

Canada must not waste the opportunities at COP 15 in Montreal

The upcoming COP 15 Conference in Montreal cannot be a missed opportunity for the Canadian government to keep its promise and establish the Canada Water Agency.



Steven Guilbeault is right to note the significance of COP15's location in Montreal, home of the successful Montreal Protocol to Protect the Ozone Layer in the 1980s, noting that it gives Canada 'a superb opportunity to demonstrate the value of protecting nature.' This value has never been more critical. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

OPINION | BY THOMAS S. AXWORTHY, JOHN W. POMEROY, AND EMILY LORRA HINES | December 7, 2022

On Dec. 7, Canada begins hosting the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties on the [UN Convention on Biological Diversity](#) (COP15) in Montreal. This gathering has so far attracted little media attention compared to that of the recent COP27 in Egypt. However, lost in these discussions is that climate change and biological diversity are inextricably linked, or rather “two sides of the same coin.” Within this, water remains the consistent factor of both, and at the heart of all climate change and biodiversity discussions.

For example: climate change caused by global warming changes weather patterns and cause extreme weather events that impact human health, food, shelter, forests, agriculture, and aquatic habitats. By 2050, [climate change will have cost Canada \\$139-billion](#) due to flooding, drought, wildfire, and other disasters, alongside the costs of unheard biodiversity loss, including [tens of thousands of dead salmon](#) in British Columbia in 2022 alone.

Steven Guilbeault, Canada's minister of the environment, is right to note the significance of COP15's location in Montreal, home of the successful Montreal Protocol to Protect the Ozone Layer in the 1980s, noting that it gives Canada "a superb opportunity to demonstrate the value of protecting nature." This value has never been more critical, with scientists estimate that [one million plants and animal species](#) are at risk of extinction in the coming decades.

The goals for the biodiversity convention are as ambitious as those for climate change. It aims to preserve natural diversity, sustainable use of nature's bounty, and fair and equitable sharing of resources amongst countries. In Montreal, states will aim to set targets to slow the destruction of nature through preserving a third of land and sea habitats for nature by 2030, a target also set by the Liberal government in the 2021 federal budget. Again, financing this will be a large issue: as seen in Egypt, developing nations are demanding a substantial transfer of resources to help them preserve their environments.

Such negotiations are obviously difficult, but one should not give up hope as there is at least one happy and significant precedent: in 1987, in Montreal, 198 parties ratified the Protocol on Substances Depleting the Ozone Layer and this agreement, despite opposition from the CFC industry, has largely worked.

As host of COP15, Canada will be in the international spotlight, presenting an opportunity to emerge as a leader in climate change, water, and biodiversity on the global stage.

With this opportunity, what will Guilbeault announce at the conference as a special sign of Canadian leadership? One good candidate is the creation of the long-awaited Canada Water Agency and significant funding for a strengthened Freshwater Action Plan.

Water is the connector between biodiversity and climate change. Water is life, and has been declared a twin of biodiversity by the [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#)—the driving force behind COP15. A Canada Water Agency would work together with First Nations, provinces, and municipalities to preserve water bodies, promote flood mapping and prevention, preserve groundwater quality, assist with the management of river basins, share water data and improve our infrastructure to prevent water loss. It has the potential to focus national attention on the water priority and could make water a mainstay of our development support, aligning with [United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals](#) and the International Feminist Agenda.

The [greater water community has already shown support](#) for an independent Canada Water Agency, now the Canadian government must show its commitment to protecting water, climate and biodiversity. Guilbeault will undoubtedly commit Canada to ambitious targets on preserving nature when he speaks to the thousands of delegates in Montreal, but announcing a Water Agency to give effect to federal promises would show that Canada is committed to reversing our Age of Extinction and would harness preserving biodiversity to helping ensure clean, sufficient supplies of water for all Canadians.

The world is watching, and Canada must rise to the occasion.

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