

Environment and Climate Change Canada's National Wildlife Areas and Migratory Bird Sanctuaries:

Strategic Program Plan and Vision to 2030



Environment and
Climate Change Canada

Environnement et
Changement climatique Canada

Canada

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1. Introduction

The establishment and effective management of protected areas is a key mechanism to directly conserve biodiversity in Canada, and the Government of Canada has committed to ensuring the protection of 25% of Canada's marine and terrestrial area by 2025 and to working toward 30% by 2030. Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) manages the Protected Areas Program¹, a network of National Wildlife Areas (NWAs) and Migratory Bird Sanctuaries (MBSs). This network is established for the benefit of wildlife conservation, with a particular focus on migratory birds and species of national importance such as species at risk. ECCC's federal conservation areas play a significant and unique role within the overall landscape of protected areas in Canada. To ensure that ECCC's Protected Areas Program stays responsive to new challenges, emerging opportunities, and ongoing needs, the following strategic plan and vision have been formulated for 2030. Implementation of the strategic plan and vision is intended to both support and enhance the role that NWAs and MBSs play in contributing to Canada's biodiversity conservation objectives.

2. Purpose of the Strategic Plan

This strategic plan establishes and outlines the role, strategic direction, and scope of ECCC's Protected Areas Program, leading up to 2030, specifically focused on the federal protected and conserved areas² administered by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) across national and regional directorates. It demonstrates how ECCC intends to effectively manage and monitor its existing sites, expand its protected areas network, and further connect Canadians to nature. This builds on CWS's vision and mission, the 2020-2023 Strategic Integrated Plan, and the Habitat Conservation and Protection aspects of the Departmental Results Framework.

The strategic plan outlines the role of the ECCC Protected Areas Program, including the approaches it will employ to manage and expand the existing network and connect Canadians to nature. It presents the six guiding principles that will inform the Program's focus toward 2030 to advance three key goals and related strategic priorities.

An appendix provides supplementary information on the history of conservation in Canada, supporting acts and regulations, as well as an overview of the steps to establishing a protected area.

1 Throughout this document, the Protected Areas Program will exclusively refer to ECCC's program to conserve National Wildlife Areas and Migratory Bird Sanctuaries, along with a few other conservation areas depicted on Map 1. [Go back](#)

2 While ECCC's Protected Areas Program also supports and encourages partners to advance protected and conserved areas under their jurisdictional purview in order to achieve national protected and conserved areas targets, that portion of the federal mandate is outside the scope of this document. [Go back](#)



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3. Protected Areas Program: Vision, Mission and Goals

Vision

ECCC effectively manages a growing network³ of NWAs and administers MBSs aimed at conserving key areas of biodiversity for the benefit of migratory birds, species at risk, and other wildlife that inspire the appreciation and participation of all Canadians in the conservation of nature.

Mission

The mission of ECCC's Protected Areas Program is to identify, designate, and cooperatively manage terrestrial and marine protected areas for the benefit of wildlife conservation. Using the *Canada Wildlife Act* as its principal legal tool, the Protected Areas Program manages and monitors ECCC's network of protected areas, restores ecosystems, facilitates research and community partnerships and maintains necessary infrastructure for public visitation. The Protected Areas Program recognizes that conservation cannot succeed without partnership and actively collaborates with a wide variety of organizations, in addition to advancing the integration of Indigenous knowledge, cultural uses, and values related to protected areas. Public participation in the conservation of wildlife is encouraged through science and monitoring activities and by connecting to nature through activities such as wildlife viewing, hiking, canoeing, hunting, and fishing – where they do not compromise conservation objectives. These management and engagement activities will help protect key ecosystems in Canada and the wildlife that depend on them.

Program Goals⁴

To advance its vision and mission, the ECCC's Protected Areas Program seeks to:

1. Protect, manage, and monitor existing protected areas to achieve site conservation outcomes.
2. Expand the protected areas network to support the conservation of habitat for migratory birds, species at risk, and other areas of importance to wildlife in Canada.
3. Encourage Canadians to experience and understand the values and benefits of the protected areas network.

³ The word "network" is used throughout this document to refer to ECCC's National Wildlife Areas and Migratory Bird Sanctuaries. These sites are often located in distant locations and do not form a connected network. [Go back](#)

⁴ Derived from the three Intermediate Outcomes of the ECCC Conserving Nature Core Result Habitat Conservation and Protection Program Performance Information Profile. [Go back](#)

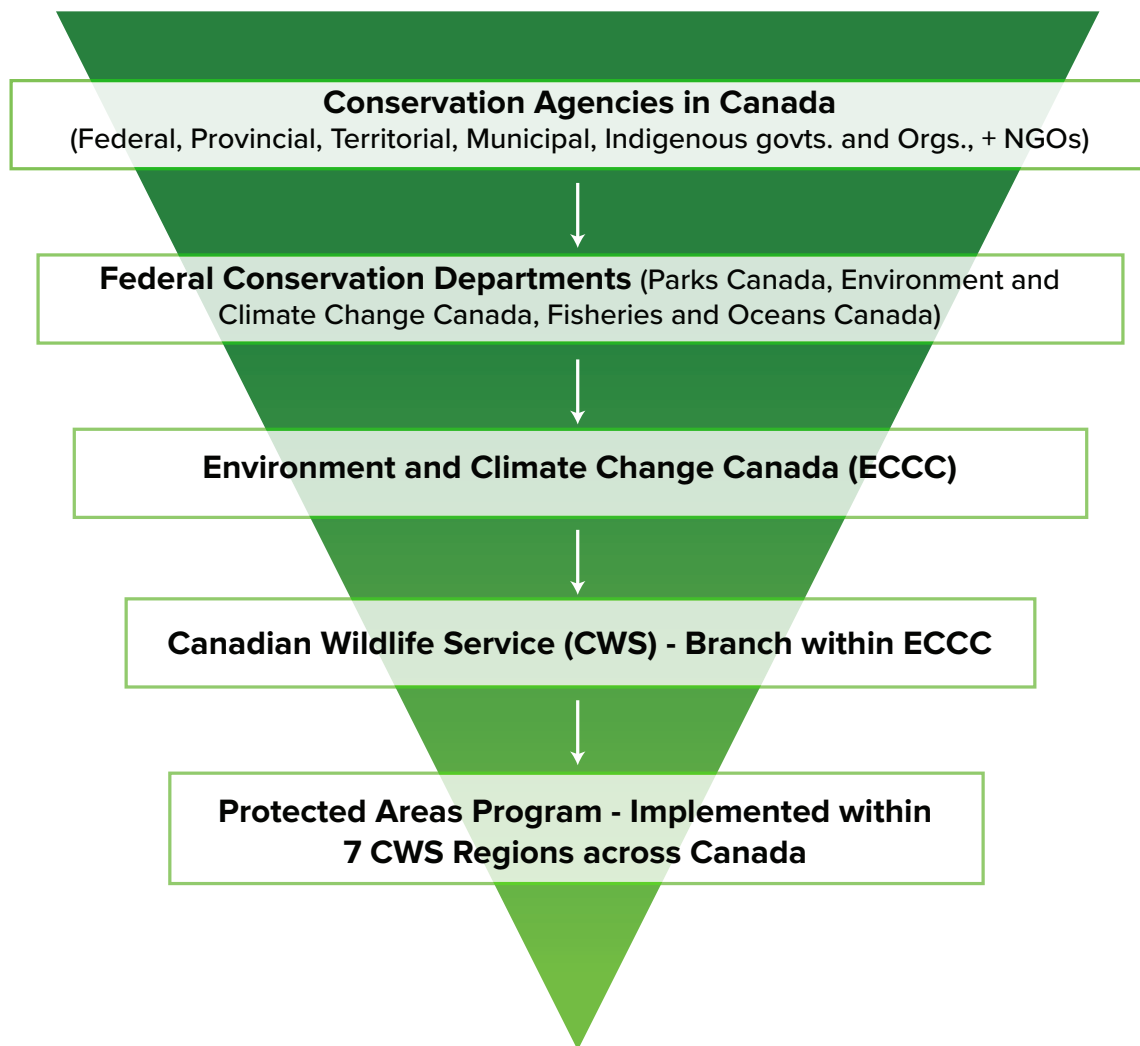
4. Role of the Protected Areas Program

The Protected Areas Program is well-equipped to make a significant contribution to the ambitious conservation goals of conserving 25% of Canada's lands and oceans by 2025 and moving toward 30% by 2030 (see Map 1). To meet these challenges, the Program will focus on several key strategic priorities, outlined in section 4.

NWAs and MBSs fill an important and unique niche in the overall national framework of protected and conserved areas by prioritizing the protection of habitats for migratory birds and species of national importance, including species at risk (see Figure 1). Canada establishes MBSs on federal, territorial, provincial, municipal, and private land. Where MBSs are located on federal land, the Federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change has the power to regulate activities that might affect the habitat of migratory birds when considering permits. In the case of Sanctuaries designated on provincial land, this authority falls to the Chief Game Officer of the province. Habitat management is the responsibility of the landowner in Sanctuaries located on private or municipal land. Whereas MBSs protect birds, nests, and eggs during the limited period of migration, nesting, and staging, NWAs afford comprehensive, year-round habitat protection on ecologically important sites for birds and other wildlife, contributing to biodiversity conservation more broadly. The purpose of NWAs established through the Wildlife Area Regulations of the *Canada Wildlife Act* is to support wildlife research, conservation, and interpretation. They are flexible conservation areas that allow permitting of activities that will not interfere with the conservation of wildlife and the habitats they rely on. Today, the *Canada Wildlife Act* is the primary legal tool for the establishment and management of protected areas for the Canadian Wildlife Service, and will continue to guide its work.

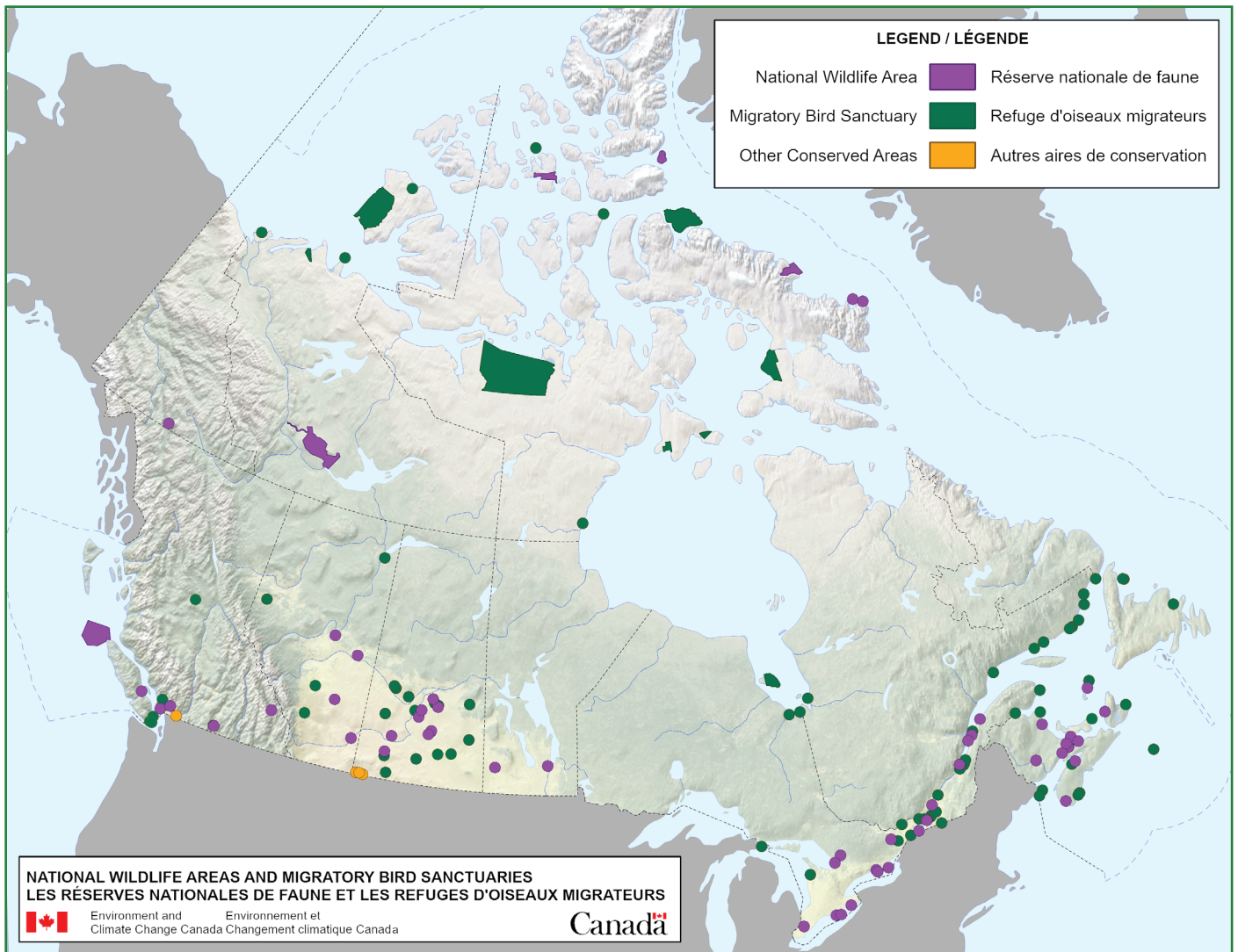
Since not all areas of Canada have the same conservation value, nor the same urgent pressure for protection, the Protected Areas Program will identify and prioritize actions in support of the conservation of migratory birds, the recovery of species at risk, and habitats for healthy and diverse wildlife populations. Recognizing the land stewardship practiced during millennia by Indigenous Peoples, ECCC will advance conservation work in the spirit and practice of reconciliation, acknowledging that partnership with, and leadership by, Indigenous peoples is invaluable. The Program will strengthen the quality of wildlife protection within its network through the ongoing evaluation of management effectiveness of its sites, by introducing a network-wide ecological monitoring protocol, and by supporting Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas through co-management and opportunities for Indigenous leadership.

Figure 1: Position of the Protected Areas Program within Conservation Agencies



The broadest level of this structure is composed of conservation agencies in Canada (federal, provincial, territorial, municipal, and Indigenous governments and organizations, as well as environmental organizations) that contribute to broad conservation actions and targets. Within these agencies, we find the federal family of Conservation Departments (Parks Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, etc.). Environment and Climate Change Canada’s biodiversity-related mandate includes: *implementing the Species at Risk Act*, managing migratory bird populations, coordinating biodiversity conventions, and managing ECCC protected areas (NWAs and MBSs). The Protected Areas Program operates under the Canadian Wildlife Service and is concerned with the establishment and management of ECCC protected areas (NWAs and MBSs).

Map 1: National Wildlife Areas and Migratory Bird Sanctuaries^{5 6}



5 This map represents the Protected Areas Program's network of NWAs and MBSs in 2021. An annually updated map can be found on the following website: Map: [National Wildlife Areas and Migratory Bird Sanctuaries - Canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/protected-areas-program/protected-areas-program-map.html). [Go back](#)

6 In the map, Other Conserved Areas represent conservation areas or nature reserves managed by the ECCC Minister that are not classified as a Migratory Bird Sanctuary nor a National Wildlife Area. [Go back](#)



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5. Managing Protected Areas in Partnership with Local Communities

The Protected Areas Program uses leading management practices to ensure that it achieves its conservation objectives, and will continue to advance work in this area. Site-specific management plans guide decision-making with respect to the monitoring of wildlife, management, and restoration of habitats, enforcement of regulations, maintenance of infrastructure, and permitting of activities. The Protected Areas Program drafts and revises management plans for all of its protected areas every 10 years, unless circumstances warrant an earlier review.

Protected area management effectiveness is also evaluated using the globally recognized Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool, both at the site and network levels. Site assessments examine, among other things, the status of management plan implementation, boundary designation and demarcation, and adequacy of staff and financial resources. These assessments are conducted regularly (every three years) to ascertain whether the network is improving or declining in its efforts to meet the goals and objectives it has been designed to achieve.

Building on recommendations of a performance audit from the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development (2013), ECCC has laid the foundations to establish a long-term, systematic, and standardized approach to monitoring the ecological and conservation status of its protected areas network. ECCC's Ecological and Conservation Monitoring Program Strategy emphasizes outcome-based monitoring of key ecological attributes, threats, and management actions. Through a systematic monitoring plan, ECCC will be better able to track changes to protected areas over time, identify new and emerging threats, and react accordingly in a timely manner. Management efforts will be undertaken in close collaboration with Indigenous and community partners, as outlined below.

5.1 Managing Protected Areas in Partnership with Indigenous Peoples

“From the realms of the human world, the sky dwellers, the water beings, forest creatures, and all other forms of life, the beautiful Mother Earth gives birth to, nurtures, and sustains all life. [...] Indigenous peoples are caretakers of Mother Earth and realize and respect her gifts of water, air, and fire.”(Assembly of First Nations, 2022)



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ECCC approaches its mandate in recognition of the urgency to work toward harmony with the natural world, and in the spirit and practice of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples of Canada. In light of the concept of “ethical space⁷” brought forward during the Pathway to Canada Target 1 initiative, the Protected Areas Program works toward meaningful interactions with Indigenous Peoples and engages with Indigenous Peoples in all aspects of biodiversity conservation.

Canada’s Indigenous Peoples have developed innovative approaches to conserving nature for millennia. As ECCC seeks to expand its network over the coming decade, the Protected Areas Program will strive to work with local Indigenous communities and identify possible cooperative management opportunities. The co-management of NWAs and MBSs in the Nunavut Settlement Area serves as an important model for this approach. Inuit-led Area Co-Management Committees develop site management plans and cooperatively implement management activities to conserve wildlife and habitat and promote the economic self-reliance and cultural and social well-being of Inuit. This aligns with the Government of Canada’s obligations through the Nunavut Agreement to establish Inuit Impact and Benefits Agreements for conservation areas.

As new protected and conserved areas are explored and developed, ECCC will engage and consult with Indigenous communities to better understand priorities for site identification and key perspectives and interests in managing lands and waters. A variety of mechanisms will be explored and implemented to facilitate Indigenous partnership in the effective and long-term management of new sites.

⁷ The process of creating ethical space establishes an environment for people to come face to face and listen to each other’s perspectives and to co-create solutions to problems. This means not only hearing different points of view and therefore points of departure for decision-making but also facing the question together of what do we do now. The opportunity to create an ethical space to actively work to bring together Indigenous and Western scientific knowledge systems provides a vital step toward achieving the shared, long-term, fundamental goal of reconciliation with the Earth. Pathway to Canada Target 1—Report of the National Advisory Panel, 2018, p. 11. [Go back](#)

Duty to Consult versus Engagement

The Crown has a legal duty to consult Indigenous groups and, where appropriate, to accommodate when contemplating conduct that might adversely affect potential or established Indigenous or Treaty rights. In light of modern treaty objectives to provide a positive environment for investment and Indigenous economic development, care is taken in the development and management of new protected areas to ensure that they are inclusive, and that designation as an ECCC Protected Area will not inadvertently restrict Indigenous participation in any resulting economic opportunities.

Canada has a renewed focus on reconciliation and a nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous groups. When Canada proposes a site for protection designation, reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples is a priority consideration. For example, some Indigenous Peoples may have a historical relationship and cultural and spiritual association with a given region. Canada is committed to appropriately recognizing the interests of Indigenous Peoples with ties to the land (e.g., hunting, cultural/historical interests, conservation of lands) and will strive to involve Indigenous communities in the ongoing management of the lands.

Engagement, in contrast to consultation, does not arise from a legal obligation and aims to build relationships and advance reconciliation. This does not mean that engagement aims at a lower standard than consultation, rather it typically aims to exceed legal obligations. Engagement can include informal discussions and collaboration including, but not limited to, building relationships, forming informal advisory committees, or identifying processes that enable Indigenous Knowledge and perspectives to inform management and decision-making processes.

5.2 Managing Protected Areas in Partnership with Local Communities

ECCC works actively with local communities in the management of protected areas. NWAs, MBSs, and other *Canada Wildlife Act* conservation areas are often important for recreational and economic reasons. For example, the conservation area established in 2021 on the former federal community pastures of Govenlock, Nashlyn, and Battle Creek in Saskatchewan is a core part of the economy of the region. Local communities are responsible for many aspects of the management and stewardship of these lands.

ECCC will continue to work in partnership with key community groups to deliver conservation outcomes while providing additional co-benefits to the community. They are essential partners in the management of protected areas.



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When implementing the Protected Areas Program, ECCC respects section 35 right holders as per the Canada Wildlife Act (section 3 on Aboriginal and treaty rights): “For greater certainty, nothing in this Act shall be construed so as to abrogate or derogate from any existing aboriginal or treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada under Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982.”



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6. Expanding the Network: Site Identification and Establishment

To achieve the objectives outlined within this plan, the Protected Areas Program will adopt the innovative approaches required in the early stages of establishment, to reflect emerging conservation priorities. ECCC will rely on a variety of information sources and criteria related to areas of conservation value when establishing new protected areas. The Program will emphasize tools that rigorously assess the importance of candidate sites, based on criteria such as multiple taxa and indicators of ecosystem health. These systematic candidate site assessments will be key to strategically expanding the Protected Areas Program network.

Conservation is “the slow and laborious unfolding of a new relationship between people and land” (Aldo Leopold, 1940)

6.1 Key Biodiversity Areas, Critical Habitat, and Bird Conservation Region Strategies

An emerging framework to assess and identify priority areas for conservation focus is the Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) process. As the KBA Framework develops, ECCC will increasingly use KBAs as an important tool to guide the selection of future NAWs in conjunction with other sources of information. Using this methodology for site selection will help to harmonize Canada’s biodiversity protection efforts with global standards and facilitate the integration of Canadian reporting on progress towards global biodiversity commitments made under the *Convention on Biological Diversity*. The KBA methodology will help ensure that ECCC’s work to advance conservation prioritizes key areas for biodiversity.

Recognizing that ECCC advances protected areas in close collaboration with key partners, NAWs take different shapes and forms (see section 6.2, below). Additional sources of information to identify areas of high conservation value will be considered alongside Key Biodiversity Areas. Important sources of information will include critical habitat for species at risk identified within recovery strategies and action plans under the *Species at Risk Act*. Consideration will also be given to important



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areas for migratory birds, including the areas where migratory birds breed or concentrate for all or a portion of the year, and tools such as Bird Conservation Region Strategies.

In summary, ECCC will continue to rely on the best available information related to conservation value when establishing new protected areas, with an emphasis on key biodiversity areas, critical habitats for species at risk, and areas of importance to migratory birds.

Key Biodiversity Areas

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) developed the Key Biodiversity Areas global standard in 2016 to capture all biodiversity elements within a site using one single tool. The global standard was adapted to the Canadian context to recognize areas of importance to the persistence of biodiversity nationwide. Key Biodiversity Areas provide an added layer of information to practitioners for the consistent and systematic identification of areas that are disproportionately important for biodiversity.

The IUCN defines Key Biodiversity Areas as “sites contributing significantly to the global persistence of biodiversity; identified using globally standardized criteria and thresholds, and having delineated boundaries. They may or may not receive formal protection, but should ideally be managed in ways that ensure persistence of the biodiversity (at genetic, species, and/or ecosystem levels).”

Critical Habitat

Critical habitat is defined as the habitat that is necessary for the survival or recovery of a listed extirpated, endangered, or threatened species and is identified as such in a recovery strategy or action plan under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). The inclusion of critical habitat in federal recovery documents is subject to review by partners, stakeholders, and jurisdictions, as well as a public consultation process. Following the enactment of SARA, critical habitat has been identified in many federally protected areas, including NWAs and MBSs.

Bird Conservation Region Strategies

In 1999, Canada, Mexico, and the United States formed the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) in response to concerns about the decline of many species of once-common birds.

As an ecologically based set of bird ‘ecoregions’, the Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) serve as the primary units for NABCI biological planning and integrated bird conservation purposes. In Canada, there are 12 BCRs and 25 BCR strategies that provide landscape level information on 6 elements of conservation: (1) priority bird species, (2) habitat associations, (3) population objectives, (4) threats faced by priority species, (5) conservation objectives, and (6) conservation actions to help reach these objectives.

6.2 Collaboration with Indigenous Peoples

Supporting the leadership of Canada’s Indigenous Peoples is central to the Protected Areas Program’s efforts to advance protected areas and biodiversity conservation, while simultaneously supporting reconciliation. The Program will increasingly prioritize areas of ecological and cultural importance to Indigenous Peoples. This will include working to advance Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) on federal lands and waters managed in cooperation with Indigenous governments and communities.

The Protected Areas Program’s approach to recognizing these areas complements other Indigenous-led area-based conservation initiatives. Within ECCC, broader programs are in place to advance the establishment and recognition of IPCAs beyond the Protected Areas Program network of federally protected areas. The establishment of the Edézhzié Dehcho Protected Area in 2018, co-designated as an NWA under the *Canada Wildlife Act* in 2022, is managed through a consensus-based management board and exemplifies recognition of Indigenous rights and governance, and reconciliation in action. Co-designation of Edézhzié as an NWA enabled ECCC and the Dehcho Dene to put IPCAs into effect under federal law through the *Canada Wildlife Act* in a manner and form consistent with modern treaties.

The term Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) was coined in 2018 following key recommendations made by the Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE), and commitments made in Budget 2018 under the new Canada Nature Fund. As part of Canada’s goal under the Target 1 Challenge to protect 25% of lands and oceans by 2025, IPCAs have emerged as a unique opportunity to undertake collaborative biodiversity conservation in the spirit of reconciliation and partnership with Indigenous Peoples. According to the We Rise Together report from the Indigenous Circle of Experts (2018), IPCAs can be defined as “lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems”.



6.3 Process for Establishing New Protected Areas

Establishing new protected areas can be a long and complex process. The timing and steps involved in designation vary depending on the location of the proposed site, environmental and economic factors, obligations under treaties and land claim agreements, and a range of other matters. Generally, the process of establishing a federal protected area comprises the following steps:

1. Identification and selection of areas of national importance to biodiversity, whose protection would directly benefit one or more migratory bird populations, species at risk, or other wildlife species.
2. Assessment of whether the site requires protection.
3. Determination of whether it should be protected as a terrestrial or marine NWA, MBS, or recognized through an agreement under the *Canada Wildlife Act*. The most appropriate mechanism is identified, taking into account land ownership, section 35 rights, conservation values, and community interests.
4. Assessment of the economic, social, and environmental impact of protecting a candidate area. Consultations and engagement with Indigenous Peoples, governmental jurisdictions affected and interested stakeholders, non-governmental organizations, and industry are a part of the process of assessing and designating a protected area. The establishment of a marine NWA also requires coordination with other federal departments with management authority in the proposed area in order to meet conservation objectives.
5. Acquisition or registration of interest in the lands by the Federal Minister of the Environment and Climate Change (or agreements with other federal departments when establishing marine NWAs), once studies and consultations are complete.
6. Designation (or modification) of protected areas is achieved through the development and/or amendment of related legislation and regulations. Designation requires thorough planning and preparation, such as consultations with interested and affected parties on the proposed conservation objectives, boundaries, possible zoning, and regulatory measures.
7. Approval by the Governor in Council of the designation of acquired lands or waters as a protected area and of proposed regulatory amendments.

ECCC relies on specific tools and authorities to acquire lands to establish or expand federal protected areas. Going forward, ECCC will consider expanding its authority to acquire lands for conservation under the *Canada Wildlife Act* or the *Federal Real Property and Federal Immovables Act*, as appropriate. To improve existing mechanisms for establishing new protected areas, ECCC aims to better address the rights, responsibilities, and priorities of Indigenous Peoples in federally protected areas. ECCC is also coordinating with provincial, territorial, and federal agencies, as well as partners in the non-government sphere, to support coordinated, connected, representative, and effective protected areas networks.



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7. Connecting Canadians to Nature

The more people interact with nature, the more they care and value it, and take action for its conservation. It is with this awareness that ECCC’s “Connecting Canadians to Nature” initiative seeks to provide the public with more opportunities to connect to nature on federal lands while ensuring wildlife conservation. ECCC will continue to advance this initiative, improving public access to specific sites by developing or rehabilitating infrastructure, improving trail conditions, providing hands-on experiences such as bird banding and nature interpretation, and supporting other low-impact uses.

*“We cannot protect something we do not love, we cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot know what we do not see”
(Richard Louv)*

Recognizing the importance of broader inclusion and diversity among visitors to ECCC’s protected areas, making publicly-available sites more accessible and welcoming to all Canadians is a primary goal of the Protected Areas Program. Therefore, it will be a priority over the next decade to assess and improve site conditions to remove barriers for those with mobility issues, and also visual or auditory impairments. The program will also focus on taking meaningful steps to attract and increase the visitor experience of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) on our sites. The Connecting Canadians to Nature initiative seeks to increase the interest of a diversity of Canadians in their local protected area so that they will become stewards of it in the future.

Many organizations have been allies of the Connecting Canadians to Nature Program and are critical to advancing this work. These organizations include the British Columbia Waterfowl Society, the Okanagan-Similkameen Conservation Alliance, Nature Saskatchewan, the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory, the Friends of Wye Marsh, les Amis de la Réserve nationale de faune du Lac-Saint-François, and Cape Jourimain Nature Centre. In addition, the NatureHood program of Nature Canada directly increases visitation to the selected NWAs via field trips of students and teachers as part of the school curricula, which indirectly raises awareness amongst the families of those students.



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8. Guiding Principles

ECCC strives to be a national leader in delivering protection-based solutions to biodiversity conservation threats. The six principles below will help to achieve the mission of the Protected Areas Program by guiding actions and decision-making.

Conservation First

The conservation of wildlife and biodiversity is the primary purpose of ECCC's protected areas⁸. Conservation of wildlife in this context means not only habitat protection by regulating certain types of human use, but also the active management of populations of migratory birds and the recovery of species at risk and other wildlife. The Protected Areas Program will seek to harmonize protection efforts with global standards in recognition of Canada's commitments to the *Convention on Biological Diversity* and to support the integration of Canadian reporting within the International community.

Management and permitting activities may include interventions such as ecosystem monitoring, habitat restoration, public hunting, traditional use and sustainable harvesting by Indigenous Peoples, investigative research projects, infrastructure and habitat management, and nature interpretation for visitors by site staff or by collaborating community-based organizations. The *Canada Wildlife Act* is the primary legal instrument for the establishment and management of protected areas for ECCC, given its central focus on the importance of protecting wildlife.

Management Effectiveness and Biological Monitoring Improve Conservation Outcomes

Designating a protected area alone does not guarantee the effective management of its resources, nor the achievement of its biodiversity objectives. As such, ECCC has committed to regular evaluation of protected area management effectiveness and a plan for systematic and standardized ecological monitoring across the network. These assessments will inform where management is working well to achieve biodiversity conservation outcomes and where it needs to change. ECCC will modify, adapt, and re-direct management practices as needed, according to what these diagnostic tools reveal.

⁸ By contrast, many provincial, territorial and other federal protected areas (e.g., national and provincial/territorial parks) are established for primary purposes of recreation, tourism and watershed protection, or to protect areas representative of Canada's natural beauty and unique features; they have ancillary benefits for biodiversity conservation. [Go back](#)

Conservation in Canada Relies on partnership with Indigenous Peoples

Recognizing the importance of Indigenous leadership in conservation, the Protected Areas Program will advance conservation in the spirit and practice of reconciliation, acknowledging that Indigenous Peoples have been the custodians of natural areas for millennia. For ongoing management and when sites are proposed for protection, ECCC will engage affected and interested Indigenous leaders and communities, including through cooperative management opportunities and Indigenous leadership.

Nationally Led, Regionally Delivered

Canada is a country of regions with unique realities. The Protected Areas Program must take into account that in such a vast country, the different regions will require unique considerations and solutions to conservation challenges. For example, the solutions needed in the more densely populated areas of southern Canada will not be the same as those in the large wilderness areas of northern Canada under Indigenous Land claims. The Program will operate to reflect these unique regional circumstances.

Complementing Other Conservation Programs

ECCC's protected areas network complements the full range of Canadian protected areas and stewardship arrangements. ECCC recognizes that its protected areas are a part of regional, national, and international networks created by governments, Indigenous organizations, and non-governmental organizations with different objectives and criteria guiding the selection of areas for protection. As a result, ECCC commits to collaborate to contribute to national and international protection targets through partnerships that increase the number of protected lands. This approach supports connectivity within a mosaic of protected areas tools.

Connecting Canadians to Nature

With approximately 80% of Canada's population living in urban areas and a growing number of newcomers to Canada seeking opportunities for nature-related recreation activities, there is an unrealized potential to make nature increasingly relevant to Canadians, thereby fostering an ongoing culture of conservation. ECCC's network of protected sites provides a range of opportunities to engage Canadians in the appreciation and conservation of nature, especially those living in nearby communities. As such, and where appropriate, ECCC will continue to provide opportunities for local communities to enjoy nature within protected areas, so long as these activities do not interfere with the conservation of wildlife. In addition, ECCC will explore and develop new opportunities for Canadians to access and engage with nature on sites that are open to the public and within reach of populated centers.

Since its inception in 2015, the focus of Connecting Canadians to Nature has been on the following ten NWAs that are close to urban or suburban centers. Additional sites (not listed below) are also accessible to the public for many non-consumptive recreational activities under the Connecting Canadians to Nature initiative.

- Alaksen National Wildlife Area (near Vancouver, BC)
- Vaseux-Bighorn National Wildlife Area (near Penticton, BC)
- Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area (near Regina and Saskatoon)
- Big Creek National Wildlife Area (near London, Ontario)
- Prince Edward Point National Wildlife Area (near Kingston, Ontario)
- Lac Saint-Francois National Wildlife Area (near Montreal, Quebec)
- Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area (near Quebec City, Quebec)
- Shepody National Wildlife Area (near Moncton, NB)
- Cape Jourimain National Wildlife Area (near Moncton, NB, and Summerside, PEI)
- Chignecto National Wildlife Area (near Amherst, NS)



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9. Strategic Priorities and Actions to Advance Program Goals

The abovementioned principles will guide ECCC's efforts to advance its goals to (1) effectively manage its existing network, (2) expand the protected areas network, and (3) encourage Canadians to value, and benefit from, protected areas. Several strategic priorities supporting these goals have been established and are outlined below.

GOAL 1 Manage Existing Protected Areas to Achieve Site Conservation Outcomes

Improving the management effectiveness of the network will require the following actions:

- Complete management plans for all established NWAs and MBSs on federal land, followed by MBSs on private, municipal, and provincial land where possible. Management plans will be completed for all newly designated sites within the first 5 years of establishment.
- Evaluate the management effectiveness of sites every three years, starting in 2020 (2023, 2026, and 2029 to follow), through the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT). Results will be reported through the Global Database of Protected Area Management Effectiveness. Between evaluations, ECCC regions will follow the METT indications as to where site-level intervention is needed to improve management outcomes.
- Finalize and implement a national conservation monitoring plan. This multi-scale monitoring program will encompass a national, regional, and site-level assessment of key ecological attributes, threat status, and trends within ECCC's protected areas. Regular monitoring reports will inform site and program-level decision-making.
- Maintain site infrastructure to assist site management and ensure public safety (e.g. buildings, roads, bridges, observation towers, and signs). Building Condition Reports for ECCC facilities as well as portfolio Integrated Investment Plans will need to be updated.
- Restore wetland, grassland, forest, and coastal habitats, manage or improve habitat conditions where possible, and maintain habitat management infrastructure.
- Control human disturbance at sites. This includes guiding approved use of sites, including visitation, working with enforcement agencies to prevent prohibited activities, and ensuring sites are protected from external threats or encroachment.
- Co-manage NWAs and MBSs in partnership with Indigenous Peoples and support Indigenous leadership in the spirit of reconciliation.

GOAL
2

Expand the Protected Areas Network to Support the Conservation of Key Biodiversity Areas in Canada

Canada must protect more habitats to reverse the declining trend in biodiversity, both in terrestrial and marine environments. Expanding the network will require the following actions:

- Complete acquisition and site-development initiatives that are already underway, and establish regulatory authorities as appropriate to acquire lands for the purposes of protected areas establishment under the *Canada Wildlife Act* or the *Federal Real Property and Federal Immovables Act*.
- Continue to identify areas of importance to biodiversity in Canada for possible acquisition, with a focus on Key Biodiversity Areas, critical habitat for species at risk, and important areas for migratory birds.
- Pursue the protection of Key Biodiversity Areas and other areas of importance to conservation that fall within federal lands as MBSs or that can be transferred to ECCC and designated as NWAs.
- Explore the possibility of entering into agreements with provincial/territorial, municipal, private, and Indigenous organizations (under Sections 5 and 7 of the *Canada Wildlife Act*) to ensure the protection of additional areas important for wildlife and biodiversity outside of federal lands.
- Expand boundaries for existing sites where appropriate, and acquire or seek interest in new lands surrounding sites on a willing-seller, willing-buyer basis.
- Contribute to the identification of priority conservation areas in the coastal and marine environments of Canada, in collaboration with Transport Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Natural Resources Canada, Parks Canada Agency, Indigenous partners, and provinces and territories to pursue the establishment of marine NWAs.

Together, the range of ECCC's expansion and acquisition activities will enhance its network of protected areas as a significant, effective, and sustainable contribution to the long-term conservation of biodiversity in Canada.

GOAL
3

Encourage Canadians to Value, and Benefit from the use of, ECCC's Protected Areas Network

Effective ecological conservation and the engagement of the public in meaningful nature experiences can successfully co-exist on a sustainable basis if managed correctly. Site-specific investments under the Connecting Canadians to Nature initiative will continue to include activities such as migration monitoring, interpretation for youth and community groups, facilitated wildlife interaction and viewing experiences, geocaching, signage, way-finding improvements, and enhanced visitor experiences and education through built infrastructure and exhibitions. Actions to better connect Canadians to nature in ECCC's protected areas will involve the following actions:

- Where appropriate, build and install Migration Monitoring Stations, similar to the station launched at Prince Edward Point NWA, on the remaining NWAs in the Connecting Canadians initiative. This will provide families with the unique opportunity to participate in the annual monitoring of migratory bird migration.
- Encourage a sense of ownership and stewardship among the public through events and activities within their local protected areas.
- Seek out new, or renew existing, agreements with dedicated non-governmental conservation outreach organizations under the Connecting Canadians to Nature initiative.
- Improve infrastructure on sites open to the public, including buildings, roads, bridges, observation towers, and signs, to assist site access and ensure public safety.

- Additional investments will be made to make site visitor amenities more accessible to visitors of varying abilities. This may include expanding capital infrastructure (e.g. adapting washrooms facilities, visitor buildings, or parking lots) and/or may focus on facilitated site use and nature interpretation experiences (e.g. trails adapted to scooters, visual impairment aids, soundscapes, online materials for people who cannot physically visit, etc).
- The Program will engage and grow a greater cross-section of Canadians in learning about, visiting, and appreciating ECCC's Protected Areas. Program staff will work with experts in the field of diversity and inclusion to address the needs of BIPOC to develop a plan for improved engagement and overcoming barriers in visitation to federal protected areas, and undertake pilot engagement and inclusion programs on selected sites.
- Monitor and measure public reaction to infrastructure changes, in terms of visitation increases and quality of visitor experience.
- Develop public safety plans for NAWs, taking into consideration those activities that are actively encouraged versus those that are allowed. Risks will be identified and mitigated accordingly.
- Seek to support and enhance the work of community-based organizations devoted to individual sites where there is a mutually beneficial relationship in place.
- Working with Indigenous partners to highlight areas of cultural and ecological importance to Indigenous Peoples, highlight place names, history, and cultural knowledge.

10. Conclusion

ECCC seeks to enhance its ambition towards establishing and managing federal protected and conserved areas across Canada. Guiding its ambition to 2030, the principles, strategic priorities, and actions outlined in this document will support ECCC in implementing the Protected Areas Program, with the goal of managing and monitoring its existing sites, expanding its network, and enhancing the connection of Canadians to nature. As experience from the process of implementing this strategic plan and vision provides new insights toward 2030, revisions will be made as appropriate to address emerging opportunities, challenges, needs, and priorities in establishing and managing federally protected areas in a bid to contribute towards achieving Canada's biodiversity conservation objectives.



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APPENDIX A – Glossary

Biodiversity: as defined in the Canadian Biodiversity Strategy, the variety of species and ecosystems on Earth and the ecological processes of which they are a part.

Critical habitat: as defined in the *Species at Risk Act*, section 2 (1), the habitat that is necessary for the survival or recovery of a listed wildlife species and that is identified as the species' critical habitat in a recovery strategy or in an action plan for the species.

Ecosystem: a biological community together with its environment, functioning as a unit.

Federal lands: as defined in the *Species at Risk Act*, section 2 (1) (a), land that belongs to His Majesty in right of Canada, or that His Majesty in right of Canada has the power to dispose of, and all waters on and airspace above that land; (b) the internal waters of Canada and the territorial sea of Canada; and (c) reserves and any other lands that are set apart for the use and benefit of a band under the *Indian Act*, and all waters on and airspace above those reserves and lands.

Habitat: for the purposes of ECCC Protected Areas Program implementation, the *Species at Risk Act* definition of habitat shall be adopted. The *Species at Risk Act* defines 'habitat' as – 2 (1) (a) in respect of aquatic species, spawning grounds and nursery, rearing, food supply, migration and any other areas on which aquatic species depend directly or indirectly in order to carry out their life processes, or areas where aquatic species formerly occurred and have the potential to be reintroduced; and (b) in respect of other wildlife species, the area or type of site where an individual or wildlife species naturally occurs or depends on directly or indirectly in order to carry out its life processes or formerly occurred and has the potential to be reintroduced.

Migratory Bird: under section 2 (1) of the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* "migratory bird" is defined as a migratory bird referred to in the Convention, and includes the sperm, eggs, embryos, tissue cultures, and parts of the bird. Under section 2 (1) of the Migratory Bird Sanctuary Regulations, "migratory birds" means migratory game birds, migratory insectivorous birds, and migratory non-game birds.

Migratory Bird Sanctuary: a protected area established under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* to protect migratory birds from hunting and all other disturbances as outlined in the Migratory Bird Sanctuary Regulations, and as prescribed in the Migratory Bird Sanctuary Regulations.

National Wildlife Area: protected areas established under the *Canada Wildlife Act* to protect nationally significant habitats for the purpose of wildlife conservation, research, and interpretation. They can be established on Canada's lands, inland waters, and territorial sea, and may include any habitat type, including uplands, wetlands, aquatic areas, estuaries, and intertidal and marine areas.

Permit: means permission in writing issued by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change to allow for the occurrence of an activity otherwise prohibited in legislation, including but not limited to the following legislation: the *Migratory Birds Convention Act*, the *Canada Wildlife Act*, the *Species at Risk Act*, and their Regulations.

Protected Area: defined by the Convention on Biological Diversity as a geographically defined area which is designated or regulated and managed to achieve specific conservation objectives.

Species at Risk: means species that have been listed as extirpated, endangered, threatened, or species of special concern, under the *Species at Risk Act*, or have similar designations under provincial legislation.

Wildlife: as defined in the *Canada Wildlife Act*, section 2 (4) (a) any animal, plant or other organism belonging to a species that is wild by nature or that is not easily distinguishable from such a species; and (b) the habitat of any such animal, plant or other organism. The *Species at Risk Act*, section 2(1), defines wildlife species as species, subspecies, variety or geographically or genetically distinct population of animal, plant, or other organisms, other than a bacterium or virus, that is wild by nature and (a) is native to Canada; or (b) has extended its range into Canada without human intervention and has been present in Canada for at least 50 years.



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APPENDIX B – Background Information on Protected Areas in Canada

Overview

Protected areas are the cornerstone of biodiversity conservation. They provide refuge to wildlife, maintain key habitats, allow for species migration and movement, and ensure the maintenance of natural processes across landscapes and seascapes. In addition to biodiversity conservation, protected areas provide important ecological goods and services, including water and air filtration, and carbon sequestration and storage. They also represent important places where people connect with nature and the lands and waters on which protected areas are located serve as refuges for the traditional practices, foods, and medicines of Indigenous Peoples. Gaining increased attention, a shift in international priorities has led to a heightened focus on protected and conserved areas as a key component in reversing the global decline in biodiversity and wildlife.

Background on Acts and Regulations

The International Union for Conservation of Nature defines a protected area as “a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.” (2008).

Protected areas have long played a critical role in Canada’s wildlife and biodiversity conservation efforts.

The *Canada Wildlife Act* and the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* were the first statutes in Canada to specifically enable the creation of protected areas whose primary purpose is wildlife and habitat conservation.

These key pieces of conservation legislation, and the kinds of protected areas they enable (NWAs/marine NWAs and MBSs), represent two distinct phases in the modern history of wildlife conservation in Canada. Toward the end of the 19th century, the most important threat to migratory bird conservation was overhunting. ECCC established many of the early sanctuaries in Canada to protect birds, nests, and eggs from direct threats: hunting for meat, the feather trade, and egg harvest. For example, Canada established the Last Mountain Lake MBS—in what is now Saskatchewan—in 1887 to protect “wild fowl” from indiscriminate hunting for meat and eggs. This was Canada’s first federal bird sanctuary, and as such, the first protected area in North America designated specifically for the protection of wildlife.

With the advent of the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* in 1917 and for the following 50 years, MBSs were the only regulatory tool available federally to protect wildlife and habitat. MBSs designated under the *MBS Regulations and the Migratory Birds Convention Act* protect migratory birds, including their eggs and nests.

As the 1970s approached the primary threat to wildlife shifted from physical disturbance and overhunting to habitat alteration and destruction. The Government of Canada, through the CWS, implemented a national habitat program in 1966 to address the challenges posed by habitat alteration and the destruction of wildlife. The National Wildlife Policy and Program for Canada (1966) responded to widespread national concern regarding the loss of important wildlife habitats and gave rise to the promulgation of the *Canada Wildlife Act* in 1973, the most important aspect of which was the provision of the creation of NWAs. Whereas an MBS protects birds, nests, and eggs during the limited period of migration, nesting, and staging, a NWA affords comprehensive, year-round habitat protection on ecologically important sites for birds and other wildlife, contributing to biodiversity conservation more broadly. The introduction of the *Species at Risk Act* in 2002 further expanded ECCC’s interests and ability to intervene in habitat conservation by taking into consideration habitats necessary for the recovery of endangered species.

ECCC began acquiring land for protected areas after the Parliament of Canada approved a National Wildlife Policy for Canada in 1966. In the past, public servants working in regional offices, in collaboration with partners (provincial and territorial colleagues, non-governmental organizations, and others), sought to acquire land, where appropriate and feasible, using the following mechanisms: 1) purchase from willing sellers, 2) transfers from other federal departments, 3) establishment of lease agreements, and/or 4) donations by private landowners. To date, all transactions have been done on a “willing-buyer, willing-seller” basis, which means acquisition efforts have been largely ad hoc and opportunistic. A natural tendency for many protected areas agencies, both in Canada and globally, has also been to protect sites where the potential for conflict with resource development or other human interests was minimized.

Despite the limited protections accorded to habitats by the *Migratory Birds Convention Act*, many Sanctuaries – particularly in Northern Canada – do provide effective year-round and comprehensive protection to habitat and wildlife through other mechanisms. This notably includes the Area Co-Management Committees enabled through the Inuit Impact and Benefit Agreement, under the terms of the Nunavut Agreement.

The purpose of NWAs established through the *Wildlife Area Regulations* of the *Canada Wildlife Act* is to support wildlife research, conservation, and interpretation. They are flexible conservation areas that allow for the permitting of activities that will not interfere with the conservation of wildlife. This includes the authorization of activities such as hiking, canoeing, photography, and bird watching in most southern NWAs. The Protected Areas Program establishes NWAs on public lands whose administration is assigned to the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change⁹.

In 1994, Canada amended the *Canada Wildlife Act* to enable the protection of marine areas in any area of the sea that forms part of the internal waters, territorial seas, or exclusive economic zone of Canada. This led to the establishment of Canada’s first marine NWA in 2018: Scott Islands Marine NWA, located off the northern tip of Vancouver Island. This marine NWA (the islands themselves are under the protection of the Province of British Columbia) was the first protected marine area established using the powers under Section 4.1(1) of the *Canada Wildlife Act*. Scott Islands has its own Regulations that describe the measures necessary to ensure the conservation of wildlife in this marine setting.

Today, every jurisdiction in Canada has legislative tools that enable the creation of protected areas. These are diverse and include national parks, provincial parks, wildlife areas, bird sanctuaries, conservation areas, private nature reserves, Indigenous protected areas, and marine parks.

⁹ The joint administrative arrangement of a NWA involving federal, provincial, or private lands may be accomplished through an agreement with the other parties (province, territory or private organization) pursuant to either Section 5 and/or 7 of the *Canada Wildlife Act*. For example, a number of the co-managed NWA in Nunavut include Inuit Owned Lands, which are effectively considered private lands. [Go back](#)