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Failing to protect and enhance biodiversity

Canada is one of seventy nations that have signed the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People. The goal? Protecting at least 30% of the world's land and oceans in a natural state by 2030.¹ Canada's 2021 budget committed over \$5 billion in funding over 5 years towards protecting our lands and waters.²

The Ford government is allocating \$20 million over four years to protect natural spaces.³ This miniscule commitment represents 0.04% of Ontario's 2021 budget.⁴ Ontario currently has a long way to go in meeting the 30% target. Only 10.7% of its land and inland waters are designated as protected.⁵ Clearly, the government's priorities lie elsewhere. In the leadup to the June 2022 election, Ford announced a "Connecting the GGH" transportation plan. It allocates \$82 billion over 10 years for carbon bombs like the proposed Highway 413 and Bradford Bypass -- key planks in his election platform.⁶

The Ford government cannot be trusted with protecting our vital natural areas. A video leaked during the 2018 election campaign showed Ford promising a group of developers that he would "open a big chunk" of the Greenbelt for them.⁷ A massive public outcry forced the government into an embarrassing climb-down on this one.⁸ Notwithstanding that rare concession, the Ford government signalled its contempt for nature protection by eliminating the Office of the Environmental Commissioner, weakening of the mandate of our Conservation Authorities and regularly



¹ <https://www.hacfornatureandpeople.org/home>

² <https://www.budget.gc.ca/2021/report-rapport/toc-tdm-en.html>

³ <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/60714/ontario-expanding-the-protection-and-preservation-of-green-spaces>

⁴ <https://budget.ontario.ca/2021/pdf/2021-ontario-budget-en.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-parks-and-protected-areas>

⁶ <https://www.thestar.com/politics/provincial/2022/03/10/doug-ford-pledges-82b-for-public-transit-and-highways-over-the-next-decade.html>

⁷ <https://www.thestar.com/news/queenspark/2018/04/30/doug-ford-assured-developers-he-plans-to-open-up-greenbelt-to-housing-development.html>

⁸ <https://ontarionature.org/campaigns/bill-66/>



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using draconian Ministerial Zoning Orders to fast track development in areas of natural heritage significance.

The Ford government has also watered down Ontario's Endangered Species Act.⁹ Developers can now pay into a fund (the so-called "pay-to-slay" fund), allowing projects that harm species and habitat. This in place of specific local benefits for threatened species. Another change allows endangered status for Ontario species to be removed when they are not threatened *outside* Ontario. Yet another erosion of wildlife protection removed applicability of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to crown forests where weaker species protection criteria apply. Then there's allowing the minister to remove species protections for up to three years based on *economic considerations*. As well, the discretion of the minister to require re-evaluation of the species for possible removal from endangered status is enhanced.

A 2021 Auditor General report, *Protecting and Recovering Species at Risk*^{10,11} revealed that

- Authorizations for harmful activities to species has increased from 13 in 2009 to over 800 a year since 2017.
 - The government has never denied an application to harm a species at risk or its habitat.
 - The government has never conducted inspections of authorized harmful activities to ensure compliance with the rules.
 - Enforcement of the law is minimal. The number of charges laid under the ESA has declined dramatically since 2018, with no fines and no charges laid in 2020.
- Climate change and healthy biodiversity are hardwired. Ontario's government must understand this immutable fact and take steps to seriously address it. Enhancing Ontario's "protected places" can be accomplished by:
- Establishing Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas
 - Identifying and protecting Provincially Significant Wetlands
 - Protecting old growth forest stands
 - Recognizing candidate protected areas in crown forests that have been designated under the Forest Stewardship Certification program
 - Expanding the boundaries of existing protected areas, including provincial parks
 - Protecting and restoring ecological corridors to safeguard wildlife movement
 - Preserving natural areas within and near urban centres
 - Restoring effective protections for endangered species by strengthening the Endangered Species Act
 - Massive investments in ecosystem restoration
 - Seeking input and approval from Indigenous peoples for measures affecting their traditional lands.

⁹ <https://ontarionature.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ERO-013-5033-ESA-May-18-2019.pdf>

¹⁰ https://auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/ENV_ProtectingSpecies_en21.pdf

¹¹ <https://ontarionature.org/ontario-failure-blog/>