments in recent years. Federal Budget 2021 included an unprecedented \$4 billion in commitments to nature, and that same year Prime Minister Trudeau signed the Leaders'

¹ WWF-Canada, *Living Planet Report Canada: A National Look at Wildlife Loss* (2017) at 6, 22, 24, 28, 30, 36: <https://www.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/LPRC-Executive-Summary.pdf>.

Pledge for Nature² Further nature investments of \$780 million followed in 2022 as part of Canada's Emissions Reduction Plan. The Liberal Party 2021 election platform promised to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030 and achieve the full recovery of nature by 2050, commitments that were subsequently included as directives in Ministerial mandate letters from the Prime Minister alongside other key nature priorities. Further, halting and reversing nature loss has cross-party support,³ and the confidence and supply agreement between the Liberal and NDP parties⁴ may mean more time in this mandate to make an action plan to achieve that goal (for a summary of environmental commitments from all major parties see: <https://election2021envirosurvey.ca/>).

The federal government has also made important commitments to Indigenous Peoples that will be critical to uphold in meeting the halt and reverse commitment. In 2016 Canada endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and in 2021 the federal government enacted legislation that requires Canada, in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous Peoples, to ensure that Canada's laws are consistent with the Declaration.⁵ Indigenous initiatives, such as Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) and Indigenous Guardians programs, play a critical role in biodiversity conservation in Canada, and offer an opportunity for the federal government to act on its commitment to reconciliation and its obligations pursuant to the UN Declaration.

2 Leaders' Pledge for Nature: <https://www.leaderspledgefornature.org/>.

3 E.g., New Democrat Party of Canada, "Protecting our air, land, and water, securing our future:" <https://www.ndp.ca/climate-action?focus=13934138¬hing=nothing>.

4 CTV News, "Liberals' deal with NDP will keep Trudeau minority in power for 3 more years" (22 March 2022): <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/liberals-deal-with-ndp-will-keep-trudeau-minority-in-power-for-3-more-years-1.5829116>.

5 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, SC 2021, c 14, ss 5, 6, 7①.





Our biodiversity commitments extend to the global stage. Canada has entered into over 100 multilateral environmental agreements covering subjects like species, climate and chemicals, and has signed onto such international initiatives as the June 2021 G7 Nature Compact, the October 2021 G20 Rome Leaders' Declaration, and the so-called High Ambition Coalition. Critically, we are party to the *United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD),⁶ under which negotiations for the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) are underway at the time of writing, providing a key context for domestic biodiversity-related goals, milestones and targets.

It is against this scientific, policy, Indigenous and international context that workshop participants discussed an action plan for meeting the federal commitment to halt and reverse nature loss. On the first day, participants discussed the key challenges to biodiversity action in Canada today, **including political, institutional and legal challenges, as well as cultural** barriers that make colonization a persistent driver of biodiversity loss in Canada. Despite these challenges, participants generally agreed that there is strong and growing public support for **conservation and reconciliation** in Canada,⁷ federal commitments to **more ambition, funding, and action** to halt and reverse nature loss, as well as a **strong and growing network** of environmental and nature groups, Indigenous organizations and partners, and more diverse voices calling for biodiversity protection and restoration and actively undertaking that work. Participants had mixed views on the role of market-based approaches to biodiversity conservation in a federal action plan.

⁶ United Nations, 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity, 1760 UNTS 79, 31 ILM 818 (5 June 1992).

⁷ International Boreal Conservation Campaign and the Indigenous Leadership Initiative, "Poll: Canadians Want Economic Recovery to Include Nature Conservation & Indigenous Stewardship" (7 July 2020): <https://www.borealconservation.org/stories-1/poll-ibcc-ili-2020>.

The workshop then moved to a discussion of setting protection and restoration goals, targets and milestones, and measuring progress on meeting those targets. There was general agreement that while the draft Post-2020 GBF goals, milestones and targets may be a good start for a national biodiversity strategy and action plan, they **have gaps** and would **not be sufficient** to halt and reverse nature loss in Canada, or to advance reconciliation. Participants also agreed on the need for equitable governance, and particularly the need to **respect Indigenous rights, understand/find solutions to jurisdictional barriers, and support Indigenous-led initiatives**. A federal action plan to halt and reverse nature loss will have to **customize** the Post-2020 GBF goals and targets, as well as **be specific** and include **quantitative goals** and targets to the degree possible. There appeared to be consensus on the need **for enhanced biodiversity monitoring**, as well as to **enhance what is working**, such as by fully funding and empowering Indigenous Guardians programs and IPCAs. The first day of the workshop closed with a discussion on advancing Indigenous rights, authority and initiatives to steward and conserve biodiversity. There was consensus on the need for both increased **and permanent sustainable funding to support Indigenous biodiversity initiatives**, and that biodiversity strategies and action plans need to reflect the **priorities of First Nation, Métis and Inuit authorities**. Participants also discussed the dual needs of **better supporting** Indigenous-led initiatives while also **getting out of the way** of Indigenous governance.

On the second day of the workshop, discussions began with how a federal action plan could advance biodiversity action by the provinces and territories while respecting the constitutional division of powers. There was considerable discussion of the **Pan-Canadian approach to transforming Species at Risk conservation in Canada**,⁸ and general consensus that while **it held considerable promise**,

⁸ Canada, *Pan-Canadian approach to transforming Species at Risk conservation in Canada* (2018): <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/wildlife-plants-species/species-risk/pan-canadian-approach/species-at-risk-conservation.html>.



its delivery fell far short of expectations. Participants gravitated towards a “**big carrot, big stick**” approach, under which the federal government would set standards (such as targets and indicators) while affording the provinces flexibility in how to meet those standards. A main outstanding question is **how to leverage current federal ambition so that the federal government takes a stronger leadership role** in setting biodiversity targets and ensuring there are effective measures and strategies in place to meet those targets. Also, participants raised the question of how to frame halt and reverse priorities in a way that is **aligned with provincial priorities**.

Next, participants discussed mainstreaming and financing for biodiversity conservation to ensure that biodiversity is fulsomely factored into federal policies and practices. Participants were supportive of the need for a whole-of-government approach to halting and reversing nature loss, and generally agreed that a **biodiversity lens** could be a key tool for achieving that, although more detail is needed on **what that lens looks like** and how it would interact with other federal lenses, like gender-based analysis-plus and climate change. They also agreed that mainstreaming biodiversity priorities and actions should be a **whole-of-society objective**, rather than simply a whole-of-government one, to strengthen humans’ relationship with nature. On **financing and subsidies**, participants noted the need to start to address biodiversity threats by ‘refocusing’ incentives from destructive to restorative and protective and to create more just and circular economies. Finally, participants discussed how to ensure the accountability of the federal government in an action plan to halt and reverse nature loss. A number of participants were interested in the notion of a **federal biodiversity framework law** as a means of enhancing public and legal accountability for achieving international and domestic biodiversity goals, and of knitting together the myriad biodiversity-related measures and strategies developed under Canada’s existing laws and policies. However, it would be critical to ensure that a federal biodiversity accountability law is meaningful, and is **strongly implemented**. Additionally, the concept of a biodiversity accountability law is in initial stages and as such, its **main functions and components remain to be worked out**.

In summary, workshop participants supported the call for a comprehensive action plan to deliver on the federal commitment to halt and reverse nature loss, as well as the goals and targets of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. The federal government must play a leadership role in biodiversity conservation and restoration in Canada, while working with the provinces and territories, Indigenous authorities and organizations, and industry and community groups to encourage initiatives and support Indigenous-led stewardship to further advance reconciliation. More work is needed to develop what a comprehensive action plan should include. Based on the discussions of this first workshop, participants discussed some preliminary elements of what such a plan should include. Key suggested principles and components are set out below.



Key principles for a federal halt and reverse action plan

- 1. Be ambitious, and drive immediate and transformative change in our relationship with nature.** Given its geographic size and the strength of its economy, Canada must be a leader on the global biodiversity stage. While the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) will hopefully provide a robust structure from which to build a national plan, Canada cannot delay action. Ultimately, all targets will need to be tailored to the Canadian context, grounded in science and Indigenous knowledge, and include targets respecting threat reduction from human activities. A target of 30% protected and conserved areas (as reflected in federal and global commitments) is a key stepping stone but insufficient to halt and reverse nature loss, with evidence suggesting that at least half likely needs to be conserved to safeguard biodiversity and address climate change.⁹ A federal halt and reverse action plan that sets the foundation for nature's full recovery by 2050 must also address restoration of species and ecosystems, not simply halting further nature loss.
- 2. Respect and uphold Indigenous rights and jurisdiction and fully support Indigenous-led initiatives.** An action plan must be grounded in the recognition that colonialism is a fundamental driving force of the biodiversity crisis, and that reconciliation is the pathway to addressing it. To that end, we must transition to Indigenous-led governance of our lands and oceans for the conservation and restoration of nature. Additionally, the federal government must develop the plan in collaboration and cooperation with Indigenous Nations and rights-holders, to ensure that goals, targets, milestones, indicators and strategies are grounded in Indigenous knowledge and law. Species-specific targets should include biocultural indicators and cultural keystone species, not just species at risk, and area-based targets must reflect Indigenous Peoples' cultural and governance goals. Initiatives such as Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas and Indigenous Guardians programs have the potential to advance both biodiversity restoration and reconciliation, and therefore must be fully supported.

⁹ Stephen Woodley et al., "A Review of Evidence for Area-based Conservation Targets for the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework" 2019 Parks 25.2 at 31, https://parksjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/PARKS-25.2-Woodley-et-al-10.2305-IUCN.CH.2019.PARKS-25-2SW2.en_.pdf; IUCN WCC 2020 Resolution 125, https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/resrecfiles/WCC_2020_RES_125_EN.pdf.

- 3. Ensure targets, measures and strategies are specific, measurable and comprehensive.** A federal halt and reverse action plan must include goals, targets, milestones and indicators respecting all aspects of biodiversity conservation and restoration, including areas, ecosystems, species, sectors, drivers of biodiversity loss, and governance. But accountability is also key to a plan's success, and depends in large part on the transparency, accuracy and integrity of reporting. To that end, the plan should include evidence-based SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) targets and be both qualitative and quantitative depending on the ecosystem and species, and their needs. It must also set out detailed indicators and measurements of success, such as species threat abatement and restoration (STAR) metrics.
- 4. Ensure that goals, targets and measures reflect the diverse ecological conditions and varying scope of biodiversity loss in Canada's regions.** Different conditions exist for different regions, and across different species. Land use planning, protection and restoration plans should play different roles depending on the location and scale of proposed interventions. The action plan should reflect the reality that different regions, particularly northern versus southern areas, have different protection and restoration needs. Terrestrial and aquatic/marine targets should be measurable and include qualitative aspects, while targets and strategies should be based on a combination of ecotypes and key species to help represent ecosystems, understand relationships and avoid a fragmented species-by-species approach to conservation.





Key components of a federal halt and reverse action plan

- 1. Accelerate and enhance current initiatives to establish protected and conserved areas, protect species at risk, and support and uphold Indigenous-led conservation and authority.** Some federal agencies, provincial and territorial governments and Indigenous nations are pursuing various initiatives to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. An action plan must accelerate these initiatives, while incorporating any needed adjustments. For example, Canada achieved its 2020 target for marine protected areas and made progress on the terrestrial protected areas target; however, this work must be accelerated and expanded to achieve the government's 30% protection target by 2030, while maintaining a strong focus on quality considerations. Implementation of the *Pan-Canadian Approach to Transforming Species at Risk Conservation in Canada* must also be accelerated to conserve species at risk in priority areas, for priority sectors and for priority species. Indigenous nations and communities are moving ahead with Indigenous-led conservation initiatives but these need to be more strongly supported by governments. Specifically, the federal government should greatly enhance funding of Indigenous initiatives, by both increasing funding amounts and making long-term fiscal commitments to support permanent Indigenous-led protection, restoration and management.
- 2. Build ambitious goals, targets and measures to ensure the restoration of nature.** Ambition means not simply halting further nature loss through greater protection. To achieve nature's full recovery, we must also restore it where human activities have resulted in biodiversity loss. Therefore, an action plan must flesh out an ambitious plan for restoration in addition to protection, and lay a credible pathway towards nature-positive outcomes for species and ecosystems by 2050. The action plan's restoration goals, targets and measures must be comprehensive, while building on restoration initiatives such as the federal two billion trees program.

- 3. Invest in and build enhanced systems for biodiversity monitoring and regular reporting.**
Fundamental to halting and reversing nature loss is identifying the elements of biodiversity that are in decline and measuring the success of biodiversity-related initiatives. Monitoring systems should be established by eco-region, and have greater investment, as well as better-defined and supported data analysis. The federal government should work with Indigenous Nations and Guardians to develop ways to support and draw on Indigenous monitoring and knowledge, and work with non-Indigenous communities to include other forms of knowledge and local science in monitoring and reporting.
- 4. Use a “big carrot, big stick” approach to incentivizing provincial and territorial action.**
Canada’s constitutional and political reality is that the provinces and territories have a considerable role to play in biodiversity protection and restoration, but are not always willing partners, let alone nature leaders. Just as it has done with climate, the federal government must take a leadership role in developing and advancing an action plan to halt and reverse nature loss in Canada. To that end, the plan should set national minimum standards (including through targets and indicators) while affording the provinces and territories flexibility in how to meet those standards. The federal government must be prepared to act as a backstop in the event of provincial or territorial inaction, while encouraging provincial and territorial biodiversity measures through the provision of funding or other incentives.
- 5. Adopt a federal ‘biodiversity lens’ under the action plan to mainstream biodiversity action throughout the federal government.** Consideration must be given to how a biodiversity lens would interact with other similar lenses, such as the Cabinet Directive on the Environmental Assessment of Policy, Plan and Program Proposals, the climate lens, and federal gender-based analysis-plus policy. It should include substantive principles to guide federal policy and program development, as well as principles for navigating interactions with and trade-offs among other federal priorities, such as climate and gender-based analysis-plus.
- 6. Include a plan for engaging the public on securing enduring, transformative change in our relationship with nature.** A halt and reverse action plan should include public engagement strategies, as well as public education and awareness initiatives. There should be better reliance on citizen science (in addition to Indigenous knowledge), to ensure transparent, detailed and honest reporting of the state of Canada’s biodiversity and progress for meeting our targets. These public engagement and education initiatives should include support for a broad range of partners to deliver on the initiatives, and include reconciliation and public opportunities to support cultural revitalization, as well as support and uplift Indigenous-led conservation and governance.

- 7. Halt harmful subsidies and refocus financial incentives towards biodiversity protection and restoration.** The G7 2030 Nature Compact commits Canada to the goal of halting and reversing biodiversity loss, including by supporting sustainable supply chains, reviewing and reforming subsidies and policies that harm nature, identifying ways to account for nature in economic and financial planning and decision-making, increasing finance for nature, ensuring international development assistance does not harm nature, and working with finance, industry and business leaders to drive a nature-positive shift by fully investing in natural capital and embedding consideration of nature-related risk. An action plan should include targets and strategies for achieving each of these goals.
- 8. Consider adopting a federal biodiversity accountability framework law to ensure that actions are adequate for achieving commitments.** A framework law could enhance public and legal accountability for achieving international and domestic biodiversity goals, and knit together the myriad biodiversity-related measures and strategies developed under Canada's existing laws and policies. Accountability would be achieved legally (through the imposition of binding requirements to set targets according to minimum standards and plan for meeting those targets), and publicly (through mandatory reporting and public and Indigenous engagement). Accountability legislation will need to address different jurisdictional authority in the ocean and terrestrial areas and should be evaluated to ensure linkages to international targets do not undermine existing federal programs and targets.

