Headlines these days make it clear wild nature is in trouble. In B.C., we’re staring down the barrel of twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. A record-shattering heatwave killed hundreds of people in June. Wildfires have turned landscapes to ash and skies blood-red and climate change-charged atmospheric rivers have wrought havoc. Meanwhile, governments force climate-killing pipelines like Coastal Gaslink and the Trans Mountain expansion through Indigenous territories without consent. Something’s got to give.

Beautiful British Columbia isn’t just a license plate slogan. If you live here, you know. The abundance of mountains, forests, rivers and coastlines are stunning with their brilliant variety of biodiversity and vast expanse of landscapes. But decades of unregulated industrial activities have severely damaged many natural habitats and put wildlife in a dangerous state. They, like us, face increasingly hostile weather from climate change. B.C. is home to more than 1,900 plants and animals on the provincial species-at-risk list. At last count, spotted owls are down to just three adults remaining in the shredded remains of their old-growth forest habitat. Some herds of southern mountain caribou have disappeared from their logging-ravaged forests so fast there’s been barely enough time to remove road signs warning to look out for them.

And, more bad news. The long-promised B.C.-endangered species law was quietly smothered in the back rooms of the legislature buildings. It’s a victim of the powerful logging, mining and oil and gas lobbies.

With Indigenous nations leading the way, we can accomplish the desperately needed expansion of the protected area system here. There could be some good news on the horizon. The government of Canada presented a bold new vision of expanding protected areas to cover 30 per cent of the landscape by 2030. In cooperation with Indigenous nations and the province, this vision could significantly expand the protected areas system.

The century-old provincial park system is one way people here sought to protect and preserve natural landscapes and species. However, successive generations have struggled to hold on to a protected area system as it faced push-back by extractive industrial corporations that profit from clearcut logging, strip mining, and oil and gas drilling. The slogan to create protected areas was painfully slow. By 1980 only about five per cent of B.C. had been protected. Then, everything changed.

Fifty years ago, First Nations sparked a revolution to expand protected areas in B.C. The Nlaka’pamux and Lil’wat Nations successfully defended Stein Valley from logging threats, as did the Tla-o-qui-aht and Ahousaht Nations on Meares Island and the Haida Nation at Gwaii Haanas. Hundreds of thousands joined together in massive campaigns to support their visions. Today, the protected area system in B.C. has grown to over 15 per cent of the landscape, thanks largely to Indigenous Peoples’ vision, foresight, leadership and determination.

With Indigenous nations leading the way, we can accomplish the desperately needed expansion of the protected area system here. We could see it double in size by 2030 to meet Canadian promises made on the international stage. Read on to learn why those promises were made and what you can do to make them come true.
**INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREA PROPOSALS**

All of what we call British Columbia is Indigenous land that’s never been ceded to Canada or the provincial government. All parks and protected areas must come from First Nations’ visions for their land.

The proposed Dene K’eh Kusān conservancy, designed, planned and mapped by the Kaska Dena people with federal government support, is a four-million-hectare cluster of intact wilderness watersheds, mountains and forests in north-central B.C. This extraordinarily diverse and wildlife-rich area is contiguous with a number of existing protected areas, making its value for conservation even greater. B.C. has yet to endorse the region’s grizzly bear population.

For several years the Ahousaht, Tla-o-qui-aht and Hesquiaht Nations have been undertaking land use visioning processes for their territories in Clayoquot Sound on Vancouver Island. The Ahousaht envision Wílkala’n̓íh Areas designed to conserve biological diversity, natural landscapes and wilderness, and provide for Ahousaht’s spiritual, cultural and sustenance visioning.

These three Indigenous land-use visions could potentially result in 700 square kilometres, an area nearly seven times larger than the City of Vancouver, of some of the finest remaining intact old-growth forests on Earth gaining protected area status.

**Map of Potential Protected Areas in BC**

To see a larger updated version of this map follow this link: [bit.ly/bccvmap](http://bit.ly/bccvmap)

**Potential Protected Areas**

1. Falcon River Headwaters
2. Kaska Dena Nation Dene K’eh Kusān IPA
3. Nisutlin Watershed
4. Glistener Nation’s Wíl-Wíl’ Lossé MacDonald IPA
5. Southcoast and West Moberly First Nations K’wax-wa-ch-N’chí Park Expansion
7. Goat River First Nation K’waax-wa-ch-N’chí Tele Park
8. Wildbird Reserve Wilderness
9. Goat River Valley
10. Raush River Valley
11. Quesnel Lake Wilderness
12. Argonaut Creek Valley
13. Nahmint Anišnaak Wilderness
14. Ucluelet Mountain-Caribou Park Proposal
15. Kumsheen First Nation Qat’muk (Jumbo-Tele Creek watershed) IPA
16. Argenta Face
17. South Slocan Study Area
18. foothills River Valley
19. Tłíshān’nit’ in Nation Damasus Tribal Park or Nexaw’wé’I’xun
20. Bulkley Valley First Nation Methow Watershed IPAs
21. Wildbird Reserve to Secwépemc Nation Piped (Jacobs Lake Area)
22. Saulteau Band Lake Haldane Heritage Park
23. Spotted Owl Habitat Areas
24. Skagit River Headwaters
25. Lower Salmon Arm Indian Band Smaltzsum IPA
26. South Ogimik – Shishekan National Park Reserve Proposal
27. Gardner Canal Complex
29. Skokomish River Complex
30. East Creek Valley
31. West Sockeye IPAs
32. Ahousaht First Nation Wílkala’n̓íh IPA
33. Ts-o-qu-aht First Nations Tribal Parks
34. Kumsheen (Central Wallahan Creek Valley)
35. Tłíshān’nit’ in Nation Tribal Parks
36. Fairy Creek Rainforest

**CANADA’S BIG PROMISE**

On Sep 28, 2020, the government of Canada committed to the international community to protect 30 per cent of its landscapes by 2030. This promise is part of global efforts to mitigate biodiversity loss and climate change and included a milestone goal of 25 per cent protection by 2025.

For B.C. to do its part, a hundred thousand square kilometres of new protected areas are required to be protected by 2025, with a further fifty thousand by 2030. The total area of B.C. is over 940 thousand square kilometres, so it’s only an additional 16 per cent of the province.

In 2021, B.C. announced a plan to move towards temporary logging deferrals on some of its most cherished and endangered ecosystems — old-growth forests. Twenty-six thousand square kilometres of endangered old-growth forests in areas Indigenous nations are considering for preservation are being targeted for deferrals to let protected area planning proceed without the threat of imminent logging.

Many Indigenous nations have been planning for this moment. Some have carefully crafted protected area proposals and land visioning. This Indigenous leadership provides hope that together, the 2025 and 2030 protected area targets will be met. It’s time for Canada and B.C. to step up.

**WILD MOUNTAIN PARKS IN WAITING**

Activists have been fighting for years — sometimes decades — to keep precious wild places safe from chainsaws and backhoes. It’s been a long battle and a long wait.

**Argenta Face** is a 6,000-hectare forested area located at the north end of Kootenay Lake in southeast B.C. Surrounded on three sides by the Purcell Wilderness Conservancy, this much-loved wilderness gem is threatened by impending logging. This region is located within the traditional territory of the Ktunaxa, Secwépemc, Sinixt and Syilx Okanagan Nations.

Rausch Valley is a 100,000-hectare intact watershed located in east-central B.C. Between Wells Gray Provincial Park and the upper Fraser River. The Rausch is the biggest intact tributary to the Fraser that’s never been ceded to Canada or protected. Though almost 7,000 hectares of the valley has been included in two parks, the rest is threatened by logging. The Rausch River watershed is located within the traditional territory of the Secwépemc and Lheidli T’enneh Nations.

**Photo: Clayoquot Sound (Jacqueline Wright)**

**Photo: Endangered Argenta Face forest (Joe Foy).**
TEARING DOWN BC MINING TENURES

Many things have changed in the 150 years since B.C. was declared a province, but the process to obtain a mining tenue isn’t one of them. Settler gold seekers could pound a stake in the ground and declare Indigenous land theirs to dig up. It was theft then, and it’s theft now. B.C.’s tenure system for resource companies doesn’t need tinkering — it needs to be torn down and relegated to the trash heap of shameful colonial history. The proposed Wilp Wii Litsxw Meziadin IPA in traditional Gitanyow Nation territory in northwest B.C. is a 30,000-hectare area designed by the Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs to protect a crucial run of sockeye salmon from potential mine impacts. The Gitanyow have determined the cost of buying out mineral tenure is prohibitive but are considering plans to move forward with protection — with or without the support of Canada or B.C.1

The proposed Dasiqox Tribal Park or Nexwagwez2an is a land, water and wildlife management area located in traditional Tšilhqot’in Nation territory in southwest B.C., in the shared caretaker areas of Xení Gwet’in and Yuneet’im peoples. The area encompasses about 300,000 hectares and borders several existing parks and protected areas. This IPA proposal is hung up because of a mineral tenue, even though the courts declared the proposed New Prosperity open-pit mine dead.2

The Skagit Headwaters region in southwest B.C. has a 6,000-hectare “donut hole” of unprotected lands surrounded by Manning and Skagit provincial parks. The left-out lands are proposed for protection, but a mineral tenue held by the notorious corporation Imperial Metals is stalling the process. The Skagit Headwaters are located within the traditional territories of the Upper Skagit, Stó:lō, Syilx and Nlaka’pamux peoples.3

RAINFORST RUCKUS

Ancient temperate rainforests in B.C. invoke powerful feelings for anyone who’s walked among the mossy giants within them. The great age and size of some of these trees are sometimes impossible to believe. Once cut, we’ll never see the likes of them again. To many, it’s as clear as big stumps on a mountainside: Old-growth logging has to be banned now while there is still some left.

This conviction has sparked protests that garner attention around the world, and thousands of people have been arrested for protecting the last of the giants. We love big tree forests — but as recent B.C. government mapping shows, industrial logging has made them heartbreaking rare. It’s cause for concern that some of the smallest protected area proposals are the sites of some of the biggest protests — perhaps because so little ancient forest is left. Like no other place on Earth, B.C. has both coastal and inland rainforests.

Fairy Creek Rainforest in the territory of the Pacheedaht Nation is just 1,200 hectares in size. Still, because it’s the last intact old-growth valley outside of parks remaining on southern Vancouver Island, logging plans there have sparked the largest civil disobedience campaign in Canadian history.4 In the summer of 2020, the Pacheedaht convinced the B.C. government to temporarily defer logging here while it develops a long-term plan for its territory.5 The heart of the nearby Central Walbran Valley, or Kaxiks, is just 500 hectares. It’s one of the most spectacular ancient rainforests in the province. Like Fairy Creek, it’s been granted a temporary hold on logging after decades of protest, thanks to the leadership of the Pacheedaht.6

The Argonaut Creek inland rainforest region sits astride Secwépemc, Ktunaxa and Syilx traditional territories, north of Revelstoke in southeast B.C. This lush forest with massive old trees is critical habitat for a herd of threatened southern mountain caribou. In 2020 and 2021, locals, environmentalists and First Nations strongly protested logging plans. Thanks to them, about 2,000 hectares of old-growth forests still stand — for now.7
TAKE ACTION

Champions live among us — sometimes they are us. "Take action!"

They’re dying. By industrial activities and stressed, the planet are running on empty.

Let’s remember to do it more.

The same tiny blue dot in the universe. They give meaning and provide light on our life’s journey.

Kids do this a lot. Adults should remember to do it more.

Indigenous stories, art, teachings and traditions are ablaze with this truth. We need to stop ignoring and repressing this knowledge and begin to honour and uplift it.

It’s the calamity of our time. That so many wild creatures around the planet are running on empty. Their habitats are so fragmented by industrial activities and stressed by the changing climate that they’re dying.

But there’s still much hope.

There are champions, and they live among us. Sometimes they are us.

One fight to save a species is particularly dire. But even this fight has hope. Spotted owls are down to just three in Canada. Once numbering more than a thousand, these nocturnal predators silently rode the wind on hunting sorties through the moon-lit ancient forests of the Coast Salish. St’Tát’imc and Nlaka’pamux peoples. Their call to one another have echoed in the tall timber since time immemorial. The spotted owl is honoured as a messenger from the spirit world and has had its likeness painted in red ochre on canyon walls.

This beautiful creature is in danger of disappearing completely because too much of its habitat has been logged.

Thankfully the owl has champions.

In a last-minute reprieve, the Nlaka’pamux community of Spó’zêm Nation demanded the owl’s habitat be protected and restored and said no to further logging.

The governments of Canada and B.C. recently heeded Spó’zêm Nation’s call. They put a logging moratorium in place in two of the nation’s valleys. Now, all of the owl’s critical habitat through its range is being mapped for preservation and restoration. Together, we could add another 300,000 hectares to B.C.’s protected area system — giving this creature a new lease on life.

Other similar stories of champions for at-risk wild creatures can be told, including southern mountain caribou, marbled murrelet, grizzly bear, pine marten, sacapultic and many more. All these creatures need room to roam and proper habitat protection.

This will require heeding multiple Indigenous nations’ conservation visions and preserving millions of additional hectares of habitat. They also require a strong species at risk law in B.C.

As we continue the fight to raise protection in B.C. to 30 per cent by 2030, we take strength from the other creatures and biodiversity that share these lands. They are why we absolutely must meet this goal.

References

Simmons, Matt. “Saving the salmon: why the Gitanyow called. They are why we share these lands. They are why we absolutely must meet this goal.

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