

What Does the COP 15 Target to Protect 30% of Land and Water Actually Mean?

by IAN MALLOV /// EAC Volunteer

On Sept. 16, 1987, delegates from 24 of the 160-plus independent sovereign states signed the [Montreal Protocol](#),¹ regulating ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and related pollutants. The targets for reduction of these and other compounds were aggressive: capping production growth within four to five years, and rapidly decelerating to zero production – with a few exceptions – within nine years.

The Montreal Protocol has now been signed by all 197 sovereign countries and the European Union. Ozone-depleting chemicals have been nearly completely removed from production and use around the world, and the holes in the ozone layer are diminishing. The Montreal Protocol is in many ways the archetype for a successful, universally adopted and effective international treaty on the environment.

So why not try again, Montreal?

In December 2022, representatives of all countries met again in the same city for a Conference of Parties (COP) of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, hoping to mirror the success of the summit 35 years earlier. The urgent challenge this time? Reversing a mass extinction.

We are currently in a biodiversity crisis known variously as the Sixth, Seventh, or Holocene [Mass Extinction](#).² Or, more pointedly, the Anthropocene Mass Extinction. Human activity – habitat destruction, over-harvesting, invasive species, pollution and climate change – is driving the disappearance of animals, plants, bacteria and fungi at alarming rates. While species are always going extinct, and new species are always appearing, what qualifies as a Mass Extinction is often taken to be when the rate of species disappearance is over [100 times the baseline rate](#)³ during a non-extinction period.

Representatives from every sovereign state and some Indigenous nations descended on Montreal from Dec. 7-19, 2022 for the 15th COP for countries that are part of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

What can be agreed upon, and acted upon in good faith, by the mixture of democracies, autocracies, monarchies, rich, developing, poor and mass-consuming nations? Ecology Action Centre representatives, along with many conservation and Indigenous groups, went to find out.



Meeting held inside the Nature-Positive Pavillion at COP15.

PHOTOS: Convention on Biological Diversity

While other international meetings designed to produce international agreements on the environment, especially the better-known 2015 “Paris Agreement,” deal specifically with limiting and adapting to climate change, a major focus of COP 15 (aka “Nature COP”) was perhaps the most basic solution: protecting land and water for biodiversity. Even with relatively straightforward goals on the table, arguments, protests and even a walkout by several nations marked the proceedings, which ranged from contentious to acrimonious to, finally, a fragile united front.

The centrepiece commitment to emerge from COP 15 was the “[30 by 30](#)”⁴ agreement, a target of designating 30% of the Earth’s lands and waters to be under protection by 2030. The ideas for this target were first proposed in the journal [Science Advances in 2019, “A Global Deal for Nature: Guiding Principles, Milestones, and Targets”](#)⁵ authored by scientists from various U.S., U.K. and Asian universities, and the National Geographic Society. Every country except for the United States and the Vatican signed on to the “30 by 30” agreement (the Vatican has minimal natural land; the United States requires international treaties to be ratified by a two-thirds majority in the Senate and most Republicans were opposed, although President Biden has [committed to a similar pledge](#) by executive order).⁶

“Canada, along with like-minded countries, said from the start that 30 by 30 must be our 1.5 degrees for nature,” [said](#) federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change Steven Guilbeault⁷ in a statement while at COP 15, alluding to the galvanizing commitment of the Paris agreement on climate change committed to in December 2015.

But even the “30 by 30” commitment is far more complex than it seems. Which 30% will be protected? What will the protections be? How will governments navigate complex issues with private and corporate landowners, as well as Indigenous Peoples whose rights have long been overlooked?

The answer to the first question is that the agreement specifically targets Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs). For example, to get to 30% protection, not all protected land and water can be in areas of low population density – areas that have traditionally been “easier” to protect than those in areas with higher human populations and therefore higher demand for other uses of the land and water.



Rally to support strong biodiversity targets held during COP15 in Montreal.

Generally, areas to be protected must have high biodiversity. Protections will include restrictions from mining, oil and gas exploration, forestry and other industrial development, although there are exceptions even to this. Many areas still permit small-scale harvesting of plants and animals, with varying restrictions.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has designated categories of protected areas depending on the level of human activity permitted: Category IA is a Strict Nature Preserve permitting only very light human use, while Category II is a National Park, and Category VI permits “sustainable use of natural resources.” While the “30 by 30” agreement doesn’t explicitly use IUCN definitions, the 30% protected areas generally span the range of the IUCN definitions. Much of the work to be done involves legal logistics and protections. High biodiversity areas, such as the forests of Papua New Guinea, are often being protected gradually by agreements with Indigenous Peoples, such as those in the [Mount Waigareame Conservation Area](#).⁸

Closer to home, two examples from Nova Scotia illustrate the complexities of selecting land for protection.

1. “About Montreal Protocol” website of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) unep.org/ozonaction/who-we-are/about-montreal-protocol
2. “What is the Sixth Mass Extinction and What Can We Do About It?” website of the World Wildlife Fund 2023 worldwildlife.org/stories/what-is-the-sixth-mass-extinction-and-what-can-we-do-about-it
3. “Mass Extinction Event” entry in the online Encyclopaedia Britannica, article by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica and most recently updated by John P. Rafferty britannica.com/science/mass-extinction-event
4. “COP 15 Ends with Landmark Biodiversity Agreement” Dec. 20, 2022 website of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) unep.org/news-and-stories/story/cop15-ends-landmark-biodiversity-agreement
5. “A Global Deal for Nature: Guiding Principles, Milestones and Targets” E. Dinerstein et al. *Science Advances* 2019, 5(4) eaaw2869 science.org/doi/epdf/10.1126/sciadv.aaw2869
6. whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/
7. Statement from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Canada, Dec. 19, 2022 canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/news/2022/12/cop15-statement-from-the-minister-of-environment-and-climate-change.html
8. “More Traditional Clans in the Bismarck Forest Corridor of Papua New Guinea Agree on Legally Protecting Their Forest Lands Together” published June 30, 2022, website of the Wildlife Conservation Society png.wcs.org/About-Us/News/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/17739/More-traditional-clans-in-the-Bismarck-Forest-Corridor-of-Papua-New-Guinea-agree-on-legally-protecting-their-forest-lands-together.aspx
9. Nash, Trish “Emerging Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas: The Unama’ki Mi’kmaq IPCA Project” Conservation-Reconciliation.ca Blog April 12, 2021 conservation-reconciliation.ca/blog/emerging-indigenous-protected-and-conserved-areas-the-unamaki-mikmaw-ipca-project

TAKE ACTION

Protected should mean protected. End of story. And yet, a U.S. golf course developer is once again trying to swindle away the West Mabou Beach Provincial Park to develop a private 18-hole golf course. If we want to achieve our protection targets, then we can’t afford to lose what’s already protected. Learn more and take action at ecologyaction.ca/save-west-mabou-beach-park

Many Nova Scotians will be familiar with the contentious plan for a golf course which would have cleared Crown land along the Eastern Shore at Owl’s Head in Little Harbour, destroying the habitats for several species within. Controversy erupted when conservation groups, scientists and local interests got wind of the Nova Scotia government’s plan to de-list 285 hectares of land proposed for protection adjacent to land owned by American developer G.S. Beckwith Gilbert.

After intense media coverage, protests and even an unsuccessful court challenge, as of June 2022, some of that land is now designated as Owl’s Head Provincial Park. This protection will now save coastal wetlands, barrens and forests home to endangered species including the piping plover and barn swallow.

Now imagine these types of competing interests taking place over and over with more significant industrial interests at stake, on a global scale, in many jurisdictions without the permitted civic engagement, free press and democratic infrastructure of Nova Scotia – although of course, we still have challenges of our own.

The second example sounds a more hopeful note. An important component of the “30 by 30” commitment is the creation of more Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), areas in which conversation is led by Indigenous Peoples with government as a partner. One of these is [Kluskap’s Cave Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area](#)⁹ in Unama’ki/Cape Breton. This IPCA will be an accumulation of land whose stewardship will be undertaken by the Unama’ki Resource Project, a collaboration of five Mi’kmaq groups and the Nova Scotia government. Land and ocean for this IPCA will incorporate areas that, as of now, are under ownership or management by Mi’kmaq peoples, the Crown and private owners. Forestry licences and mineral rights in the area will have to be dealt with. These particular lands were selected because they are home to a designated Important Bird Area, a marine Ecologically and Biologically Sensitive Area, large tracts of wilderness and areas of special cultural significance to the Mi’kmaq, such as Kluskap’s Cave, which in Mi’kmaq stories and legends was the last home of Kluskap on Earth.

There are challenges in protecting this area, including dealing with forestry and mineral licences in the areas, but this is a start in using this protection mechanism in Nova Scotia, which also aids in reconciliation. It is also an exciting time, as perhaps in 10 years, at a future COP 25, we may well have witnessed the most rapid growth in protected areas in history.

Ian (he/him) is a chemist and writer, and EAC member since 2021.