



Video Transcript

Value-for-Money Audit: Conserving the Natural Environment with Protected Areas (2020)

I'd like to talk to you about our audit Conserving the Natural Environment with Protected Areas.

Protected areas are places where nature is allowed to function relatively unaffected by human activities and ecological processes can occur with little or no intervention by people.

Protected areas, like provincial parks, are society's most effective tool to conserve nature and the services it provides to us. As of 2020, protected areas cover over 11.5 million hectares, or about 10.7% of Ontario. Only 0.6% of southern Ontario is protected.

In Ontario, the responsibility for managing protected areas and creating new ones is shared. The *Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act* directs the Environment Ministry to create a network of provincial parks and conservation reserves to support biodiversity. The *Far North Act* directs the Natural Resources Ministry to work with First Nations to protect 22.5 million hectares in the Far North.

We chose to do this audit because according to the World Economic Forum, the loss of biodiversity in nature is one of the top five risks to economies over the next decade. Biodiversity is the variety of life—including plants, animals, fish and other organisms—in particular habitat or ecosystems. There is significant concern about the future survival of more than 2,200 species of plants and animals in Ontario. Protected areas can help to slow or stop the loss of biodiversity, especially in southern Ontario where it is most at risk.

Our audit assessed whether the Environment and Natural Resources ministries have effective processes and systems in place to:

- permanently protect a network of provincial parks, conservation reserves and other areas to conserve biodiversity; and
- monitor and publicly report on their progress in protecting these areas.

Overall, we concluded that the province's systems and processes are not effective to permanently protect provincial parks and conservation reserves.



The Environment Ministry does not have sufficient information about the state of biodiversity in Ontario. Ontario does not have a plan or targets for creating new protected areas.

Our findings include that insufficient staffing and funding have contributed to many issues, and have impacted the ministries' legal obligation to conserve nature through protected areas.

The Environment Ministry does not collect enough information about species at risk, invasive species and the impact of activities like hunting, fishing, and trapping that may harm native species in provincial parks and conservation reserves.

As well, in the last five years, Ontario added only 3,007 hectares or 0.003% of the province's lands to its protected area network. Only 10.4% of Ontario's Far North is protected—well short of the 50% target in the *Far North Act*. Biodiversity is most at risk in southern Ontario, where only about 78,700 hectares are protected.

Our report contains 17 recommendations, consisting of 36 actions, including that:

- the Environment Ministry develop and implement a monitoring program to regularly collect information about species at risk and their habitat, invasive species and the impact of hunting fishing and trapping in each provincial park and conservation area;
- the Environment Ministry and the Natural Resources Ministry assess and allocate the human resources needed to create and manage protected areas; and
- the Environment Ministry establish a long-term plan and target for expanding protected areas.