



News Release

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Auditor General: Long-Term Planning Needed to Protect Ontario's Parks and Other Protected Areas

(TORONTO) Ontario lacks an overall plan or long-term target and the staff it takes to protect the province's parks and other protected areas, concluded Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk in her *2020 Annual Report of Environmental Value-for-Money Audits and the Operation of the Environmental Bill of Rights*.

"As we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for people to be outside and enjoy green space for both physical and mental health reasons," stated the Auditor General. "Unfortunately, the part of the province with the highest population density—southern Ontario—only has 0.6% coverage of protected areas. This is unfortunate for both people and nature."

The audit found the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (Environment Ministry) did not know enough about the state of biodiversity within existing protected areas to know whether it is meeting its legislative responsibility to conserve species and their habitats in these areas. The Environment Ministry does not collect sufficient information on species at risk and invasive species, or on the impact of hunting, fishing and trapping on native species in provincial parks and conservation reserves.

The audit, which has 17 recommendations, says neither the Environment Ministry nor the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (Natural Resources Ministry) has any plan or target to expand Ontario's protected areas.

"Biodiversity loss has been ranked as a top-five risk—by likelihood and impact—to economies over the next decade because of the economic value of the services that the natural environment provides," Lysyk stated. "Ontario needs an effective protected area network to ensure the positive economic impacts attributed to protected areas continue."

The audit also found insufficient staffing has significantly contributed to many of the issues identified and impacted the ministries' efforts to conserve nature through protected areas. For example, the audit reports that only 7 of the 254 staff members at Ontario Parks, a branch within the Environment Ministry, are ecologists responsible for leading science-related activities to understand impacts on biodiversity.

Meanwhile, the number of full-time staff at the Natural Resources Ministry working on land-use planning in the far north decreased from 22 in 2018 to 10 at the time of the audit.

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Visit www.auditor.on.ca to read the report.

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Background and Other Findings:

- The audit concluded that an effective network of protected areas is necessary to slow or stop the loss of biodiversity—particularly in southern Ontario—so Ontario residents can more fully benefit from nature, including recreational opportunities.
- Protected areas in Ontario support thousands of jobs, generate millions of dollars in revenue and contribute hundreds of millions of dollars to the province’s gross domestic product. Biodiversity loss is one of the top five risks to economies over the next decade because of the economic value of the services that nature provides us such as clean water and food.
- More than 2,200 species of all plants and animals in Ontario that have been studied by scientists are “of conservation concern,” indicating significant concern about their future survival.
- At the time of the audit, 10.7 per cent of Ontario was protected from development and 0.6 per cent of southern Ontario was protected even though it is the most biologically diverse and most at risk because of high human population.
- Only 3,007 hectares or 0.003 per cent of Ontario’s land area was added to the province’s network of provincial parks, conservation reserves, and dedicated protected areas over the last five years despite the continued loss of biodiversity.
- Ninety-five or 15 per cent of provincial parks and conservation reserves, including popular parks like Algonquin and Lake Superior, have management plans more than 20 years old and 12 protected areas have no management plans. Management plans outline specific actions to protect the nature and provide public accountability for how these areas are conserved.
- The Environment Ministry’s annual land acquisition budget was reduced from \$500,000 to only \$1,000 beginning in 2012. This budget was previously used to purchase private land or cover the administration costs of accepting land donation from private landowners or land conservation organizations. In its fall 2020 Budget, the province committed to investing \$20 million over four years to help conservation partners purchase new protected areas.
- The Natural Resources Ministry has not determined whether it will support First Nations’ requests to create Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas, which could contribute to both reconciliation and conserving biodiversity.
- Two-thirds of Algonquin Provincial Park does not meet criteria for a protected area because of commercial logging. Algonquin Provincial Park is one of the largest provincial parks in Ontario, but only one-third of the park meets the national criteria to be reported as a protected area. Neither the Environment Ministry nor the Natural Resources Ministry has reviewed the park’s role in the protected areas network as recommended by the Ontario Parks Board of Directors in 2006.