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## Indigenous-led conservation efforts could make Canada a global leader in biodiversity

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Canada will step into the global spotlight this month when it welcomes the world to the United Nations Biodiversity Conference [in Montreal](#). When international delegates arrive, they will see many examples of a powerful solution for sustaining biodiversity across the country: Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship.

Ministers, Indigenous peoples, business leaders and others will gather for once-in-a-decade negotiations that will influence the health of natural systems we depend on – from intact forest landscapes (essential for carbon storage) and drinking water to agriculture and clean air – for generations to come.

The trendlines in Canada are not good: rates of wildlife and plant extinctions are [rising rapidly](#). But Indigenous nations are leading the biggest, most ambitious plans to protect lands and waters across the country.

Over the last 20 years, Indigenous nations have been responsible for identifying and advocating for many of the areas now officially designated as “protected” lands and water in Canada. Dozens of additional new Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) have been proposed, and Indigenous guardianship programs have grown apace. Guardians – Indigenous experts who are trained to monitor and manage the land on behalf of their nations – now oversee at least 120 protected lands and waterscapes across Canada.

The federal government has said repeatedly that these Indigenous-led initiatives are central to its strategy for [protecting 30 per cent](#) of the country’s lands and waters by the year 2030 – a promise Canada made as a member of the UN’s [High Ambition Coalition](#) for Nature and People. With significant long-term support, Indigenous-led conservation can help Canada achieve this goal, and deliver many more benefits as well.

Indigenous peoples are offering a broader, deeper model of conservation – one that is as good for people as it is for the land. Indigenous-led approaches to stewardship reflect knowledge that is often missing from Western society. Instead of viewing land as a resource to be exploited, Indigenous peoples recognize that people and the land are interdependent: if we take care of the land, the land takes care of us. It’s a relationship.

Indigenous-led conservation is about more than a simple designation. It supports cultural revitalization, as Indigenous knowledge of the land is embedded in our languages. It involves connecting youth and elders so that insights about our lands and waters, such as patterns for caribou migration and ice formation, are shared. And by bringing people onto the land, it recognizes that healing and mental

health are interwoven with stewardship. In fact, Indigenous stewardship has been shown to deliver wide-ranging community benefits, from job creation to better outcomes for public health. Many guardians say their role has helped them recover from addiction, restore pride in their identity and become leaders in their communities.

Not only have the societal benefits been impressive, Indigenous-led conservation efforts have also proven to be highly effective in protecting the environment. According to the UN, [80 per cent](#) of the world's remaining biodiversity can be found on lands managed and loved by Indigenous peoples. A University of British Columbia [study](#) looked at species data from Canada, Australia and Brazil and found that the number of birds, mammals and amphibians is highest on lands managed by Indigenous communities.

Researchers have also [found](#) that every dollar invested in guardian programs delivers significant advantages in the form of social, economic and environmental benefits for Indigenous communities, including reduced rates of incarceration and violence against women, as well as improvements in population health and well-being. One study of Coastal Guardian Watchmen programs established by First Nations in British Columbia showed a rate of return on investment of up to [20 to 1](#).

It is not often that we get a chance to accomplish so much at once, from stemming biodiversity loss to healing the impacts of residential schools, from generating sustainable economic growth to creating opportunities for youth. But building on these results requires more comprehensive, integrated support. Now is the time for Canada to expand investments in Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas, as well as guardian programs, and commit to innovative financing tools in order to do so.

As the eyes of the world turn to Montreal, Indigenous nations can help Canada become a global leader in the preservation and reclamation of biodiversity. Together, we can advance a model of conservation that respects Indigenous knowledge, sustains biodiversity and nourishes communities. Indigenous peoples have a responsibility to care for the land and water not just for our own benefit, but for the good of everyone. Supporting this stewardship will create a better-shared future for all.