



TURNING BACK THE CLOCK ON EXTINCTION



THE TRAIL TO A FLOURISHING PLANET



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Even the most carefully placed footsteps are too loud in caribou country. The lichen-covered forest floor gives you away before you can distinguish animals in the distance. Caribou, grizzly bears, wolverines, whooping cranes, cougars and wolves live here in the boreal forest.

A stroll in the wild heightens your senses. You may find yourself unearthing lost feelings of connection to the land that have been suppressed for over 12,000 years. Wildlife helps close the gap between modern societies and the ecosystems we've come to dominate and disconnect from. As species disappear, we lose this connection. Being in the forest may no longer present the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of caribou or a fox and its kits. It's devastating but that's where we're headed.

Across the lands now known as Canada, wrecked remains of habitats are a stark reminder of how wild creatures have been sacrificed in the name of resource extraction and corporate wealth. Rewinding the clock, we only have to go back 60 years to see when large-scale fossil fuel extraction, clearcuts and mining really began impacting wildlife across the country. The early 1900s is when industrial

whaling drove many species to near extinction. Another 50 years back from then is when giant trees in B.C. — some of the largest on Earth — began to fall on an industrial scale.

The Western extractive resource economy built to serve twin systems of colonialism and capitalism hasn't been around that long. But it's been devastating for wildlife, ecosystems and the Indigenous communities from these lands and waters. Across Canada, the picture is bleak. We're close to losing over 800 species forever and those that remain are getting fewer and fewer. The land is being emptied.'

Throughout the country, it's within the regulations to harm species. We're often up in arms over century-old heritage buildings. Many jurisdictions have laws in place to protect older architecture but not to safeguard species millions of years in the making. There isn't legislation that

protects at-risk biodiversity and wildlife in most provinces and territories. Where those laws do exist, they're weak. To mend the damage we've done, we must change the system that incentivizes destruction by implementing strong laws that protect biodiversity.

There are respectful

Wildlife helps close the gap between modern societies and the ecosystems we've come to dominate and disconnect from. As species disappear, we lose this connection.



Photo top: Polar bear and cub — special concern (DonJohnstonphotos.com).
Photo bottom: Western prairie fringed orchid — endangered (Mike Grandmaison).

ways to interact with the land and species that were in place long before European contact and colonialism. Indigenous communities have been living with caribou since time immemorial. In the Boreal, Indigenous communities have strong relationships with caribou, depending on them for everything from meat and furs to tools. In the past, Mountain Métis near Grande Cache, Alberta would burn the land to encourage plant growth to nourish ungulates, including caribou, and harvest them in a way so populations would thrive. However, since the 1970s it only took the industrial resource economy 50 years to push this species to the brink of extinction.

It's possible to rebuild our relationship with the wild in a way that cherishes wildlife and respects the boundaries of this planet. We must start by returning lands and authority to Indigenous communities. However, in the absence of good laws that protect wildlife, Indigenous communities are often left alone at the forefront to protect their territories and wildlife from industrial projects. Efforts to protect wildlife must centre Indigenous sovereignty and justice, while demanding change from the system that harms so many for the benefit of so few.

If every jurisdiction across the country had stronger laws to protect wildlife and ecosystems that aligned with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), we could ensure wildlife flourish.

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE WORK OF A BILLION CREATURES

Biodiversity, or biological diversity, is the variety of living things. But more than that, it's the water you drink, the food you eat and the air you breathe. Everyday life is made possible by the work of a billion living creatures, from bacteria and fungi to pollinators and trees. It's more than an engaging wildlife documentary narrated by David Attenborough. Biodiversity increases the health, resilience and productivity of ecosystems and everything that depends on them, including us.

From the genetic to the ecosystem level, diversity is important. Cheetahs, for example, have low genetic diversity, which makes it hard for them to birth cubs. Species diversity is the number of different species within an ecosystem and the individuals



Photo: Gypsy cuckoo bumblebee — endangered (Sheila Colia).

within those species. In the boreal shield of Canada, wetlands harbour an impressive amount of biodiversity.² Hectare for hectare, wetlands are some of the most productive ecosystems in the world, on par with tropical rainforests and coral reefs.³

Ecosystem diversity combines the diversity of the living world, species and genetics, with the nonliving world, like land formations and the climate. B.C., for instance, has incredible biodiversity largely due to the variety of ecosystems, from mountainous environments, and desert-like landscapes to lush rainforests and marine ecosystems.

Biodiversity also protects us from disease. As humans encroach on wilderness, landscapes are destroyed, ecosystems are disrupted, and viruses are transferred from their natural hosts, where they find new ones — like humans.⁴ Ecosystem destruction tends to cause large-bodied species to disappear while smaller-bodied, fast-lived species that are famous for transmitting disease increase.⁵

We should protect biodiversity for no other reason than its intrinsic value and because wildlife have a right to exist. But there are also thousands of reasons that align closely with human needs. Protecting biodiversity is essential.

RECIPES FOR EXTINCTION

Species on Earth are going extinct at least 1,000 times faster than would be the case without human influence.⁶ Currently, there are 809 at-risk species listed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).⁷ But biodiversity is more than just how many species exist. It's also the number of individuals within each species — and those numbers are plummeting. **Half of the monitored species in Canada experienced population declines by an average of 83 per cent between 1970 and 2014.**⁸

Most people are aware of the pressure we put on wildlife and ecosystems. When understanding extinction broadly, the causes and solutions become easier to understand. The five biggest drivers of the decline in nature we're experiencing today in descending order are:

- 1. Changes in land and sea use:** 75 per cent of the Earth's land surface and 66 per cent of the marine environment has been altered by humans.
- 2. Direct exploitation of organisms:** Overexploitation of wildlife is driven by harvesting, logging and hunting. In marine ecosystems, fishing causes the most harm, followed by land and sea-use change.
- 3. Climate change:** A small change in climate drastically impacts the ability for species to live. On the extreme side, it increases the frequency and intensity of severe weather events, impacting biodiversity.
- 4. Pollution:** Pollutants from heavy industry negatively impact soil, freshwater and marine water quality and the global atmosphere. Marine plastic pollution has increased tenfold since 1980, affecting at least 267 species.
- 5. Invasive species:** Nearly one-fifth of the Earth's surface is at risk of plant and animal invasions, impacting native species and ecosystem functions.⁹

We can address all five of these drivers. Policies to cease destroying nature and overexploiting organisms can and should be implemented immediately.

EXTINCTION ISN'T A CRIME IF THERE'S NO LAW AGAINST IT

When major industrial projects are proposed, concerns about wildlife and species at risk are rarely an obstacle. Provincial and territorial laws seldom require independent scientists to accurately assess the full impacts to wildlife. Even when projects undergo a wildlife assessment that concludes there will be significant harmful effects to at-risk wildlife, the projects are rarely stopped.¹⁰ At most, owners of the project are required to "mitigate" impacts like putting in a fish culvert, a sort of road for fish, arbitrarily replacing habitat elsewhere, or leaving a lone tree with a bird's nest intact.

The long and growing list of at-risk species shows these measures are not successful in preventing wildlife decline. What's needed is

an effective and comprehensive law that protects species at risk and native ecosystems.

Conditions to protect biodiversity:

- Identify species at risk
- Make it illegal to kill them
- Legally protect their habitat and help them recover
- Ensure healthy wildlife populations stay that way by protecting ecosystems
- Hold governments and industry accountable to laws
- Enshrine United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

In addition, any new law must be co-developed with Indigenous Peoples and uphold UNDRIP, so sovereignty over traditional lands is built in from its inception. There must be funding and support for Indigenous leadership to protect wildlife.

Lastly, and often forgotten, is the need for a plan to keep species off the endangered list by maintaining healthy ecosystems. Wildlife that aren't currently at risk need ecosystem protection from industrial projects to avoid becoming at risk. What good is a law if it doesn't protect wildlife until they're in real trouble?

If we had laws that achieved this, there would be a layer of protection

A standard species at risk grading scale lists species in one of the following categories: data deficient, not at risk, special concern, threatened, endangered, extirpated, extinct.

before an industrial project is proposed. Corporations would be inclined to avoid harming habitat and wildlife before developing plans and submitting applications. Projects that would severely damage wildlife simply wouldn't be allowed, and our local economies would inherently become more sustainable.

Currently, there are six provinces and territories without standalone species-at-risk laws in Canada: British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, P.E.I., Nunavut and the Yukon."



Photo: Piping plover — endangered (John E. Marriott).



Photo: Alberta tar sands (Garth Lenz).



Photo: Wolverine — special concern (Grambo images).



THE GRADES ARE IN – WE'RE FAILING BIODIVERSITY

The report cards below grade four jurisdictions throughout Canada on how well they're protecting biodiversity, including species at risk and ecosystems, based on six conditions.

Canada

Canada has the Species at Risk Act (SARA) that's intended to prevent wildlife from disappearing in Canada.

SUBJECT: **GRADE:**

Identifying species at risk: **B-**
The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada assesses the risk status of species but legally listing them is up to the government.

Making it illegal to kill them: **D-**
The SARA only automatically protects threatened and endangered species and their residence if they are migratory birds, aquatic species or species on federal lands. This means all species found on non-federal land, 60 per cent of land in Canada, don't receive automatic protection.

Legally protecting their habitat and helping species at risk recover: **D-**
Critical habitat on non-federal land is not automatically protected and it's up to the provinces and territories to manage it. The federal government is **supposed to** issue a safety net order and take over habitat protection when the province fails to. But, in the history of the SARA it **has never done this once**.¹² Species with legal protection don't necessarily recover: 64 SARA-listed species saw population declines by 28 per cent from 2002 to 2014.¹³

Protect ecosystems to maintain healthy populations: **F**
There's no protection for species that aren't legally listed as endangered or threatened. Even special concern species don't receive protection from harm.

Accountability: **F**
The language used in the SARA is vague and discretionary making it difficult to hold the government accountable. Therefore, the law is only as strong as the will of the government in power.

Enshrining UNDRIP: **F**
UNDRIP is not enshrined in the SARA. The law describes a vague duty to consult with Indigenous Peoples "to the extent possible." This often leads to excluding Indigenous Peoples and fewer than half of recovery strategies show evidence of their involvement.^{14,15}

D-

British Columbia

B.C. is the province with the most biodiversity but no standalone law that protects species at risk or ecosystems. Premier John Horgan promised a species at risk law in 2017 but has failed to fulfil his promise. There's still hope — a recent review on old-growth protection recommends creating overarching biodiversity legislation.

SUBJECT: **GRADE:**

Identifying species at risk: **D-**
In B.C. the conservation data centre (CDC) assesses species and ecosystems at risk, but results in no legal protection.

Making it illegal to kill them: **F**
The Wildlife Act protects only four species at risk from being harmed out of the 1,583 species the CDC lists as at-risk.¹⁶ There's no law that prohibits harm to all listed species at risk.

Legally protecting their habitat and helping species at risk recover: **F**
B.C. does not have a law that protects species at risk and their habitat or helps them recover.

Protect ecosystems to maintain healthy populations: **F**
B.C. claims to use a patchwork of laws to protect wildlife, such as the Wildlife Act. This act doesn't protect habitat and is mostly used to regulate hunting, fishing and trapping. There's no law protecting ecosystems and habitat remains largely unprotected from industrial extraction.

Accountability: **F**
B.C. has no accountability in protecting at-risk wildlife because there are no laws that require them to do so.

Enshrining UNDRIP: **D+**
B.C. passed legislation to enshrine UNDRIP into provincial law in 2019 but we've yet to see the laws amended. Yet, this presents an opportunity for B.C. to create a law enshrining UNDRIP from the beginning.



Photo: Beluga whales — endangered (Grambo Images)



Photo: Greater sage-grouse — endangered (Grambo Images)

F

Manitoba

Manitoba has an Endangered Species and Ecosystem Act (ESEA), but much of it is voluntary. In 2020, the Manitoba government transferred all of the wildlife and fisheries staff from conservation to the agriculture and resource development branch.²¹ This was like appointing a fox to guard the henhouse, as these industries are responsible for the majority of impacts to wildlife.

SUBJECT: **GRADE:**

Identifying species at risk: **F**
Manitoba has a committee tasked with assessing species, but there's no requirement for the government to follow its recommendations.²² The last time at-risk species were added to ESEA was 2015.²³ There are dozens of species at risk that remain unlisted in the ESEA.

Making it illegal to kill them: **C**
The ESEA prohibits harming an endangered species, a threatened species, or an extirpated species that has been reintroduced.

Legally protecting their habitat and helping species at risk recover: **F**
Although the ESEA prohibits harm to habitat of listed species, there's no requirement to identify habitat in the first place.²⁴ The law doesn't require recovery planning and implementation. No recovery strategies have been produced besides boreal woodland caribou, and 11 years ago a draft action plan was made but never finalized.²⁵

Protect ecosystems to maintain healthy populations: **F**
Manitoba's Wildlife Act provides the designation of Crown lands as wildlife management areas (WMAs) to help protect species.²⁶ However, these areas can be open to activities such as oil and gas development, trapping, hunting and motorized vehicle use.²⁷

Accountability: **F**
Since the law doesn't require recovery planning and implementation, the government is not held accountable for recovering species.

Enshrining UNDRIP: **F**
UNDRIP is not enshrined in the law, nor does the law require any consultation with Indigenous nations.²⁸

F



Photo: Black-tailed prairie dogs — threatened (DonJohnstonphotos.com)

Ontario

Ontario has an Endangered Species Act (ESA), once thought the strongest species at risk legislation in Canada. But under Premier Doug Ford's government, it drastically weakened.¹⁷

SUBJECT: **GRADE:**

Identifying species at risk: **C-**
The Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario (COSSARO) assesses species using scientific and Indigenous knowledge criteria. But now anyone with "community knowledge" can be a member, allowing industry representatives on the committee, bringing socio-economic views into what should be purely scientific.

Making it illegal to kill them: **D**
The ESA gives legal protections to individuals and habitat of species classified as threatened or endangered, **but that doesn't happen automatically anymore**.¹⁸ There can be delays allowing permit holders to continue harming species for one year and the minister can suspend protection for up to three years.¹⁹ If all ESA delay options are used, it could take up to five years for at-risk species to receive protective actions.

Legally protecting their habitat and helping species at risk recover: **D-**
The permitting process allows harmful activities that would normally be prohibited. Multiple activities that would harm and (or) destroy species at risk and their habitat over a broad geographic scale can now be authorized.²⁰ An auditor general report found permit approvals have increased by over 6,000 per cent since 2008 and are **always** granted. Blanding's turtles have declined by 60 per cent and have been impacted by 1,403 permits.

Protect ecosystems to maintain healthy populations: **F**
There's no protection for special concern species, which risks them becoming threatened or endangered. Ontario also has a Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act but it mostly regulates fishing, trapping and hunting wildlife.

Accountability: **F**
The auditor general report finds the ministry is not monitoring its effectiveness and **all listed species continue to decline**. A new "pay to slay" fund has been established, allowing corporations to harm species as long as they pay into the fund.

Enshrining UNDRIP: **F**
UNDRIP is not enshrined and there is no requirement of consultation with Indigenous nations.

D-

DESTRUCTION IS DRIVEN BY THE SYSTEM, NOT HUMAN NATURE

The mid-1900s is often referred to as the beginning of the Anthropocene. Human activity has overtaken geological forces as the dominant influence over the climate and environment in this period. The Anthropocene²⁹ coincides neatly with industrial-scale mining, logging and fossil fuel extraction in Canada, and dramatic wildlife declines.

The extinction rates we're causing today are driven by our relatively new system that prioritizes corporate profits above all else and demands ever-increasing extraction. The impossible pursuit of infinite growth on a finite planet remains one of the most harmful ideas in history.

But there have always been better ways of living on these lands. These ways restore rather than degrade ecosystems and cherish instead of exploit wildlife.



Photo: Beverly swamp, ON (WC Files).

Indigenous-managed lands harbour more biodiversity than any other areas in the world, including protected areas.³⁰ Indigenous worldviews and governance systems show us that human presence on the landscape is not fundamentally harmful. The biodiversity crisis is not a problem intrinsic to human nature — it's a problem rooted in the systems of

colonialism and capitalism in which power is entrenched. It's essential to name these things to understand it doesn't have to be this way. **Change is possible.**

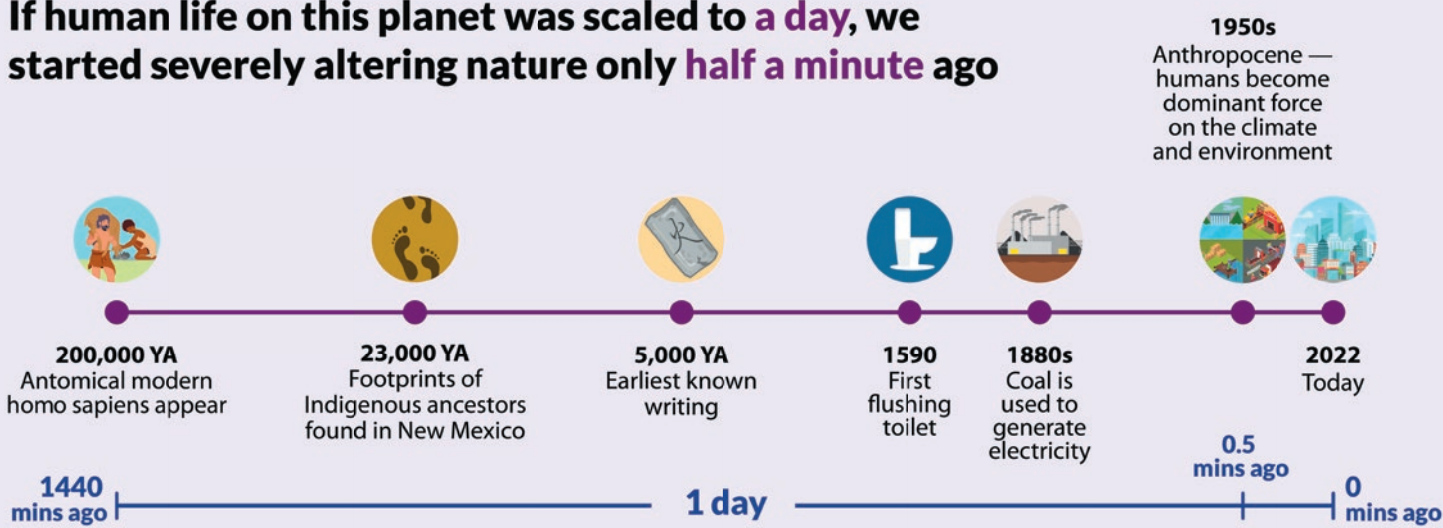
We have a chance to change course and save biodiversity with strong laws. With these laws, we can also create jobs in species and ecosystem recovery and shift towards justice for Indigenous Peoples who've always lived here. This is ambitious, but all living creatures deserve nothing less.

It's not too late to reforge our connection to the land and wildlife. The simple act of spending time in natural spaces starts this process. Next, we can look for ways to align our daily actions with the planet's needs and get involved in efforts to demand politicians do the same with our laws.



Photo: Western painted turtle — threatened (John E. Marriott).

If human life on this planet was scaled to a day, we started severely altering nature only half a minute ago



TAKE ACTION

Hold provincial and territorial decision makers accountable for extinction.

Call, write or meet your local elected official today. Demand stronger laws to protect biodiversity and species at risk.

- ▶ Ask them what provincial or territorial laws and policies are in place to protect species at risk habitat
- ▶ Tell them they need stronger laws to limit industrial activity in wildlife habitat
- ▶ Demand they prioritize addressing the extinction crisis



Photo: Killer whale — endangered (Dave Hutchison).

WildernessCommittee.org/TurnBackExtinction

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Wilderness Committee, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2022.
Canadian Mail Product Sales Agreement No. 0900567.
Posted in Vancouver for free distribution. Printed in Canada on recycled newsprint with vegetable-based inks.
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Published by
Wilderness Committee — National Office
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