

## The Convention on Biological Diversity: Our Living Legacy

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was one of the major achievements of the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. Increasingly, the global decline of biodiversity is being recognized as one of the most serious



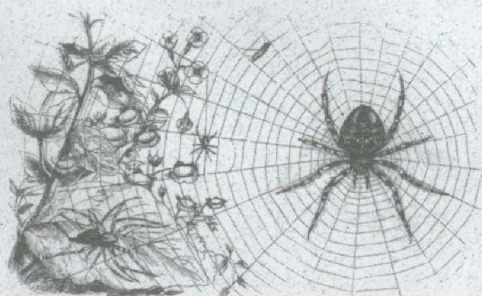
environmental issues facing humanity.

Worldwide recognition of this inspired the global community to negotiate the

CBD, or the Biodiversity Convention, as it is more commonly known. Canada was among the first to sign the Convention at Rio and was the first industrialized nation to ratify it. To date 118 countries have ratified it.

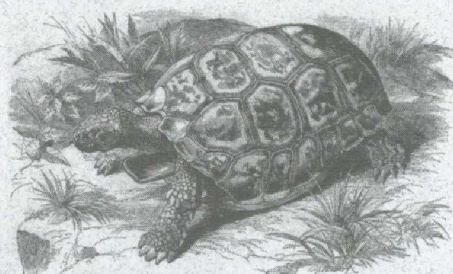
Biological diversity, or "biodiversity," is the term used to describe the variety of life on Earth. It encompasses three concepts. "Species diversity" describes the variety of animals, plants and micro-organisms that exist on our planet. "Genetic diversity" refers to the range of possible genetic characteristics found within a particular species and amongst different species. "Ecosystem diversity" describes the variety of natural ecological systems found in a region, a country and on the planet.

Scientists estimate that the total number of species of



animals, plants and micro-organisms on Earth ranges between 10 and 100 million. Still, today only 1.4 million species have actually been identified.

Some observers believe that up to 100 species become extinct every day. These losses are caused by the ever-growing demand for food, fuel, and industrial products generated by the rising expectations and needs of a growing population. All of these factors lead to the destruction of precious habitat, over-harvesting of resources and pollution.

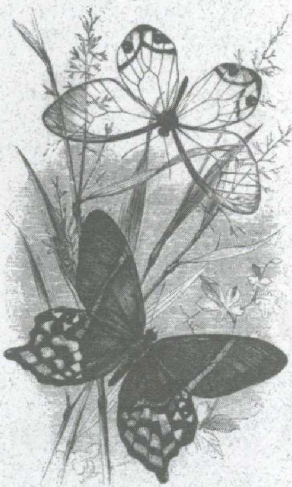


The Biodiversity Convention provides an international legal framework for the conservation of the planet's biological diversity, the sustainable use of biological resources and the equitable sharing of benefits derived from the use of genetic resources.

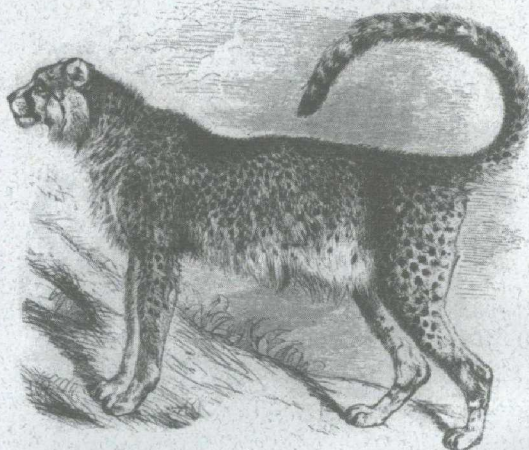
Development of national biodiversity strategies is the first step in implementing the CBD. These strategies should set out the approach each country will take to conserve its biodiversity and to use its biological resources in a sustainable way. The

Canadian Biodiversity Strategy is a joint effort by federal, provincial and territorial governments and will soon be released.

More than half of the world's species live in tropical countries in the developing world. These countries rely on the wealth of their biological resources to develop their economies and to improve the living conditions of their citizens.



Canada recognizes that biodiversity conservation will depend on building partnerships with other countries, particularly developing countries. The establishment of a consistent framework for sharing knowledge, technologies and the benefits of biological resources is one of the key results of the Biodiversity Convention.



Canada believes that ultimately all countries will benefit from the conservation and sustainable use of Earth's biodiversity. Moreover, if we fail to recognize the link between biodiversity loss and human well-being, future generations will suffer significant ecological, economic and social costs. ♣

## Forest Biodiversity

Forests cover nearly half of Canada's land area and are likely home to two thirds of the 300 000 species of plants, animals, insects, fungi and micro-organisms estimated to exist in Canada. New species continue to be discovered: in recent years, for example, scientists working in British Columbia's Carmanah Valley have identified more than



60 new insect species in the canopies of coastal old-growth forests. Forests are therefore a key element in Canada's efforts to conserve its biodiversity.

Conserving the natural diversity of forest species preserves the potential to discover and develop new products for medicine, biotechnology, forestry and agriculture.

Canada has taken steps to conserve the diversity of its own natural ecosystems. It has already set aside 7.9 per cent of its land base (12.5 per cent of the world's total protected area) and is committed to nearly doubling that area. Furthermore, 5.5 per cent of Canada's forest land is protected by law from harvesting; an additional 6.6 per cent of forest land, composed of shallow or rocky soil, steep slopes and waterway reserves, is excluded from harvesting by provincial policy. ♣

## Taking Action on Biodiversity

by the Honourable John Fraser, PC, QC  
Canada's Ambassador for Environment and Sustainable Development

"They can't see the forest for the trees," is a time-honoured expression in English. For a long time it applied to issues surrounding biological diversity. Many people looked at wild forests but only saw lumber. They looked at mountains but only saw minerals.

Natural resources such as those are important. They are the building blocks of our economy. However, we have broadened our vision to see that the environment offers us many more benefits than those alone. In Canada, as around the world, we have come to understand how interconnected living things, species, habitats and ecosystems are. We now understand that policies and practices must take the values and the complexity of the natural environment into account.

The path to that recognition has not been simple. Canada is old enough to have suffered the loss of some important species and habitats. Many are under pressure. But we are also young enough to have a great deal left to conserve. That is why Canadians care and expect their governments to follow through on commitments they have made to protect the biological diversity we still enjoy. I know that people around the world expect us to show leadership on this issue.

Domestically, the Canadian Biodiversity Strategy represents a major step forward in meeting our commitments to the international community, and to ourselves. It recognizes the responsibility and the need for action that we all share. We play a role in stewardship of this immense portion of the planet. Internation-

ally, our work with partners in developing countries does the same. But we might not even have had a Convention on Biological Diversity to guide that work, if not for Canada.

I recall that the final stages of negotiations on the Convention centered on complex and difficult issues. Some G-7 countries began to indicate they might not sign it. Canada announced that, regardless of their positions, it would support the Convention. That broke the log jam. Earth will reap the results.

Shortly, the international community will decide where to locate the Permanent Secretariat of the Convention. Canada has offered Montreal as its host. That city has already become a centre of international environmental activity. It is home to the Montreal Protocol Secretariat and the North American Free Trade Agreement Environmental Cooperation Commission.

Montreal is a city in which English and French are at home. It is a crossroads for many cultures, serving well as a site for international organizations, e.g. the International Civil Aviation Organization. As a country with a strong commitment to international environmental co-operation, Canada looks forward to providing a home for the Permanent Secretariat.

Unlike the old saying I quoted at the beginning, we are learning to see the forest and everything in it. The Permanent Secretariat will be an important tool to help the world do the same. ♣