

## Environmental Commissioner of Ontario

### [Ontario's Biodiversity Crisis: Time for Action](#)

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Plants, animals, and other organisms are going extinct at a rate of about 1,000 times higher than what could normally be expected.

There are seven species that once lived in Ontario that have become globally extinct in modern times. Another 12 species were once in Ontario and are no longer found here. We also have almost 200 species that are still here, but their survival is in jeopardy. It is an alarming trend that these numbers increase year after year.

Human impacts on the natural world are responsible for this crisis. The most significant threats are habitat loss, climate change, invasive species, over-harvesting, and pollution. This unprecedented loss of species is the most visible part of what scientists call the biodiversity crisis.

Biodiversity is inextricably linked to the quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the soils we depend upon for our food, and the lands upon which we depend for our natural resources. It's about our rivers and lakes, our woodlots and forests, wetlands and prairies, and even the songbirds in our backyards.

January marks the start of the International Year of Biodiversity. The United Nations General Assembly chose the year 2010 to raise understanding globally, to assess what has been done by governments, and to chart a new way forward.

We can be proud that Canada was the first industrialized country to become a signatory of the international Convention on Biological Diversity after the Rio summit in 1992. Almost every country on Earth has formally pledged its support for this international effort.

These countries jointly set the goal for themselves "to achieve a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss" by 2010. Unfortunately, this goal will not be met by any country, according to the United Nations. A renewed effort is unequivocally needed.

Two important events in 2010 represent opportunities for the Ontario government to make biodiversity a priority. In June, our province will be the host for the summit of G8 countries in Huntsville and the loss of biodiversity has clear consequences for our global economy. Then in October, the world will meet in Nagoya, Japan to set targets and detail the necessary steps to halt biodiversity loss.

We are not without our own successes. Species such as the peregrine falcon and the bald eagle have slowly rebounded in Ontario. However, such tangible accomplishments seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

The Ontario government started down the right path in 2005 by creating a five-year biodiversity strategy. Other advances have been made, including putting in place better laws for protecting our provincial parks and species at risk. These initiatives have the potential to make a difference but they must be matched by the political will to make conservation a priority.

A key barrier for the Ontario government has been the failure to make biodiversity conservation an explicit responsibility of all government ministries in all their activities that have an impact on the natural environment, whether they oversee highway planning, municipal growth, mining or agriculture. Instead, concern for biodiversity often remains compartmentalized within the Ministry of Natural Resources. Simply put, it gets lost within the government bureaucracy.

Action on biodiversity must be integrated across the Ontario government as a whole. In a way, it's not much different than the challenges of tackling climate change. Dealing with globally significant environmental issues must explicitly be seen by politicians and the public as a government-wide responsibility of the most serious urgency.

“Does this better or worsen biodiversity?” That’s the question that we all must ask from now on. It should be asked when debating a new law or even when figuring out if the location of a new subdivision is appropriate.

We have to ask this kind of question – and have it treated seriously – if we’re sincere about joining the international community to halt the loss of biodiversity in the years ahead. At a minimum, we should at least be making our own measured decisions about Ontario’s biodiversity with the best possible information.

At this stage, I would argue that results are what count. We need much more than promises or rhetoric. The consequences of failing to properly address the biodiversity crisis are clear.

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