

and Arctic barrens. Since the days of the fur trade and the Hudson Bay Company, so much of the driving force of the Canadian economy has come from the northern forests, the prairie grain fields and the fisheries of the British Columbian and Atlantic coasts. More than almost any other nation on Earth, vast wildness has been key to our national identity.

So many Canadians consider that the opportunity to experience the wilds is our birthright - to fish in a clear lake, listen to loons at twilight, or roam in old growth forests. And, given the huge size of our nation, most people believe that Canada today is still mostly wild. So while there is concern amongst the public for the loss of big trees on the west coast, or quality fisheries in the Maritimes, the common assumption is that with so much land, all we as Canadians have to do is go over the next ridge or around the next corner and there will lots of intact Nature left.

But the reality is drastically different from this popular perception. According to research undertaken by World Wildlife Fund Canada, (WWF) human development activities have heavily altered the face of much of our land. According to WWF, the option to preserve unaltered wilderness blocks of land exceeding 50,000 Ha (a benchmark size considered by leading scientists to be the minimum requirement for pristine ecosystem sustainability)⁷ has already been lost in one quarter of Canada's bio-regions. Given the rate at which logging, mining, farming, roading, settlement, and power development is occurring, the loss of intact natural areas increases ever more rapidly.

As the Federal Government's Green Plan notes:

"Old-growth forests, native grasslands and wetlands continue to disappear. For example, in southern Ontario, more than 68% of the original wetland has been drained for agricultural and other uses, and draining continues to remove about one percent per year from the remaining stock of wetlands. On the Prairies, over 90% of the original grasslands have gone, and in the last decade, one third of the remaining grassland was converted to cropland." ⁸

In portions of the country, landscape alteration has already been so great that species such the Dawson Caribou are now extinct. Countless others large and small are listed as endangered species: the black-footed ferret, the Vancouver Island marmot, the whooping crane.

Obviously such losses cannot continue without disastrous consequences.