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.

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.

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 within those species. In the boreal shield of Canada, wetlands harbour an impressive amount of biodiversity.\(^4\) Hectare for hectare, wetlands are some of the most productive ecosystems in the world, on par with tropical rainforests and coral reefs.\(^5\) 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 mountaneous environments, and desert-like landscapes to kush 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.\(^6\) Ecosystem destruction tends to cause large-bodied species to disappear while smaller-bodied, fast-lived species that are famous for transmitting disease increase.\(^7\)

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.

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**RECIPIES FOR EXTINCTION**

Species on Earth are going extinct at least 1,000 times faster than would be the case without human influence.\(^8\) Currently, there are 809 at-risk species listed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).\(^9\) 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.\(^6\)

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.\(^10\)

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

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**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.\(^7\) 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 lane 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 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.\(^11\)

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**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.**

Photo:Gypsy cuckoo bumblebee — endangered (Sheila Colia)

Photo:Wolverine — special concern (Grambo images)

Photo:Alberta tar sands (Garth Lenz)

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

Photo:4D-G5-Kamloops butterfly — endangered (Dallas Collins)
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 protect wildlife from disappearing in Canada.

#### SUBJECT: Identifying species at risk

- **GRADE:** F

#### Making it illegal to kill them:

The SARA only automatically protects species at risk and endangered species and they receive 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:

Critical habitat on provincial 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 whereas the province takes the primary responsibility for habitat protection in the history of the SARA it has never done this. Species with legal protection don’t necessarily recover. 64 SARA-based species saw population declines by 50 per cent from 2002 to 2014.

#### Protect ecosystems to maintain healthy populations:

There’s no mechanism or program for species that aren’t legally listed as endangered or threatened. Even special concern species don’t receive protection from harm.

#### Accountability:

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.

#### Emshining UNDRIP:

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.

### 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.

#### SUBJECT: Identifying species at risk

- **GRADE:** B-

#### Making it illegal to kill them:

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#### Legally protecting their habitat and helping species at risk recover:

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### Ontario

Ontario has an Endangered Species Act (ESA) that protects the strongest species of risk legislation in Canada. But under Premier Doug Ford’s government, it drastically weakened.

#### SUBJECT: Identifying species at risk

- **GRADE:** F

#### Making it illegal to kill them:

The ESA prohibits harming an endangered species, a threatened species, or an anticipated species that has been reintroduced.

#### Legally protecting their habitat and helping species at risk recover:

Although the ESA prohibits harm to habitat of listed species, there’s no requirement to identify habitat in the first place. The law doesn’t require recovery planning, or prohibitions on harmful activities. A recent U of T audit found that 47 of 57 projects identified by the government didn’t have a recovery plan. This means the minister can suspend species protection for one year and the minister can suspend protection for up to three years.

#### Protect ecosystems to maintain healthy populations:

The Wildlife Act provides the designation of Crown lands as wildlife management areas (WMA) to help protect species. However, these areas can be used to activities such as oil and gas development, trapping, hunting, and motorized vehicle use.

#### Accountability:

Since the law doesn’t require recovery planning and implementation, the government is not held accountable for recovering species.

#### Emshining UNDRIP:

UNDRIP is not enshrined in the law. But the law does not require any consultation with Indigenous nations.

### British Columbia

B.C. is the province with the most biodiversity. But through its Endangered Species Act, which was created to protect species in critical habitats, such as the Great Bear Rainforest, it’s been criticized for not adequately protecting species at risk.

#### SUBJECT: Identifying species at risk:

- **GRADE:** C

#### Making it illegal to kill them:

The provincial act protects only four species at risk from being harmed, out of the 1,537 species the act protects. This law doesn’t prohibit harm to all listed species, at risk.

#### Legally protecting their habitat and helping species at risk recover:

B.C. claims its a patchwork of laws to protect wildlife. There’s no protection for ecosystems and habitat remains largely unprotected from industrial extraction.

#### Accountability:

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

#### Emshining UNDRIP:

B.C. failed to enshrine UNDRIP in provincial law, in 2019 but they’ve yet to recognize the law and they perform it. B.C. is not in a law harmonizing UNDRIP law by year-end beginning.

### Report Cards
T
de 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 Anthropocene coincides neatly with industrial-scale mining, logging and fossil
fuel extraction in Canada, and dramatic wildlife declines.

The extinction rates we’re seeing today are driven by our relatively new system that
causing today are driven by


demands. The impossible pursuit of
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.

This is ambitious, but all living

The destruction of wilderness

is/finite growth on a finite planet remains

understand it doesn’t have to be

with the planet’s needs and get involved in efforts to demand politicians do the

Look for ways to align our daily actions with the planet’s needs and get involved


Return to: Wilderness Committee 604-683-8220
Vancouver, BC V5T 1J4

Phone: 604-683-8220 in the Lower Mainland, BC 1-866-611-9453 toll-free elsewhere in Canada.

Enclosed is: $35 $60 $150 Other $ ______

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MY GIFT BUILDS PRESSURE TO PROTECT!

Your gift keeps us on the ground to document at risk ecosystems and keep the pressure on for greater protection in our public, media and education outreach.

YES!

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CREDITS

WildernessCommittee.org

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Photo: Killer whale — endangered (Dave Hutchison).

WildernessCommittee.org/TurnBackExtinction

Photo: Western painted turtle — threatened (Dave Hutchison).

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.

WildernessCommittee.org/TurnBackExtinction

DESTRUCTION IS DRIVEN BY THE SYSTEM, NOT HUMAN NATURE

Indigenous-managed lands harbour more biodiversity than any other areas in the world, including protected areas. 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 territorial and governance.

References


WildernessCommittee.org/TurnBackExtinction

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