



**A National Conservation Plan for Canada:  
Speaking Notes for Wildlife Conservation Society Canada**

**Presented by Damien Joly, Ph.D.**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members for inviting us to appear before you today to discuss the development of a National Conservation Plan for Canada.

My name is Damien Joly. I am a wildlife epidemiologist with Wildlife Conservation Society Canada (WCS Canada). WCS Canada was established in 2004 as a Canadian non-government organization. Our mission is conservation of wildlife and wildlands and we use science to achieve this goal. Our trademark is “muddy boots” biology by getting in the field and conducting the necessary research to fill key information gaps on Canada’s fish, wildlife, and ecosystems. We then use relevant information and our expertise, working with Aboriginal communities, Government and regulatory agencies, conservation groups, and industry, to resolve key conservation issues.

WCS Canada welcomes the opportunity to present our thoughts to the Standing Committee. We believe there is a strong role to be played by the federal government in conservation, and here we outline what we see are the key elements of that role.

We must, however, first express our profound uncertainty regarding the outcome of this process to create a National Conservation Plan, given the number of recent actions by the federal government that are already undermining any potential for its true success. In the past few months this government has proposed the repeal or revision of key conservation-related federal legislation (particularly the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act and the Fisheries Act). These reduce the role of the federal government and seriously weaken the ability of any government or society-at-large to promote conservation with a robust scientific basis. Conservation actions are largely based on solid science, and recent budget measures have seriously reduced the role of science in societal decision-making by cutting numerous federal scientist positions and departments involved in environmental and conservation issues.

Canada’s biodiversity, and the natural systems that sustain us, are at risk. Urbanization, agriculture, oil and gas production, mining, forestry, and supporting infrastructure such as roads, have resulted in a substantial human footprint across much of southern Canada. Canadian governments’ own science<sup>1</sup> confirms widespread deterioration in environmental values that include but are not limited to losses in wetlands, grasslands and old-growth forests, decreases in river flows, declining populations of native species, increasing invasions by non-native

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<sup>1</sup> Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Governments of Canada. 2010. Canadian Biodiversity: Ecosystem Status and Trends 2010. Canadian Councils of Resource Ministers, Ottawa, ON.

species, and accumulation of contaminants that threaten wildlife and human health. These are clear signals that ecological functions in terrestrial and aquatic systems are being impaired in significant ways.

Meanwhile, in northern Canada (north of 50°), investments in natural resource development have been steadily rising over the past decade, and the Government of Canada has made clear that this trend will continue. Much of this attention and activity is occurring in boreal and arctic ecosystems that are a globally significant. Rather than increase investments in monitoring and oversight of environmental values accordingly, Canadian governments have chosen the opposite strategy. Budgets for information-gathering systems focused on studying and understanding biodiversity and ecosystem change have been cut back each year, and government-led assessment processes are being modified to hasten decision-making on developments.

The role of the federal government is to assume broad responsibility for matters of national and international concern that transcend political boundaries. This includes biodiversity, ecosystems, ecological processes, and consistent standards for assessment of development projects that will impact them. As such, it is entirely appropriate that this body lead the development of an overarching national conservation plan that clearly defines collective commitments to, common understanding of, and respective roles and responsibilities for implementation by federal, provincial and territorial governments. This, moreover, supports Canada's international commitments under the 1992 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

### **WCS Canada Recommendations**

We briefly present three fundamental areas of focus for Canada's National Conservation Plan: 1) conservation beyond protected areas, 2) protected area establishment and management, and 3) species conservation. In our opinion, a National Conservation Plan must integrate all three elements and each must be supported with investment in scientific and Aboriginal traditional knowledge systems.

#### **1. Conservation beyond Protected Areas**

The 2012 federal budget has staked Canada's long-term economic prosperity on natural resource development, a strategy that will significantly increase both the industrial footprint and environmental stressors, with established negative implications for ecological and social systems. To ensure that ecological systems maintain the capacity to support development and the services we obtain from these systems for free without compromising ecosystem integrity across our country, a National Conservation Plan must extend its reach well beyond protected areas; parks alone simply aren't enough to ensure conservation of Canada's wild plants and animals.

The Plan must foster a comprehensive approach with Provinces and Territories that addresses a wider set of environmental, social, and economic impacts than current land use planning and environment assessment processes permit. This means 1) replacing piecemeal decision-

making processes governing individual development projects with strategic land use planning and environmental assessments performed at regional scales, and 2) creating national standards for resource management and monitoring in both land- and water-scapes beyond protected areas. A focus on the maintenance of ecological flows – the movements of organisms, water, and nutrients – across lands and waters will likewise be critical.

In sum, a proactive approach to addressing cumulative land use change beyond protected areas will be fundamental to fostering both resilience (sustaining those attributes that are important to society in the face of change) and adaptation (developing new institutions and approaches that function under changed conditions) of Canada's natural heritage for future generations.

## 2. Protected Area Establishment and Management

Establishing and managing national parks has been a cornerstone of Canada's conservation efforts for over a century. While Canada's terrestrial protected areas network has increased steadily since 1992, only about 10% of the land base and 1% of marine systems have been designated -- well short of Convention on Biological Diversity's 2020 Aichi Biodiversity Targets.

As opportunities for meaningful establishment of new areas are rapidly disappearing, a key priority under the National Conservation Plan must be to complete the National Park System Plan of representative ecological regions, filling important gaps in representation of freshwater, marine, and some terrestrial ecosystems and building on the solid foundation to complete the parks system. Gazetted areas must be large enough and designed with enough forethought as to provide meaningful habitat quality for area-sensitive species and be as resilient as possible to a changing climate and changing conditions beyond park boundaries.

Care must be taken to ensure that rigour in scientific monitoring of these "ecological benchmarks", or natural reference points, is not undermined by economic drivers such as enhancing visitor use. In order to find solutions to these many challenges, the Government of Canada will find that working in tandem with provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments can encourage innovative approaches to achieve land protection that address the unique environmental and social context comprising Canada's natural systems.

## 3. Species Conservation

Species are the most visible building blocks of biodiversity, the variety of life on earth and foundation of Canada's commitment under the Convention on Biological Diversity. The status and health of fish, wildlife and plant populations serve as barometers for how our natural systems are faring. Warning signs in Canada are indeed evident, with species-at-risk lists increasing in size every year, while relatively few species are recovering sufficiently to be removed from such lists. Still more Canadian species are displaying concerning signs of decline in parts of their range where human impacts are at their most intense, while as-yet intact areas serve for the time being as critical population and habitat strongholds.

Even at a time when habitat loss and degradation is globally recognized as the overwhelming

threat to species survival and persistence, habitats of those species that are most at risk of extinction in Canada seldom receive protection of any consequence. Moreover, most species escape meaningful monitoring investment or attention, even when faced with escalating threats.

An effective National Conservation Plan must place conservation of all species, particularly those of conservation concern, as a key pillar to both target its efforts and as a means to monitor its success. Further, we caution that because of the strong evidence for the relationship between species diversity and ecosystem function, the value of individual species cannot be underestimated. This means that any approach that places the highest value on those species that are of economic or even cultural importance to humans risks being dangerously short-sighted.

In conclusion, at a time when regulatory and information systems are increasingly hard-pressed to keep pace with mounting threats to conservation from resource developments, climate change and a growing human population, the imperative for a National Conservation Plan could not be more clear; we strongly encourage the committee's efforts to develop such a plan. WCS Canada recommends that this Plan contain three pillars: 1) conservation within landscapes beyond protected areas, 2) protected area establishment and management, and 3) species conservation. A useful and sincere Plan would show serious commitment by the Government of Canada to Canada's obligations under international treaties and agreements (e.g., Convention on Biological Diversity), a renewed commitment to federal investment in science, and a reversal of legislative changes that weaken the conservation agenda.

For more information:

Justina C. Ray, Ph.D, Executive Director & Senior Scientist  
Wildlife Conservation Society Canada  
jray@wcs.org, (416) 850-9038 x 22