

# Canada Increases Wilderness Protection and Policy Goals

BY HARVEY LOCKE

The years 2007 and 2008 have seen major advances in wilderness protection in Canada at the level of both policy and outcomes. Led by the Canadian Boreal Initiative and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, calls for protecting at least half of Canada's public lands and waters are starting to take hold in public policy.

Because Canada is the second largest country on Earth, and at least 90% of it has some aspect of public ownership, such an agenda is of global significance.

## **Protect "At Least Half" of the Boreal Forest**

The public goal of protecting at least half of Canada's vast



Figure 1—Cirque of the Unclimbables in the Nahanni Park expansion area. Photo by Harvey Locke.

boreal forest was first articulated in 2003 through the Boreal Conservation Framework led by the Canadian Boreal Initiative. Its founding signatories were conservation groups (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, World Wildlife Fund—Canada, and Ducks Unlimited), some First Nations, and a few enlightened industrial players. To give a sense of scale, Canada's boreal forest is 6 million square kilometers (2.3 million sq. mi.) in size and contains 25% of the world's remaining intact primary forest (Bryant et al. 1997). It contains enormous blocks of roadless wilderness bigger than many countries, vast free-flowing rivers, millions of acres of wetlands, and is home to grizzly bears and caribou, as well as millions of migratory songbirds and waterfowl. About 600 aboriginal communities are located in it (many without year-round road access), and many people pursue traditional subsistence harvesting activities. It is also home to some of the largest hydroelectric projects on Earth (e.g., province of Quebec), the world's second largest oil deposit (Alberta's tar sands), a large forestry industry, and globally significant mineral deposits ranging from nickel to iron ore to diamonds. In 2003, there were only a few really large protected areas present in the boreal forest, such as Wood Buffalo National Park, Alberta and Northwest Territories (44,802 sq km; 17,298 sq. mi.), and the Muskwa Kechika Management Area in northern British Columbia (6.3 million ha; 15.5 million acres).

In 2005, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) adopted the goal of protecting at least half of Canada's public lands and waters, which includes not only the boreal forest, but also Arctic, freshwater, and marine areas in the north and other natural ecosystems farther south. In 2008, the Mountain Equipment



Figure 2—Dumoine River in Quebec. Photo by Harvey Locke.

Co-op, Canada's largest outdoor retailer, joined forces with CPAWS to launch "the Big Wild," a public engagement project designed to promote the idea of protecting at least half of Canada's areas with wilderness characteristics.

Canada is a country with provincial control over large areas of natural resources and federal control over navigable waters and oceans and some lands in the north. In addition, there are variety of different title arrangements relating to aboriginal groups and their use and ownership of lands. Thus, nature conservation is done by different levels of government, depending on where the areas are and who has jurisdiction.

This target of "at least half" is materially more ambitious than previous conservation targets that were set with a view to achieving rep-

resentation of natural ecosystems. Representation is the basis of the federal government's plan to complete Canada's national park system. In 1990, the Endangered Spaces campaign set a goal of representing at least 12% of each of Canada's natural regions by the year 2000. The campaign did not meet its goals everywhere, but made material progress in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia and was successful moving the national level of protection up from 2.9% to 6.8% of the land area in 10 years (MacNamee 2008).

However, during the same period, conservation science demonstrated that representing natural systems was only one of the components that effective protected area systems need to consider. Protected area systems also need to be connected in order to protect

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Figure 3—Otoskwin River in northern Ontario. Photo by Harvey Locke.

wide-ranging species, to provide secure breeding and rearing areas for wildlife, and to be of sufficient size to absorb natural disturbance events such as fire and flooding without losing all existing habitat (Locke 2009). By the 21st century, it was clear that the level of protection needed to be moved up to the landscape scale with interconnected networks of protected areas containing at least half of the natural systems (Schmiegelow et al. 2006). Interestingly, this scientific research corresponded to public research findings that showed Canadians wanted even more than half of the boreal forest protected (McAllister Opinion Research 2008).

### Canadian Relationship with Wilderness

Canadians have a deep and nuanced relationship with the wilderness. Wilderness experiences of high quality are available close to every major city except Toronto (and even there it is only three to four hours of travel away). James Polk in *Wilderness Writers* wrote:

From the beginning writing in

Canada has centred on the wilderness. ... This is because wilderness to us is more than just empty space out there: it is part of every Canadian's idea of himself and his country. Even if he has never been out of downtown Montreal or suburban Vancouver, in his imagination he belongs to a place of thundering rivers, untrodden forests, spacious plains, sublime icefloes, and untamed animals. Without the land, what would we be? (1972, pp. 13–14)

Canada's visual arts have strong ties to the wilderness and the vastness of the land is a point of national pride. Political leaders often refer to the special role wilderness plays in the Canadian psyche. For example, Liberal Pierre Elliot Trudeau, who was Canada's prime minister in the 1970s and a passionate wilderness canoeist, wrote in 1944: "I know a man whose school could never teach him patriotism but who acquired that skill when he felt in his bones the vastness of his land, and the greatness of those who founded it" (Trudeau 1970, p. 5).

On November 25, 1992, the Ministers of the Environment of every province and the Canadian federal government (no matter what their political affiliation) signed a declaration entitled a "Statement of Commitment to Complete Canada's Networks of Protected Areas," which included the following language:

On the occasion of Canada's 125th anniversary, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, the Canadian Parks Ministers' Council, and the Wildlife Ministers' Council of Canada have come together to recognize that: Canada's natural heritage—its wildlands, waters and wildlife—unites and defines us all as Canadians. Canada has a special global responsibility to protect its natural heritage given that Canada is steward of almost 20% of the planet's wilderness (excluding Antarctica), 20% of its fresh water, and 24% of its remaining wetlands. (Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, Canadian Parks Ministers' Council, Wildlife Ministers' Council of Canada. 1992)

Although Canada is very urbanized, it also has many one-industry towns with resource extraction economies based on logging, mining, or oil and gas. At the same time, there is a large wilderness outfitting industry in Canada. The Canadian relationship with wilderness is complex and ambiguous.

Canadians tend to equate any form of protected area designation with wilderness protection and biodiversity conservation. In Canada, there is not a wilderness act of broad national application, although there are some specifically designated wilderness areas under specific laws. Certain landscapes such as Banff National Park and

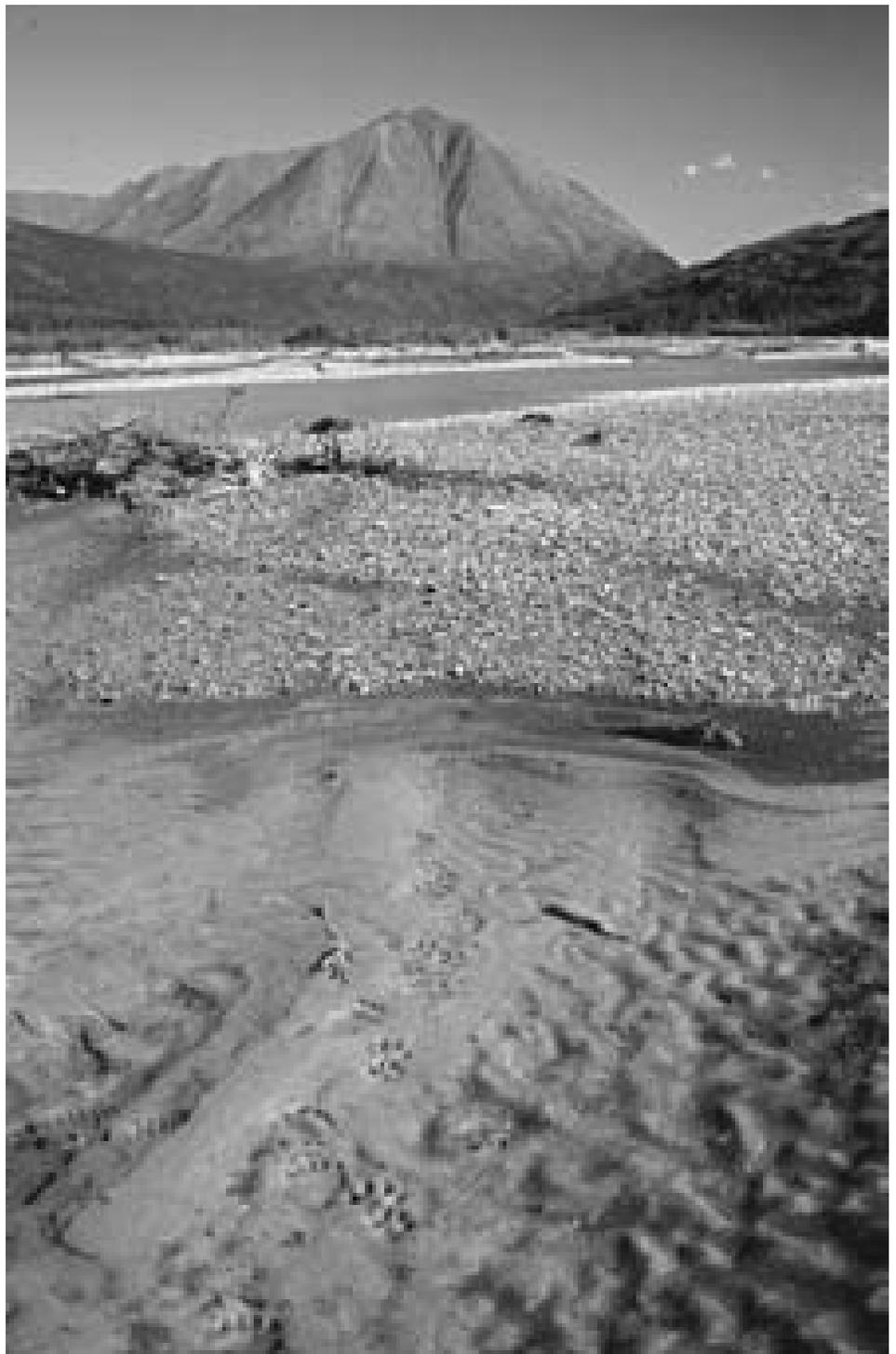
Algonquin Provincial Park are national icons. In 2004, CPAWS and the Dehcho First Nations mounted a high visibility national campaign calling for the protection of another iconic landscape—the South Nahanni watershed.

The heightened global public concern about climate change in 2006 provided a major catalyst for wilderness conservation in Canada. This is due, in part, to the fact that Canada's boreal and Arctic biomes are huge storehouses of terrestrial carbon (Luyssaert et al. 2008) and more significant for carbon storage than tropical forests (Mackey et al. 2008). Leaving the wetlands, peatlands, and tundra intact is both a first order climate change mitigation and an adaptation strategy. Canada's performance on meeting its environmental targets under the Kyoto protocol of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change has been very poor because it is a globally significant producer of oil and gas, has vast coal reserves, and has a very large automobile industry. Nature conservation is one way for Canada to get closer to its environmental targets.

### **Increased Public Policy to Protect Wilderness**

The net result of these combined factors has been a major surge in wilderness conservation in Canada in 2007 and 2008, and there are examples from various jurisdictions across the country.

- The first area to achieve protection of at least half of its land area was the Queen Charlotte Islands, the traditional territory of the Haida people. Half of the vast temperate rain forests of these Pacific Islands are receiving protection through a combination of national park and provincial designations that involve aboriginal



**Figure 4—Grizzly bear and wolf tracks along the Snake River in the Yukon. Photo by Harvey Locke.**

comanagement. Many years of campaigning by NGOs bore fruit in 2007 when the federal government joined the province of British Columbia, First Nations, and some philanthropists to protect, through a complex written

agreement, the Great Bear Rainforest in a conservation matrix that covers an area of 8.75 million hectares (21.6 million acres) and created 110 “conservancies” in about one-third of the area. Steps remain to fulfill all

aspects of the agreement, such as conservancy management planning, the enactment of biodiversity areas, and establishing a regional plan for conservation outside of protected areas ([www.savethegreatbear.org](http://www.savethegreatbear.org)).

- After years of work by NGOs, the federal government, with the agreement of aboriginal communities, moved to protect on an interim basis several very large areas in the Northwest Territories, including almost all of the spectacular watershed of the South Nahanni River (36,400 sq km; 14,054 sq. mi.), the Ramparts Wetlands (15,000 sq km; 5,792 sq. mi.), the East Arm of Great Slave Lake (26,350 sq km; 10,174 sq. mi.); and Sahoyue Ehdacho was also permanently protected (5,550 sq km; 2,143 sq. mi.).

18,000 sq km (6,950 sq. mi.).

- Manitoba finally moved in 2008 to eliminate all logging from its considerable park network (with one exception).
- The most spectacular wilderness conservation event was the announcement by Premier Dalton McGuinty of Ontario in July 2008 that at least half of that province's vast Far North would be protected. A land use planning process is being developed with that policy at the center and with a goal of about 225,000 sq km (86,873 sq. mi.) of boreal forest, wetlands, and tundra being protected.
- In November 2008, during the provincial election campaign, which his party won, Quebec premier Jean Charest promised to protect at least half of Quebec

minister Stephen Harper's speech at the Bonn 2008 meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity reflect the current national mood in Canada:

I'd like to conclude with a quotation by the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Wallace Stegner. Stegner evoked the beauty and tranquility of the Canadian Prairies in a way that in my opinion has never been surpassed. In 1960, long before environmentalism became a galvanizing public issue, Stegner urged us to conserve and protect biodiversity in a famous tract called his *Wilderness Letter*. Let me quote from it. He said: "We need wilderness preserved—as much of it as is still left and as many kinds—because it was the challenge against which our character was formed." Ladies and gentlemen, the preservation of our wilderness today and into the future is the challenge against which our character will be measured. (Harper 2008)

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## Wilderness conservation has tended to come in waves that correspond strongly to periods when civil society has been engaged in advancing a public agenda in favor of conservation.

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- The province of Nova Scotia passed a law in 2007 requiring protection of at least 12% of the province, it created a new wilderness area near Halifax, and it appropriated funds to buy private forestlands for public wilderness protection.
- The federal government announced plans to make a very large "marine" conservation area in Lake Superior.
- Quebec moved from less than 1% protection in 2000 to more than 6% protection (mostly on an interim basis) in 2008. Quebec is almost as big as Alaska, and each percentage point of Quebec is about

north of the 49th parallel. This area would amount to 70% of the province, and the area protected would cover an area about the size of France.

Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of the recent surge in wilderness protection in Canada has been a fairly broad public consensus that landscape conservation at a major scale needs to be implemented. In the 2008 federal election campaign, both the Liberals and Greens adopted the goal of protecting at least 50% of the land area, and the Conservatives committed to completing the national park system. These words from Conservative prime

Alas, not all governmental jurisdictions in Canada are performing at an acceptable level when it comes to wilderness conservation. Noted laggards in adopting new policy and initiatives are the Yukon Territory, Nunavut, and New Brunswick; the federal government's record in marine conservation is also very poor.

Wilderness conservation in Canada does not happen solely at the behest of enlightened governments. Wilderness conservation has tended to come in waves that correspond strongly to periods when civil society has been engaged in advancing a public agenda in favor of conservation (Locke 2009). Whether all these recent announcements will result in permanent protection of these vast areas of Canada

***Continued on page 14***

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Hope lies with the local constituencies who are currently beginning to redefine how land and wildlife conservation must act and react to the growing pressures upon the land.

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### Continued from CANADIAN POLICY GOALS, page 8

will likely be dependent, in part, on whether members of civil society act to ensure that the various governments follow through on their recent inspiring promises. **IJW**

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