



CONSERVATION

Hotspots



STATUS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN ONTARIO: THREATENED



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People in Ontario have a long history of environmental stewardship and protection. Indigenous nations have rooted relationships with nature in their economies, laws and cultures since time immemorial. These values are embedded in the original treaties that shape this land. Ontarians value experiences in nature for the tranquility, beauty and wonder they provide.

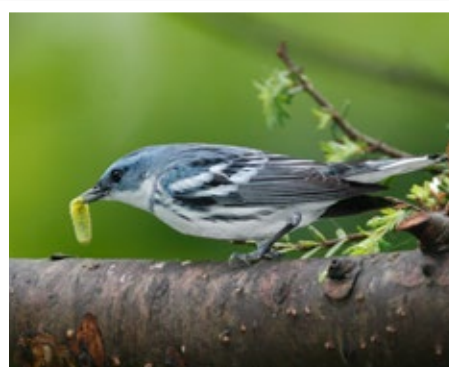
Fresh water, forests, grasslands, clean air and a stable climate are essential to our quality of life. Over the last few centuries Ontarians have reaped the rewards of these diverse ecosystems, but intensive resource extraction, urban development and failure to honour the treaties have also left them heavily degraded.

Southern Ontario has lost nearly three-quarters of its wetlands in addition to much of its original forest and grasslands cover.¹ Central and northern forests, wetlands and peatlands are threatened by

unsustainable logging and mining. This puts the climate, wildlife and remote Indigenous communities at risk. Over 240 species are identified as at risk in Ontario, with habitat loss the main cause.²

Science and Indigenous knowledge make it clear we need to do much better at conserving and restoring the ecosystems sustaining us. The UN has highlighted the potential of nature-based solutions in addressing climate change.³ Canada has committed to protecting 17 per cent of land by 2020 and a quarter by 2025 and has enlisted Indigenous leadership to create Indigenous

The world is living in a time of twin climate and biodiversity crises



Photos top: Blanding's turtle (Robert McCaw), Catchacoma old-growth hemlock forest (Cameron Douglas), Beverly Swamp (Don Maclean), boreal caribou (Hidehiro Otake). Photo bottom: cerulean warbler (Jeff Nadler).

Protected and Conserved Areas to meet these goals.⁴⁵ All of this means business-as-usual in Ontario is not going to cut it.

There are provincial laws aimed at environmental protection. Often these have been hard-won by pressure from environmental organizations and grassroots communities. These laws, however, are always at risk of being tampered with and weakened by the government of the day.

The current government, under a mandate of "opening Ontario for business," has launched an attack on the environment under the guise of cutting "red tape." Some cuts made headlines early on, such as closing the office of the environmental commissioner and shutting down clean energy projects.⁶ They cancelled the cap-and-trade program and replaced it with a climate plan with reduced targets that was blasted by the auditor general as "not supported by sound evidence."⁷

The government has also targeted laws aimed at conserving natural systems. Many changes have largely gone unnoticed, tucked away in bureaucratic language within huge



Photos: pickerel frog (Robert McCaw).

omnibus bills. Together they amount to death by a thousand cuts. Under pressure from industry, they've created loopholes making it easier for sprawl developers to expand without limits, quarry pits to dig into significant wetlands and have gutted protections for species-at-risk. They've proposed doubling logging in the boreal forest and exempting industry from government and public oversight.

It's vital for all of us to be vigilant and raise our voices to challenge this dismantling of environmental protections. We've already seen the premier back down from plans to open the Greenbelt to development due to massive public outcry — proving people power can take down corporate greed.⁸

This report highlights critical conservation hotspots to illustrate what's at stake when protections get cut and how communities are fighting back.



HOTSPOT #1: BATTLEGROUND BOREAL FOREST

WHAT'S AT STAKE:

Sustainable forestry, boreal caribou and essential carbon storage.

THE THREAT: Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry has released a new forest sector strategy that proposes doubling logging in the boreal forest and weakening environmental oversight of the industry by exempting it from the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and environmental assessments.⁹ This is a reckless, shortsighted mistake for an industry already pushing this globally significant ecosystem to the brink.

Most Ontarians live far from the vast boreal forest but we all recognize its essential natural values. It's a life-support system for remote northern towns and First Nations, and for wildlife such as the iconic caribou. The entire world benefits from its status as a global carbon storehouse, helping to mitigate against climate change.

While forestry can be a part of healthy rural economies if done sustainably, it requires public, scientific and Indigenous oversight and a clear, enforceable plan to protect intact forests. The

strategy proposed by the current government achieves neither and puts the fate of the boreal firmly in the hands of private corporations.

WHAT'S MISSING:

Caribou are considered a canary in the coal mine for the health of the boreal forest because they need large tracts of undisturbed forest. In 2012, concerned by evidence of a dangerous decline in caribou population due to habitat degradation from human activities, the federal government asked provinces to prepare habitat protection plans by 2017.¹⁰ **Ontario failed to meet this deadline and still has no mandatory protections for caribou habitat.** The new forest strategy conspicuously makes no mention of caribou nor the province's commitment to conservation under the federal mandate.

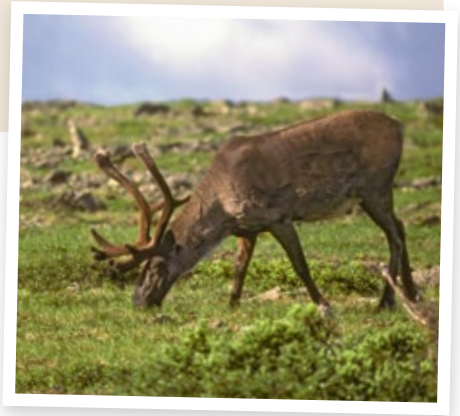
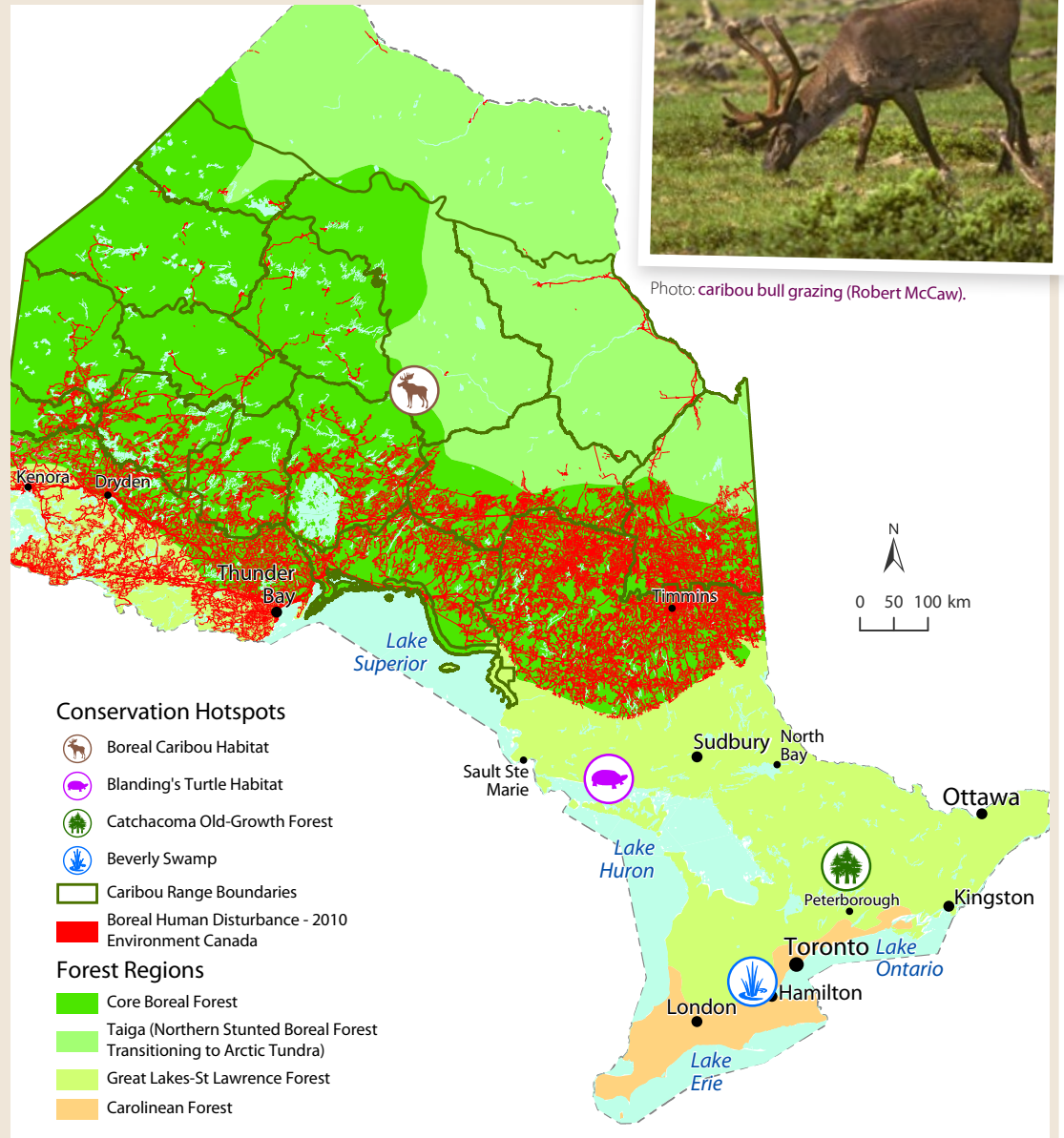


Photo: caribou bull grazing (Robert McCaw).



HOTSPOT #2: BATTLEGROUND BEVERLY SWAMP

LOCATION: Hamilton Conservation Authority lands, City of Hamilton, Treaty 3 territory.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: Significant wetland and a healthy climate.

THE THREAT: Enbridge Gas is seeking permission to build a \$204 million, 10 km natural gas pipeline through one of the largest forested wetlands in southern Ontario, known as the Beverly Swamp. The 2,300-hectare wetland is partly owned and managed by Hamilton Conservation Authority — visitors to the conservation area can hike to stunning silver maple, cedar and aspen swamps, cattail marshes, meadows and ponds that support diverse wildlife. It's a natural water source and sponge, storing water to prevent flooding. Streams flowing through the Beverly Swamp drain into Lakes Erie and Ontario.

If approved, pipeline construction would cross three creeks and include blasting through bedrock. In what might be considered backwards planning, Enbridge only has to do an ecological study *after* the project is approved by the Ontario Energy Board. Hamilton Conservation Authority has said they won't grant

CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES ON THE CHOPPING BLOCK?

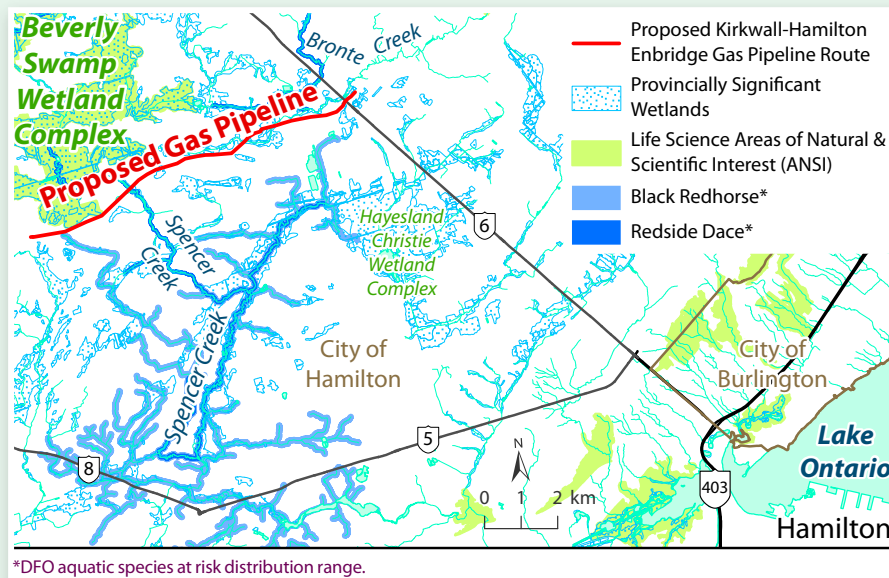
Since 1946, 36 conservation authorities (CAs) across Ontario have run programs to conserve natural systems and protect people and property from flooding. CAs monitor and protect watersheds from irresponsible development.

But, the Ford government seems poised to limit the power of CAs.¹⁴ They've already cut funds to flood prevention and big developers are pushing to remove CAs role in land-use permitting — paving the way to paving wetlands.¹⁵

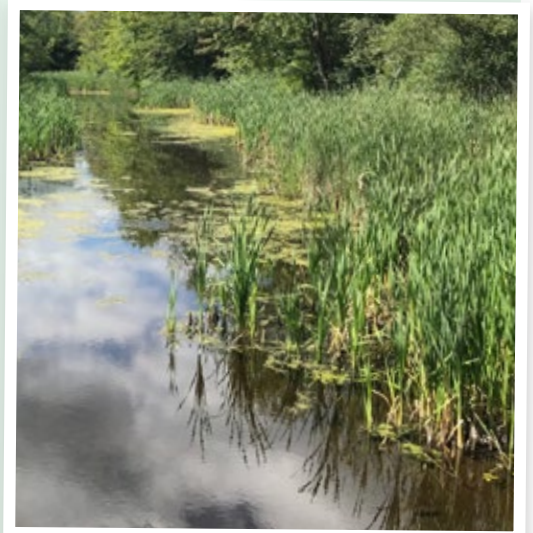
access to the part of the route it owns until a full environmental assessment is done.¹¹ This project is a double whammy threat. The pipeline would allow for an expansion of Ontario's natural gas-fired electricity and increased carbon emissions. The proposal has

brought attention to the provincial government's projection of a **300 per cent** increase in natural gas-fired electricity over the next five years. **This would fly in the face of even the current "Made-in-Ontario" climate plan, which relies on a decrease in emissions from**

natural gas.¹² Enbridge also wants to put the cost of the project on households, increasing rates for consumers throughout Ontario by \$120 million.¹³ Like many municipalities, the City of Hamilton has declared a climate emergency and, along with the Wilderness Committee and others, is pushing the Ontario Energy Board to consider the climate impacts of the project. Will Ontario continue down this dangerous path, or invest in electricity conservation and renewable sources instead?



*DFO aquatic species at risk distribution range.



Photos: Beverly Swamp (Don Maclean).



HOTSPOT #3: BATTLEGROUND BLANDING'S TURTLE HABITAT

LOCATION: Serpent River Watershed, Township of the North Shore, Robinson-Huron Treaty territory.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: 115 hectares of pristine wetland and habitat for species at risk.

THE THREAT: The gravel company, Darien Aggregates, has applied to dig a massive quarry on provincial Crown land recently found to be critical habitat for Blanding's turtles. The turtles are a threatened species with protection under Ontario's ESA. The company has convinced the township to rezone the site for mining by promising jobs and dollars. It will be up to the

Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry to approve or deny the license. The decision will, in part, be based on an environmental study — one conducted by a private consultant for the company. If that seems like a potential conflict of interest, keep reading.

THE SCIENCE: Scientists from Laurentian University independently surveyed the turtle population on the site. That study found many more turtles than the company's study. In fact, they called it the densest population of Blanding's turtles in Ontario. They concluded the quarry should be rejected given at least 63 per cent and at most all of the proposed area is endangered species habitat, with low tolerance to disturbance.¹⁶ To add insult to injuring

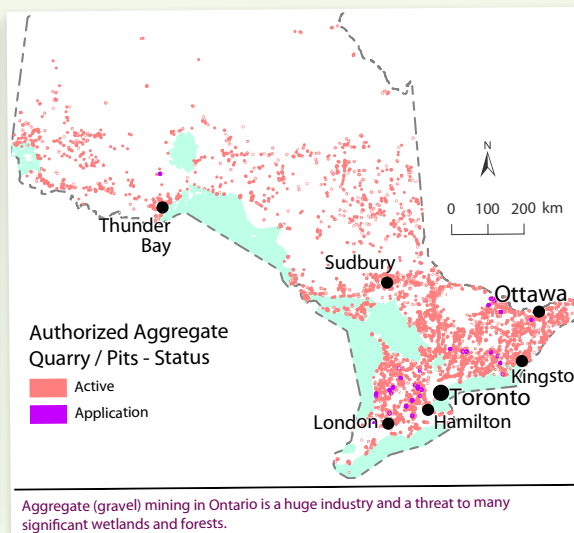
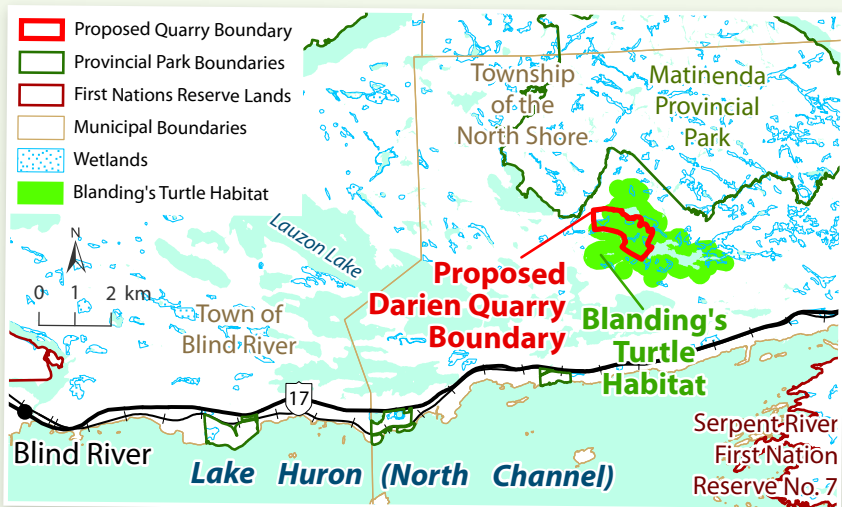


Photos: Blanding's turtle habitat in the North Shore (Rhonda Kirby).

turtles, when the scientists shared their results, the company and their consultant launched a defamatory attack. They spread accusations of academic misconduct. The scientists were forced to hire lawyers to get a retraction.¹⁷ **It remains to be seen**

whether public or privatized science will have more sway with the ministry.

THE LOOPHOLES: Sadly the ESA includes exemptions allowing for habitat destruction if industry says it will provide an "overall benefit" to wildlife. This could be the creation of new habitat somewhere else or rehabilitation after the project is over. Darien Aggregates estimates rehabilitation of the wetland would take over 130 years, but scientists question whether that's even possible.¹⁸ A brand new loophole put in by the Ford government makes it even easier. It's a "pay-to-slay" policy — companies can pay a fee to a conservation fund instead of protecting habitat.¹⁹



Aggregate (gravel) mining in Ontario is a huge industry and a threat to many significant wetlands and forests.

LOCAL OPPOSITION: North Shore citizens and members of Serpent River First Nation protested the municipal rezoning and are challenging it through the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal. If that appeal is turned down, there will be opportunities for public input through the province's environmental registry. **We all need to tell the government: approval of the Darien quarry would stomp all over the ESA by destroying critical turtle habitat.**



HOTSPOT #4: BATTLEGROUND CATCHACOMA OLD-GROWTH FOREST

LOCATION: Crown land, north of Catchacoma Lake, Peterborough County, Williams Treaties territory.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: Rare old-growth eastern hemlock forest.

THE THREAT: The 550-hectare Catchacoma forest was recently identified by ecologists from Ancient Forest Exploration and Research as the largest known old-growth eastern hemlock forest.²⁰ Old-growth forest is rare in highly developed southern Ontario and deserving of protection, yet data on it is lacking. The Catchacoma stand is licensed for commercial logging by Bancroft Minden Forest Company, which means the ecological integrity and old-growth features that support forest-dependent species are at risk of being compromised by harvesting and road building.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, in charge of reviewing forest management plans, needs to step up to the task of doing a full inventory of old-growth

locations, identifying habitat for species at risk and implementing conservation status for ecologically significant natural heritage systems. So far the ministry has not responded to a Wilderness Committee request for information about species-at-risk identified in the Catchacoma stand.

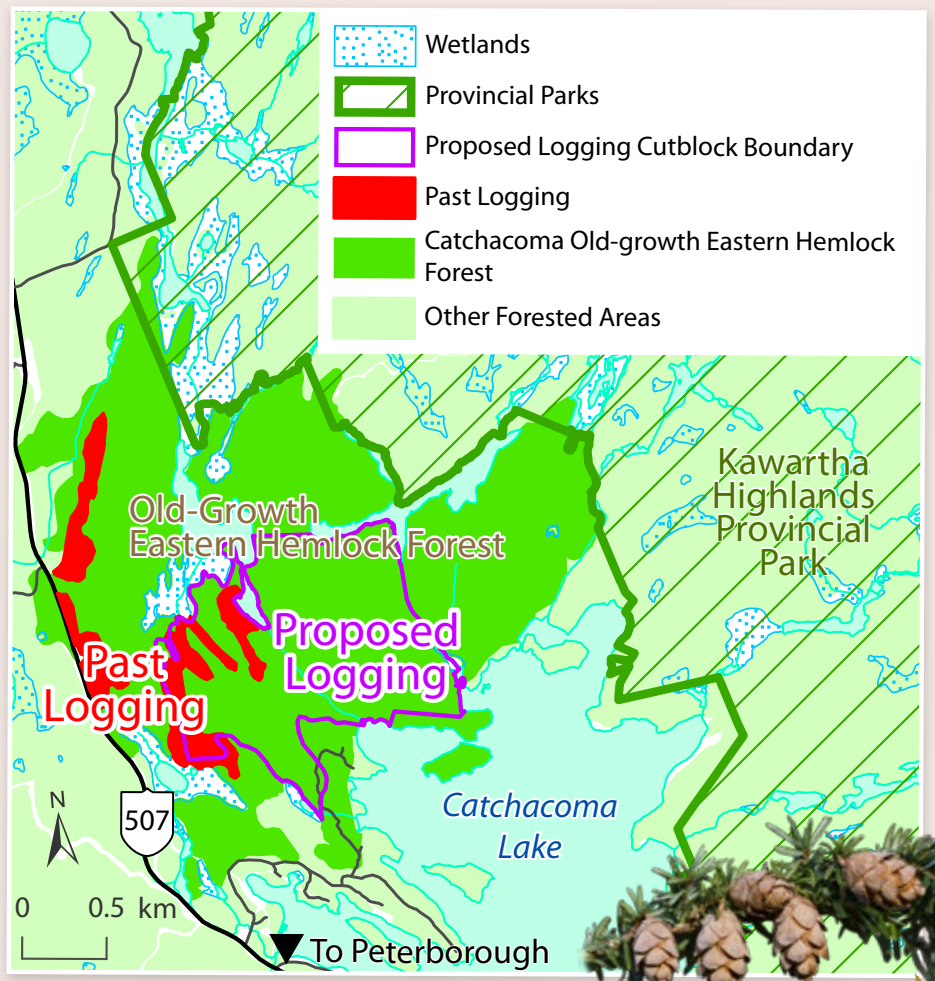
WHAT'S NEEDED: Ontario's Biodiversity Strategy set a target of protecting 17 per cent of land by 2020, in line with Canada's UN commitment.²¹ The Ford government's "Made-in-Ontario" climate plan also recognizes conservation of old-growth

and other natural areas as playing an important role in mitigating and adapting to climate change.²² Yet Ontario has been stalled at under 11 per cent protected and has no plan to achieve more. The upcoming mandatory public consultations on the Bancroft

Minden Forest Company's new 10-year management plan are an opportunity for the Wilderness Committee, Ancient Forest Exploration and Research and local citizens to push for a pathway to protection for Catchacoma and other old-growth stands.



Photos: Catchacoma old-growth hemlock trees (Cameron Douglas).



PROTECTED PARKS NOT FULLY PROTECTED

While we fight for new conservation areas, the battle to uphold the intentions of protected status — ecological integrity above private use — continues. Two of Ontario's most beloved provincial parks still do not meet these goals. Sixty-five per cent of Algonquin Provincial Park remains open to commercial logging. Both Algonquin and

Rondeau provincial parks — home to the highest number of species-at-risk — still lease land for private cottages, despite over 60 years of government promises to phase this

out. Ontario's Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act identifies ecological integrity as the main value of protected places. Private profits or property have no place in parks.



Photo: whip-poor-will roosting (Robert McCaw).



Photo: bird's-foot violet (Robert McCaw).



Photo: eastern flowering dogwood (Robert McCaw).

ONTARIO NOT-FOR-SALE

We can't and won't take it anymore. The Wilderness Committee has joined with a coalition of environmental organizations and grassroots groups to build awareness and capacity to oppose the Ford government cuts to environmental policies and regulations in favour of unsustainable industry and development. Together all of us must stand up and tell our government: Ontario is not for sale.



Photos: five-lined skink (Robert McCaw).



Photos: volunteers in the Catchacoma old-growth forest (Cameron Douglas).

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TAKE ACTION

Write to your MPP and tell them:

- ▶ Strengthen protections for wetlands, forests and species at risk.
- ▶ Oppose weakening of environmental regulations in the name of cutting "red tape."
- ▶ Follow the federal government's commitment and protect 25 percent of lands by 2025.
- ▶ Make a plan to protect intact boreal caribou habitat.
- ▶ Maintain the role of conservation authorities in land-use planning, permitting, monitoring, stewardship and education.



Photo: volunteers in the Catchacoma old-growth hemlock forest (Katie Krelove).

Sign up for regular reports and action tools here: WildernessCommittee.org/Ontario

Visit WildernessCommittee.org/ConservationHotspots to find your local MPP to take action.

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