

Protecting Ecosystems

Awareness of the need to conserve natural ecosystems and their inherent biological and physical resources has increased the recognition of the need for protected areas. Such areas are viewed as a way to maintain nature's inherent ecosystem diversity. Setting landscapes and seascapes aside helps avoid the destruction of assets whose value may not be fully understood today, but may prove to be infinitely valuable in the future. Protected areas serve as laboratories for the study of the status and trends in ecosystem structures, functions, and processes, relatively free from human disturbance. The information gained in the analysis of these natural ecosystems is usefully applied in the development of measures to restore degraded ecosystems. Through their protection of biodiversity, protected areas provide a source of species that may be reintroduced to restored areas.

Because many of Canada's landscapes and seascapes are relatively intact (Mixedwood and Prairie have been significantly altered), opportunities to preserve ecosystem diversity exceed those in many other countries. The Canadian Council on Ecological Areas, established in 1982, promotes the development of a comprehensive system of areas representative of Canada's terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem diversity. The council developed the Canadian Conservation Areas Database, which contains information on protected areas held by federal, provincial, and territorial governments, as well as nongovernmental organizations. This comprehensive database has been used in the assessment of ecosystem representation as well as other protected area goals, such as important wildlife areas.

The setting aside of representative ecosystems continues in Canada. Protected areas include national, provincial, and territorial parks; wilderness reserves; forest reserves; ecological reserves; national marine conservation areas; national wildlife areas; marine wildlife areas; and migratory bird sanctuaries. Individual landowners, conservancy groups, industry, Aboriginal people, and governments are among the many who play a role in protecting areas in Canada.

The Government of Canada is committed to continuing progress toward its goal of completing the system of national parks and advancing the system of national marine conservation areas. The goal is to establish a national park in each of the 39 national park natural regions defined by the *National Park System Plan* in 1990 and new marine conservation areas in each of the 29 marine regions defined by *Sea to Sea to Sea: Canada's National Marine Conservation Areas System Plan* (1995). Since 1998, the establishment of five new pilot Marine Protected Areas has been announced under Canada's Oceans Act: one in the Atlantic Ocean and four in the Pacific Ocean.

Network of Special Places in Manitoba

An Action Plan for a Network of Special Places for Manitoba was published in 1994 as part of Manitoba's sustainable development initiative to meet the commitment to protect 12 percent of the province's area representing the 12 natural regions. The network includes designated areas such as provincial parks, ecological reserves, wildlife management areas, heritage sites, and provincial forests.

Protected Areas in the Northwest Territories

The Government of Canada and the Government of the Northwest Territories approved their protected areas strategy in September 1999. The strategy provides an overall framework and set of criteria to guide the work of identifying and establishing protected areas. It recognizes each region's unique environment, culture, and land claim or Aboriginal rights context. The strategy promotes the community-based development of a system of protected areas. It also promotes a balanced approach to land use decisions by incorporating the best available traditional, ecological, cultural, and economic knowledge.