

ENSURING BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

The destruction of forests, wetlands, rivers and other ecosystems by humans is driving countless species of plants and animals to extinction. Though it is difficult to establish exact figures, it is believed that the human-caused rate of extinction is hundreds or even thousands of times the natural rate. The losses are especially serious in the tropical forests, which cover only 7 per cent of the earth's surface but are home to between 50 and 80 per cent of plant and animal species. Even in Canada, some 175 animal and plant species are known to be at risk.

Conservation of biological diversity goes well beyond the question of preservation for aesthetic or for moral reasons; it is important for our health and our economy. Species loss directly threatens the natural resources upon which sustainable development depends. Genetic material from plant and animal species (many of which have yet to be discovered) are the foundation for the agricultural, pharmaceutical and other biotechnology-based industries. About one-quarter of the pharmacological products in use in North America contain ingredients derived from wild plants. Providing adequate food supplies for a growing world population will increasingly depend on agricultural researchers' access to the widest possible variety of genetic resources for developing better varieties of crops and animals.

Ensuring biological diversity requires a combined effort on the part of all countries.

- International negotiations are taking place under the auspices of UNEP for a convention on the conservation of biological diversity. Canada supports this concept and will pursue international efforts to develop such a convention.
- Canada is party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which controls the trade of some 48 000 listed plants and animals and the products derived from them. With 96 countries participating, CITES protects endangered species from over-exploitation through trade by means of a system of import and export permits.
- Protecting habitat is the key to maintaining biodiversity. Canada has joined in a number of international agreements that apply this principle, including the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (the World Heritage Convention) by which natural and historical areas of outstanding value are permanently protected; the United Nations Biosphere Reserves Initiative, which preserves examples of all the earth's major ecological systems; the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention); the International Tropical Timber Agreement, which provides a framework for regulation of trade in tropical timber; the Tropical Forest Action Program, which encourages sustainable forestry practices in tropical countries; and the International Tropical Timber Organization, which promotes sustainable use and conservation of tropical forests and their genetic resources.