



BC's Vanishing Wildlife



BROKEN PROMISES DRIVING EXTINCTION

NATURE'S ON LIFE SUPPORT, IT NEEDS A LAW



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On the coastlines of the Salish Sea in the spring, water turns silver as millions of herring return to spawn in kelp forests. A female herring will lay at least 20,000 eggs and males fertilize them, turning the water chalky white. Animals from sea to sky come surging in — gulls, herons, Pacific salmon, bald eagles, seals and sea lions show up in great numbers to feast on the herring and their eggs. Lumbering black bears are lured out of the forest to intertidal zones to forage on herring eggs. First Nations have relied on this spring harvest, gathering eggs off of kelp seaweed since time immemorial.

Later in the year salmon return to spawn. Once again the bears visit



Photo: sockeye salmon (Garth Lenz).
Photo top: grizzly bear mom and cubs (John E. Marriott).

river shores stretching throughout B.C. like arterial veins to catch salmon and carry them far into the forest. In years of plenty bears eat only fatty parts of salmon, leaving remains on the

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forest floor. Salmon contain nitrogen, a nutrient scarcely found in temperate rainforests. This influx of nitrogen helps tree rings grow up to 1.5 mm wider on average.¹

Remember, this whole chain of events started with the herring — these little fish couldn't have greater importance. One species causes a ripple, or a tidal wave, in an ecosystem. And the loss of one species has lasting impacts on others, including humans.

However, governments commonly fail to consider how interconnected species are. For example, they may be concerned low salmon populations are impacting food available for killer whales and people. But do they worry about empty rivers? Or hungry bears? Or trees waiting for nitrogen from salmon

that never come? Governments must acknowledge the incredible importance of each species and face the truth that when it comes to protecting wildlife and "super, natural British Columbia" it's all or nothing.

Nothing is basically what we have here in B.C. We don't have a law to protect wildlife headed for extinction. The lack of policy to protect nature means decisions are made recklessly, without considering the importance of intact ecosystems and our reliance on them.

That's why we're facing an extinction crisis. Worldwide, one million species could become extinct within a decade.² B.C. has more



Photo: old-growth in E.C. Manning Provincial Park (Jeremy Sean Williams).



Photo: great blue heron (Roberta Olenick).

biodiversity than any other province in Canada but also has the most at risk. In B.C. alone 1,807 species face extinction.³ Recognizing the importance of biodiversity, the BC NDP government made a promise for a species at risk law. In fact, Premier John Horgan's 2017 mandate letter to Environment Minister George Heyman instructs him to "enact an endangered species law."⁴ Their government publicly promised that by 2020 they would enact a provincial law.

They broke that promise.

In 2019, the premier announced no law is coming in the foreseeable future.⁵ This broken promise is a death sentence for some of the more than 1,800 species at risk in B.C. Species need a law now. While the government plays politics, wildlife is running out of time. Read on to find out why the NDP government must keep its promise.

RELENTLESS DESTRUCTION DRIVING EXTINCTION

Species are hurtling towards extinction at a rate 1,000 times faster than any point in recorded history.⁶ Species in B.C. are feeling the pressure and we’re starting to lose beloved wildlife. Southern mountain caribou, blotched tiger salamanders, short-eared owls, Haller’s apple moss, yellow-banded bumble bees and fishers are just some species struggling to survive.

Habitat destruction from activities like logging, road building, oil and gas extraction and mining is commonplace in B.C. Every forest logged, river compromised and tract of land sprayed with pesticides results in harm to species. The cumulation of increasing industrial practices since the turn of the century has chipped away at the ability of species to recover from the continuous shrinking, polluting and degrading of their habitat. Wildlife is incredibly resilient but when one destructive activity happens after the next, it makes it almost impossible for species to recover to healthy levels.

You might be asking, “surely there are laws in place that effectively limit industrial impacts on species at risk in B.C.?” There aren’t.

Without a B.C. law for wildlife on provincial land, they’re at the mercy of industry with no legislation in their corner to help protect them. The solution to extinction in B.C. is a

provincial law to provide protection and recovery measures for species at risk.

Winged phantoms of BC: the spotted owl

Arguably no species at risk has suffered more when it comes to lack of provincial protection than the northern spotted owl.

The spotted owl, once 500 pairs strong in southwestern B.C., brought the forest to life with a vibrant language of 13 different hoots, barks or whistles. These calls can’t be heard in B.C. anymore, unless by rare chance you stumble upon **one of the three known surviving individuals.**⁹

Spotted owls need old-growth forests and the features within them to survive. In 1986, the spotted owl was designated as endangered and since then, biologists and



Photo: northern spotted owl (Jared Hobbs).

environmental organizations have been fighting fiercely to protect them. Biologist Jared Hobbs tracked young spotted owls and documented their difficult lives. He followed them as they navigated the backcountry searching for suitable nesting sites — most often never finding them. These old-growth dependent owls died off with these ancient trees.

Because spotted owl habitat is mostly non-federal land, owl recovery was left up to the provincial government. The B.C. government dodged its responsibility to protect habitat, instead investing heavily in Band-Aid solutions like culling non-native barred owls and captive breeding. Even in areas the B.C. government earmarked for spotted owl recovery, it continued to allow logging and included habitat not suitable for owls and already-

Falling through the cracks

Species in B.C. are falling through the cracks in the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA). Of the 455 federally-protected species at risk monitored, most have worsened in status or failed to improve, largely because protection only automatically applies to species located on federal land, or migratory birds and aquatic species.⁷ In B.C., non-federal land makes up 99 per cent of the land base so most species at risk here don’t receive any immediate protection from harm or habitat destruction.⁸

impacted forests.¹⁰ Despite there being only three known individuals left, it is still legal to log trees with a spotted owl nest as long as the owl is not in the nest.¹¹

The story of the spotted owl makes it clear we can’t rely on the goodwill of governments and industry to save species — we need a law. Without it, even the simplest measures to protect the most at-risk wildlife aren’t being taken.

PAYING THE PRICE FOR SHORTSIGHTED LAWS

A patchwork of laws currently manage wildlife in B.C. Laws that are supposed to “govern” species include the Wildlife Act, the Forest and Range Practices Act, the Oil and Gas Activities Act, the Ecological Reserves Act, the Park Act, and the Land Act.¹² These laws interact like puzzle pieces that don’t fit. The lack of synergy makes them as patchy as a clearcut forest and the result is devastating for wildlife.

You might be wondering, “how does a lack of species at risk legislation play out on the landscape?”

For industrial projects operating on most provincial land in B.C., there’s often no legislation requiring companies to limit impacts to species listed as endangered, threatened

or special concern. Companies are often able to disturb and destroy critical habitat without repercussions and without considering ways to avoid impacts. Where impacts could have been avoided, they often aren’t because there’s no legal requirement to do so.

We need a law protecting all species faced with extinction. From orchids to caribou, we need a law that doesn’t discriminate but provides the same protection for all wildlife at risk. From the insects pollinating crops, to the trees purifying air, wildlife continue to provide us with our basic needs. Let’s return in kind.

Guiding principles of a strong species at risk law:

- The goal is to recover populations of at-risk species and rare plant communities
- Habitat protection must come first for species at risk followed by restoration of degraded habitat, not the other way around
- The law must list and recover species at risk as well as rare plant communities, such as old-growth forests
- Habitat protection must be based on the knowledge of independent scientists and traditional ecological knowledge holders
- The law must recognize the intrinsic value of healthy species and ecosystems, and the critical role they play in supporting healthy human societies and economies
- Interim habitat protection must be provided as soon as a species becomes at risk so species don’t continue to decline as planning is underway
- The law must be built upon our moral obligation to recover species we’ve driven to extinction
- The law must clearly separate scientific and traditional ecological knowledge from political, social and economic components — the latter must not influence whether we decide to take action to protect a species
- In accordance with B.C.’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People’s Act, the government must work with Indigenous communities to develop the law¹³



Photo: yellow-banded bumble bee (Leif Richardson).



Photo: Oregon spotted frog (David Blevins).



Photo: barn swallow (Robert McCaw).



Photo: Coeur d’Alene salamander (Jakob Dulisse).



THE LAW PROMISED BUT NOT PASSED

When the NDP formed a minority government with the support of the Green Party in 2017, wildlife enthusiasts across B.C. celebrated. After years in opposition, the NDP assured the public that when they formed government things would be different. They promised to create a species at risk law which would protect wildlife across B.C. headed for extinction.¹⁴

The government got the ball rolling with stakeholder workshops, online public consultations and reports outlining components needed for strong legislation. Things were moving forward and substantial effort was made, not just by the government but by First Nations, environmental

organizations and scientists to create a strong law for wildlife.

Suddenly it came to a screeching halt in 2019 when the government stalled on their promise to enact the law.

Coincidentally, a caribou plan was being drafted at the same time that received unwarranted pushback from vested interests like logging companies.¹⁵ Industry response to the plan caused hysteria and misinformation to spread throughout communities like wildfire.¹⁶ The provincial government didn't respond well.

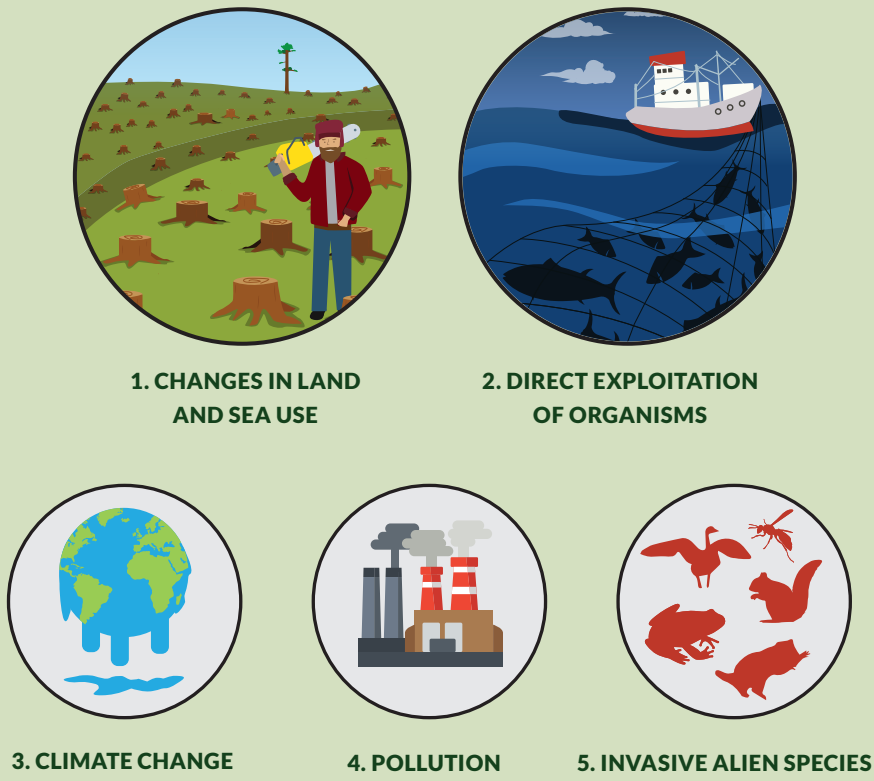
After this, government backpedalling was rapid. The premier was quoted saying, "There's no significant species at risk legislation on the docket for the foreseeable future here in B.C..."¹⁷ And just like

that the rug was pulled from under our feet. More hollow words and broken promises. We must hold the government to their words.



Photo: logged caribou habitat in Clearwater Valley (Joe Foy).

FIVE LARGEST GLOBAL DRIVERS OF CHANGE IN NATURE



The good news is the first two biggest drivers are directly within our control to fix.

Source: Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented'; Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating'. <https://bit.ly/3a6yIkI>

WHAT IT TAKES TO SAVE A SPECIES FROM EXTINCTION

Sixty years ago, the Peace Valley region on Treaty 8 Territory had caribou herds numbering in the hundreds of thousands.¹⁸ The land would rumble and shake with their migration. From afar they looked like colonies of ants traversing the rolling hilltops.

Gradually, industrial development hacked away at their habitat and disrupted migration corridors. The W.A.C. Bennett Dam devastated the caribou, causing animals to drown in a massive man-made lake that suddenly appeared in place of wooded migration corridors.¹⁹ Logging, mining, and gas development all took their toll.

In 2014, with one herd extinct

and others following, the West Moberly and Saulteau First Nations decided to take the fate of caribou into their own hands. They sought action to recover the herds and began a program that same year which increased the herd from 16 to 80 individuals by 2018. Over this time, most other herds in B.C. declined.²⁰

The West Moberly and Saulteau First Nations led the way on caribou recovery for five years. In 2018, the province was finally brought to the table under pressure from the federal government.²¹ The parties negotiated a plan that would protect an area the size of the Greater Toronto Area as caribou habitat, restore old roads and other

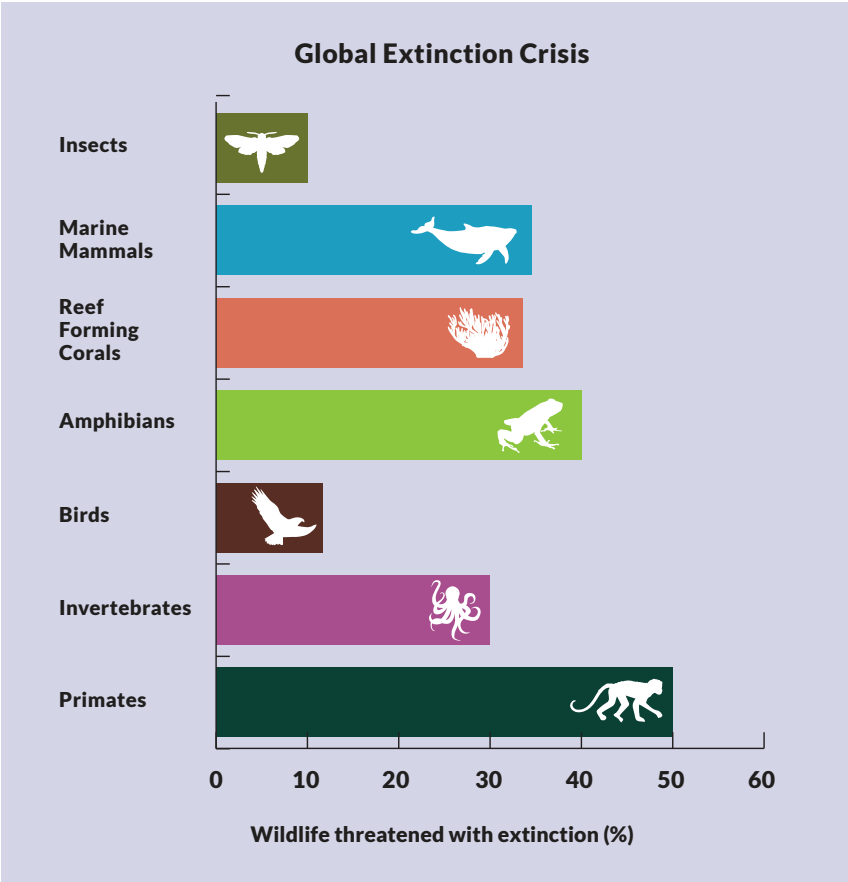
disturbances, and continue with a maternity pen to keep young caribou safe. This plan is the first to actually go the distance for caribou and give them a good chance at long-term survival.

This year, the plan was officially signed in its entirety!²² That's thanks to advocacy, public support

and, most importantly, leadership from First Nations who've cared for the land since time immemorial. Going forward, we must seek these partnerships with other Nations to restore forests, heal the land and recover species — especially when it comes to the B.C. species at risk law.



Photo: southern mountain caribou (David Moskowitz).



Source: Nature's Dangerous Decline 'Unprecedented'; Species Extinction Rates 'Accelerating'. <https://bit.ly/3a6yIkI>

A UNITED NATIONS’ WARNING UNHEEDED

In 2019 the United Nations released a global assessment on biodiversity and ecosystems from 145 experts, which recommend policies to deal with environmental harm in order to benefit both nature and the economy. It also warned these policies will likely be opposed by vested interests looking to continue unsustainable practices in forestry, mining, oil and gas, fisheries and more.²⁵ It looks like these industrial interests have had their way in B.C. and are influencing government officials to break their promises.

But we can change their minds. Premier Horgan is likely hoping we'll forget the promise he made on endangered species.

That’s not going to happen.

We need people throughout B.C. to speak up on behalf of those

Pre-Trump, the US law was the gold standard:

Before the Trump administration used its fossil fuel-covered hands to dismantle the Endangered Species Act (ESA), it was the gold standard. Throughout the U.S., 291 species would now be extinct if it weren't for the law.²³ One of the strongest aspects of the law was a committee known as the "God Squad." The God Squad was created to review exemptions under the act. Applicants can seek to obtain an exemption if the 'benefits' outweigh the harm to the species. This sounds like a clear avenue of disaster for wildlife. But it's not, the committee is well-intentioned and strong. So strong in fact that companies have avoided applying for exemptions altogether. The God squad has only had 6 applications and only granted exemptions twice in four decades.²⁴

The God Squad provides an example of the type of policy tool able to stand up to corporate interests and is needed in the age of extinction.

who can't. As the B.C. government tries to get away with its broken promises, we must ask them if they're willing to accept the blame for the extinction of

species like spotted owl or southern mountain caribou. If the government continues to place corporate interests ahead of wildlife and ecosystems by

failing to implement a species at risk law, the extinction that follows is on them.



Photo: southern resident killer whale pod (John E. Marriott).



Photo: Vancouver Island marmot (Jared Hobbs).

TAKE ACTION

FOR SPECIES AT RISK TODAY!

1. Write the premier and tell him to

- ▶ Implement a strong B.C. Endangered Species Act that also protects habitat by 2021
- ▶ Protect species at risk habitat while planning is underway to create a strong law

2. Arrange a meeting with your member of legislative assembly to demand a law by 2021



Photo: species at risk petition delivery (Isabelle Groc).

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YES! HERE'S MY GIFT TO SAVE SPECIES AT RISK!



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