



2025 REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONER OF THE ENVIRONMENT
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TO THE PARLIAMENT OF CANADA
ON BEHALF OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL OF CANADA

Establishing Terrestrial Protected Areas



Office of the
Auditor General
of Canada

Bureau du
vérificateur général
du Canada

**INDEPENDENT
AUDITOR'S REPORT**

Performance audit reports

This report presents the results of a performance audit conducted by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG) under the authority of the Auditor General Act.

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- report both positive and negative findings
- conclude against the established audit objectives
- make recommendations for improvement when there are significant differences between criteria and assessed performance

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At a Glance



Overall message

Overall, we concluded that Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada were not on track to establish protected and conserved areas covering 25% of terrestrial land and inland water by 2025. We also concluded that they had not planned to ensure these areas were well-connected, ecologically representative, and protecting areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services. Protecting ecologically important areas helps prevent habitat loss, a main cause of the biodiversity crisis. It is also an important nature-based solution for addressing climate change.

The federal government has committed to conserving 25% of terrestrial areas (land and inland water) in Canada by 2025, and 30% by 2030. By the end of 2024, Environment and Climate Change Canada's database indicated that less than 14% of Canada's land and inland water had been protected and conserved. We found that the 2 federal organizations had undertaken the foundational work needed to establish and expand the network of protected and conserved areas by working with provincial, territorial, Indigenous, and other partners. However, they had not met the majority of the targets in the 13 programs we examined. Progress relies in part on numerous factors, including on the capacity and willingness of partners to participate and on requirements related to land transfers and private land acquisition.

Improving the system of protected and conserved areas requires more than reaching a quantitative goal. The overall network is stronger, in a qualitative sense, if areas are well-connected, are representative of Canada's ecological diversity, promote biodiversity, and support key ecosystems. We found, however, that the 2 federal organizations did not consistently consider or track progress on meeting qualitative goals, which would help them prioritize areas for protection. The 2 federal organizations also did not specifically track progress or report on the conservation of inland waters.

Establishing a strong, countrywide network of protected and conserved areas of high ecological value preserves biodiversity, safeguards ecosystems, provides food security, and supports cultural continuity. It also helps create certainty with respect to infrastructure planning and decision making as the federal government seeks to expedite approvals for projects of national importance. Given that the federal government must work with provincial, territorial, Indigenous, and other partners to meet its targets, urgent and cooperative action is needed among all parts of society if Canada is to meet its 2030 biodiversity goals.

Key facts and findings



- This audit is part of a series of 3 reports focused on protected and conserved areas across Canada. The 2 other audits are [Establishing Marine Protected Areas](#) and [Federal-Indigenous Management of Protected Areas](#).
- In December 2022, Canada signed on to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which commits Canada to conserve 30% of its land and inland water areas by 2030, including areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, while respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples.
- Environment and Climate Change Canada, which maintains the country's official repository for protected and conserved areas information, did not report on annual changes to the network. As a result, it would be challenging for Canadians to determine how Canada's conserved areas changed over time, and the reasons for those changes.
- Canada's ability to expand its network of conserved areas has global significance because the country is home to 9% of the world's forests and 20% of its freshwater resources.

See [Recommendations and Responses](#) at the end of this report.

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Introduction

Background

Commitment to conserve land and inland water



Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Source: United Nations

1. The United Nations recognizes biodiversity loss as one of the world's most pressing emergencies. Biodiversity is declining in all regions of the world, including in Canada. Healthy ecosystems, both on land and in water, provide habitat needed to maintain biodiversity, as well as services essential for human well-being, such as the provision of clean water and air.

2. Canada's terrestrial areas (land and inland water) are globally important, as they comprise the second-largest land mass of all countries. Canada is home to 9% of the world's forests, which have global significance because of their contributions to carbon and water cycles. Canada also holds 20% of the world's freshwater resources. Globally, freshwater biodiversity is being lost faster than biodiversity on land.

3. Over the past several decades, Canada has committed to targets for protected and conserved areas ([Exhibit 1](#)). These targets have increased over time due to heightening concerns internationally about the continued loss of biodiversity and the threat that this poses to nature and human well-being. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework aims to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, building upon the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 15 to take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats and halt the loss of biodiversity. In 2024, Canada finalized Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy: Halting and Reversing Biodiversity Loss in Canada, which serves as the country's action plan for the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Exhibit 1—Canadian commitments to conserve land and inland water since 2010

Year	Commitment	Context
2010	Conserve 17% of land and inland water by 2020	Canada, as a signatory to the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity, committed to this target through the Aichi Biodiversity Targets adopted in 2010. This target was incorporated in 2016 in the 2020 Biodiversity Goals and Targets for Canada.
2019	Conserve 25% of land and inland water by 2025	This target was introduced in the 2019 Speech from the Throne. Federal Budget 2021 allocated \$2.3 billion over 5 years to support this conservation commitment.
2022	Conserve 30% of land and inland water by 2030	Canada adopted the United Nations' Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework under the Convention on Biological Diversity. The framework sets out 23 targets aiming to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, with a vision of living in harmony with nature by 2050. This included the commitment to the target that by 2030, at least 30% of Canada's land and inland water, "especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures," while respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples. This commitment was incorporated into Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy: Halting and Reversing Biodiversity Loss in Canada.

Source: Based on information from Environment and Climate Change Canada

4. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework's 30% by 2030 target is both quantitative and qualitative. It is focused on both the total area conserved as well as the specific qualities of the areas needed for effective biodiversity conservation, including:

- to be well-connected, to allow for species to move freely, and natural processes to flow unimpeded
- to be representative of the country's ecological diversity
- to protect areas of particular importance for biodiversity; for example, species at risk habitat or areas important to species during their life cycles
- to protect areas of particular importance for ecosystem functions, such as water or carbon cycles, and ecosystem services; for example, climate regulation or flood mitigation

5. Countries that have adopted the target have made the commitment to recognize and respect the rights of Indigenous peoples in the protection and conservation of land and inland water. The countries also committed to full and effective participation of Indigenous peoples in decision making for establishing protected and conserved areas.

6. In this report, the term “protected and conserved areas” is used to describe: (1) **protected areas**, and (2) **other effective area-based conservation measures**, which both contribute to the 2025 and 2030 targets:

- **Protected areas** are clearly defined geographical spaces, recognized, dedicated, and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term protection of nature along with associated ecosystem services and cultural values. Protected areas can be established under legislative or other tools, by governments, or by private landowners. In Canada, examples include national, provincial, and territorial parks, Indigenous protected areas, national wildlife areas, migratory bird sanctuaries, and freshwater national marine conservation areas.
- **Conserved areas** in this report refer to **other effective area-based conservation measures**. These measures are intended as geographically defined areas, other than a protected area, that are governed and managed to achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the conservation of biodiversity in its natural habitats and surroundings. These areas can include those being used for another primary objective such as military training, scientific research, or historical or cultural preservation, but that protect biodiversity in its natural state as a secondary intended benefit. For land and inland water, conserved areas are recognized by being included in the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database, Canada’s official repository for protected and conserved areas information.

7. The federal government uses a number of different programs and tools in establishing and recognizing protected and conserved areas of land and inland water in Canada ([Exhibit 2](#)). These programs and tools have different objectives and can vary in terms of allowable activities. The processes for establishing or recognizing areas also vary among different tools and can take from years to decades to complete.

Exhibit 2 —The federal government uses a spectrum of tools and programs to protect and conserve land and inland water in Canada

(a) Federal protected and conserved areas

Tool or program	Lead organization	Enabling federal legislation	Description	Result
National park or national park reserve	Parks Canada	Canada National Parks Act	Area of land established for the benefit, education, and enjoyment of Canadians and managed for ecological integrity A national park reserve is an area that is managed like a national park but is subject to 1 or more Indigenous land claims	Protected area
Freshwater national marine conservation area	Parks Canada	Canada National Marine Conservation Areas Act	Area of inland water established and managed for the purpose of protecting and conserving representative areas for the benefit, education, and enjoyment of all	Protected area
National wildlife area	Environment and Climate Change Canada	Canada Wildlife Act (Wildlife Area Regulations)	Area established and managed for wildlife research, conservation, and interpretation	Protected area
Migratory bird sanctuary	Environment and Climate Change Canada	Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994 (Migratory Bird Sanctuary Regulations)	Area that protects birds, nests, and eggs during the period of migration, nesting, and staging	Protected area Federal or non-federal land
National urban park	Parks Canada	Area-specific legislation (e.g., Rouge National Urban Park Act) or designation under the Interim National Urban Parks Policy	Places of natural or historical significance located in or near a major city in Canada and is managed to conserve nature, connect people with nature, and advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples	Protected or conserved area federal or non-federal land

(b) Federal programs supporting the establishment or recognition of protected and conserved areas

Tool or program	Lead organization	Description	Result
Natural Heritage Conservation Program	Environment and Climate Change Canada	Program that provides funding to secure ecologically sensitive private lands and private interests in lands	Protected or conserved area
Ecological Gifts Program	Environment and Climate Change Canada	Program to enable Canadians to donate ecologically sensitive lands to protect nature and leave a legacy for future generations, made possible under the Canada Income Tax Act and the Quebec Taxation Act	Protected or conserved area
Indigenous-Led Area-Based Conservation Program	Environment and Climate Change Canada	Program that provides funding to Indigenous governments and organizations to lead or co-lead the establishment and recognition of protected areas or conserved areas	Protected or conserved area
North American Waterfowl Management Plan	Environment and Climate Change Canada	Program that provides funding and federal secretariat support to conserve and protect waterfowl populations and their habitats, including wetlands	Protected or conserved area
Nature Agreements	Environment and Climate Change Canada	Funding agreements between the federal and provincial or territorial governments, with mutually agreed upon actions for nature conservation and protection	Protected or conserved area
Old Growth Nature Fund	Environment and Climate Change Canada	Program that provided funding to permanently protect old growth forests in the province of British Columbia	Protected or conserved area
Protected Areas and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures Recognition Program	Environment and Climate Change Canada	Program intended to communicate, build partnerships, and identify new areas of opportunity for protected and conserved areas in Canada	Protected or conserved area

Tool or program	Lead organization	Description	Result
National Program for Ecological Corridors	Parks Canada	Program that provides funding to other jurisdictions and organizations to develop ecological connections between protected and conserved areas across large landscapes	Not applicable

Source: Based on information from Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada

Protecting and conserving land and inland water in Canada

8. In 2021, Canada launched the 5-year, \$2.3-billion Enhanced Nature Legacy for Canada **horizontal initiative**.¹ One of the initiative's objectives is to conserve 25% of Canada's land and inland water by 2025, building the foundation towards 30% by 2030. This initiative provides funding for several programs and tools used by Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada related to protected and conserved areas. This includes funding to support the establishment of federal protected areas and to implement funding programs to incentivize others to establish, or recognize, protected and conserved areas.

Collaboration to achieve land and inland water targets

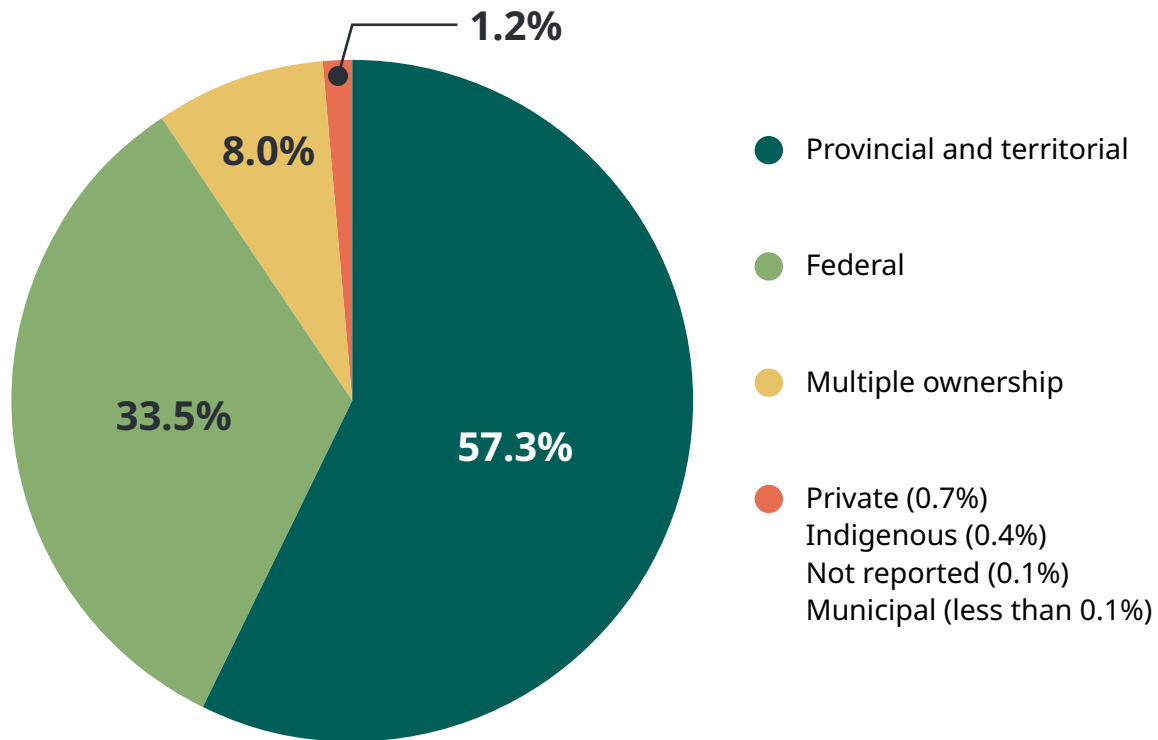
9. The federal government cannot meet the 25% by 2025 and 30% by 2030 targets on its own. For land and inland water, Canada's success requires collaboration and partnership. The federal government must work with provincial, territorial, Indigenous, and other partners if it is to meet targets for land and inland water protected and conserved areas.

10. Meaningful and equitable partnerships with Indigenous governments and organizations include the integration of Indigenous cultural values and Knowledge. These are critical in the establishment of Canada's terrestrial protected and conserved areas and support of cultural continuity.

11. Provinces and territories are responsible for the majority of protected and conserved land and inland water in Canada ([Exhibit 3](#)).

¹ **Horizontal initiative**—An initiative in which multiple organizations must work together to achieve shared outcomes.

Exhibit 3—Canada’s protected and conserved land and inland water is managed by multiple parties



Note: The calculation is based on square kilometres in 2024.

Source: Based on information from the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database, Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024

[Read the Exhibit 3 text description](#)

Roles and responsibilities

12. **Environment and Climate Change Canada.** The department is responsible for national wildlife areas established under the Canada Wildlife Act and for migratory bird sanctuaries established under the Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994. It administers programs to protect and conserve land on private property, including the Ecological Gifts Program and the Natural Heritage Conservation Program. It is also responsible for maintaining the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database, Canada’s official repository for protected and conserved areas information, which is used for national and international reporting. Environment and Climate Change Canada is the lead department for

the government's Enhanced Nature Legacy for Canada initiative. The department also represents the Government of Canada in matters related to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

13. **Parks Canada.** The agency is mandated to create a system of national parks under the Canada National Parks Act and freshwater national marine conservation areas under the Canada National Marine Conservation Areas Act. It is responsible for ensuring that long-term plans are in place for establishing systems of national parks and national marine conservation areas. Parks Canada is also responsible for programs recognizing ecological corridors and designating national urban parks.

Focus of the audit

14. This audit focused on whether Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada were on track to establish protected and conserved areas covering 25% of terrestrial land and inland water by 2025. It also focused on whether the organizations were planning to protect and conserve areas covering 30% of terrestrial land and inland water by 2030 that are well-connected, ecologically representative, and of significance to biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services.

15. This audit is important because urgent action is needed worldwide to address the biodiversity and climate crises as human activities continue to drive biodiversity loss at rates unprecedented in human history. A network of protected and conserved areas of high ecological value would enable Canada to meet its commitments to the international community and contribute to its goal to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. Failure to meet commitments could risk further degradation of important habitats, weaken ecosystem functions and services, and miss opportunities for reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Further, clearly identifying areas that have high conservation value would increase certainty with infrastructure planning and decision making as the government seeks to expedite project approvals for projects of national importance.

16. This audit is 1 of 3 fall 2025 Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development reports on protected and conserved areas. The other 2 reports are [Establishing Marine Protected Areas](#) and [Federal-Indigenous Management of Protected Areas](#).

17. More details about the audit objective, scope, approach, and criteria are in [About the Audit](#) at the end of this report.

Findings and Recommendations

Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada were not on track to contribute as planned to protect and conserve 25% of land and inland water by the end of 2025

Why this finding matters

18. This finding matters because the federal government has an important leadership role to play in increasing protected and conserved areas and coordinating action across provinces, territories, Indigenous governments, and other partners. Area-based protection is a key part of Canada's approach to halting and reversing biodiversity loss, as it addresses underlying factors of habitat loss and degradation. Protected and conserved areas have long-term environmental, economic, and health benefits and are essential to ensuring that these benefits are sustained for future generations.

Context

19. Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada both contribute to the Enhanced Nature Legacy for Canada initiative with the objective to conserve 25% of Canada's land and inland water by 2025, laying the foundation for 30% by 2030. As of December 2020, the year before the initiative was started, the total area of protected and conserved land and inland water in Canada was 12.8%. This area included, for example, 54 national wildlife areas, 37 national parks, 10 national park reserves, and 1 national urban park.

20. Canada's national and international reporting on protected and conserved areas relies on Environment and Climate Change Canada's database. The Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database contains information provided by federal organizations, provincial and territorial governments, Indigenous governments and organizations, land trusts, and other data providers to quantify annually the protected and conserved areas of Canada. The database covers both terrestrial and marine protected and conserved areas.

21. The amount of area reported as protected and conserved in Canada can be changed by:

- increasing the amount of land or inland water entered in the database by establishing new protected areas or conserved areas, expanding existing protected or conserved areas, or recognizing existing areas not in the database
- decreasing the amount of land or inland water entered in the database by removing protected or conserved areas or downsizing by reducing the size of existing protected or conserved areas

Some progress was achieved towards the target, but work was not completed

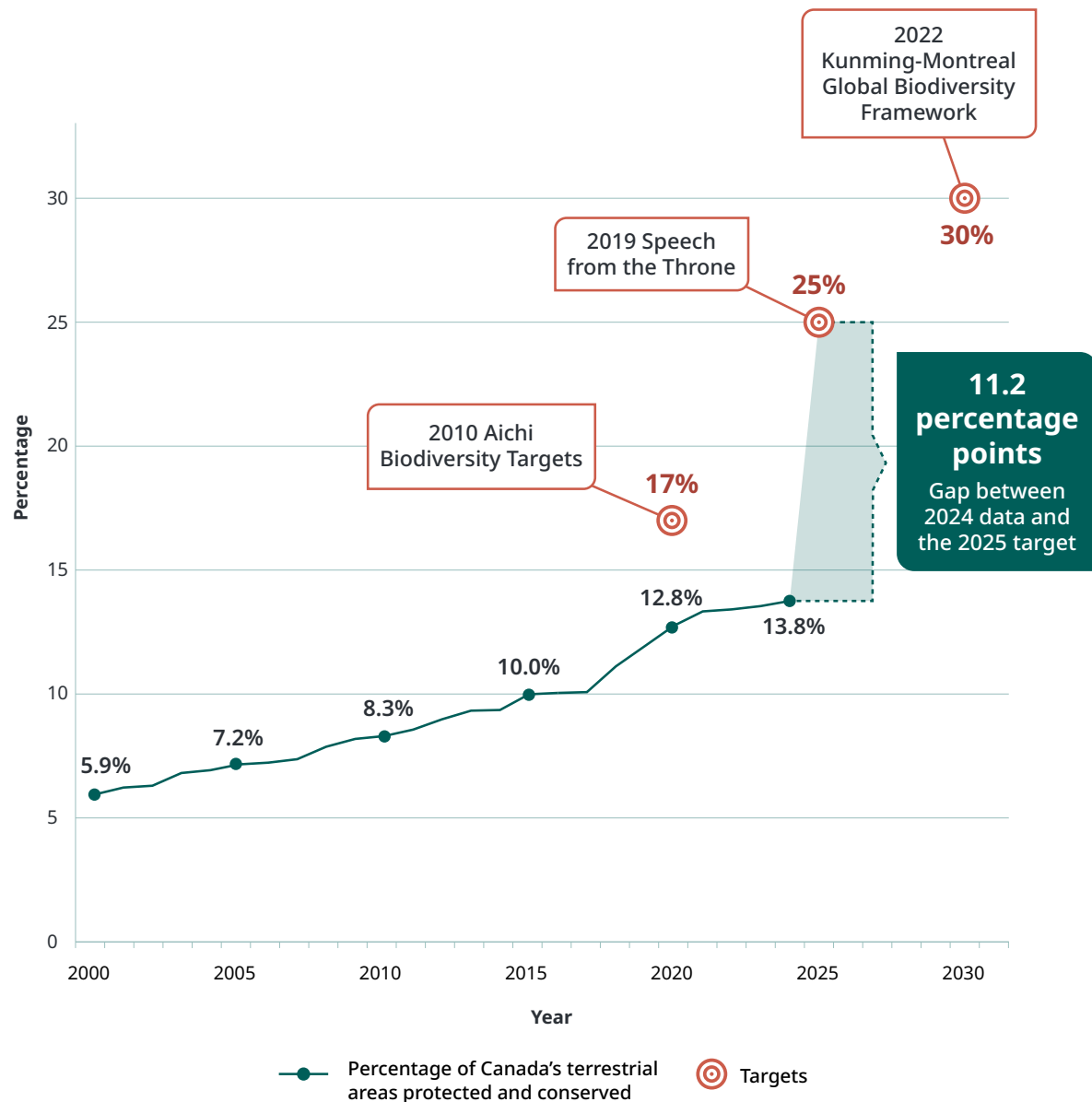
Findings

22. We found that Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada were not on track to contribute as planned to conserve 25% of land and inland water by the end of 2025. Based on data from December 2024 in the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database, 13.8% of Canada's land and inland water was reported in the database as being protected and conserved. This left a gap of 11.2 percentage points (or approximately 1,120,000 square kilometres) to reach the 25% by 2025 target. During our audit period, protected and conserved land and inland water increased by 1.0 percentage point ([Exhibit 4](#)).

23. Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada identified and developed plans for 13 programs that contribute towards the targets of 25% by 2025 and 30% by 2030.

24. We found that Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada had not met program-level targets for most of the 13 programs we examined. The organizations had not met targets for establishing federal protected and conserved areas by the end of our audit period ([Exhibit 5](#)). This meant that the organizations were unlikely to contribute, as planned, to the overall 25% by 2025 commitment.

Exhibit 4—There was a gap between the 2025 target and the percentage of Canada's terrestrial areas protected and conserved as of December 2024



Source: Based on information from the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database, Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024

[Read the Exhibit 4 text description](#)

Exhibit 5—Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada had not met targets for establishing federal protected and conserved areas, as of March 31, 2025

Environment and Climate Change Canada

Program	Program-level target	Date to achieve	Source of target	Number completed during audit period
National wildlife areas, migratory bird sanctuaries, and conservation areas (establishment and expansion)	Establish 6 new national wildlife areas and finalize the designation of 7 national wildlife areas (13 total)	End of 2025	Federal Sustainable Development Strategy 2022 to 2026	10 new national wildlife areas established 0 designations finalized (10 total)

Parks Canada

Program	Program-level target	Date to achieve	Source of target	Number completed during audit period
National park or national park reserve	10	End of 2026	Federal Sustainable Development Strategy 2022 to 2026	1 Pituamkek National Park Reserve
Expansions of national parks or national park reserves	None	Not applicable	Not applicable	6 expansions ¹
Freshwater national marine conservation area	4	End of 2026	Federal Sustainable Development Strategy 2022 to 2026	0
National urban park	6	End of the 2025–26 fiscal year	Parks Canada's 2023 to 2027 Departmental Sustainable Development Strategy	0

¹ As reflected in the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database, Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024

Source: Based on information from Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada

25. Despite not meeting targets, we found that the 2 federal organizations had undertaken foundational work to establish protected and conserved areas for most programs. For example:

- Environment and Climate Change Canada had acquired over 3,000 hectares of private land in the process of establishing or expanding national wildlife areas.
- Environment and Climate Change Canada had signed 5 Nature Agreements with provinces or territories.
- Environment and Climate Change Canada supported securement of private land through its programs supporting the establishment or recognition of protected and conserved areas. This included over 270,000 hectares reported by partners through the Natural Heritage Conservation Program from the 2021–22 to 2024–25 fiscal years.
- Parks Canada had 13 potential national parks or park reserves in various stages of the establishment process.
- Parks Canada had 7 potential national urban parks in various stages of the designation process and had added an area to an existing national urban park.
- Parks Canada had funded 26 projects with potential to be recognized as ecological corridors, including 10 Indigenous-led projects.

26. While much of this work was focused on land, we found limited action had been taken for the protection of inland water. For example, we found that Parks Canada had made only limited progress towards its plan to create 4 new freshwater national marine conservation areas by the end of 2026. Only 1 candidate site had been selected by the end of our audit period.

27. We noted that the 2 federal organizations had identified that progress was reliant on factors such as the capacity or willingness of partners to participate and numerous requirements and processes related to land transfer and private land acquisition. Funding for the horizontal initiative was set to end in March 2026. There was no additional funding for the 30% by 2030 target as of the end of our audit period.

28. Our recommendation for this section is at [paragraph 43](#).

Environment and Climate Change Canada's protected and conserved areas database had limitations

Findings

29. We found that Environment and Climate Change Canada lacked systems to identify and report on annual changes to protected and conserved areas in Canada. The department did not systematically track changes in areas from year to year in the database, such as adding, expanding, removing, or reducing areas. As a result, it would be challenging for Canadians to determine how Canada's protected and conserved areas changed over time and the reasons for those changes. We found that this was a limitation of Environment and Climate Change Canada's database, which was rebuilt every year based on information from data providers.

30. We found that for 4 of its programs supporting the establishment or recognition of protected and conserved areas, Environment and Climate Change Canada did not require funding recipients to report protected and conserved areas to the department for inclusion in its database. This meant that the department funded some projects intended to help get to the 25% target, but without the projects contributing towards Canada's reported progress.

31. We found that there was no verification system to determine whether the information contributed by data providers met criteria for inclusion in the database. A 2018 report from Canada's federal, provincial, and territorial departments responsible for parks, protected areas, conservation, wildlife, and biodiversity acknowledged that incorporating an audit function could help ensure the integrity of reporting, including consistency and quality. This audit function had not been implemented by the end of our audit period. In our view, a verification system would provide additional transparency for Canadians and would help improve the reliability of information reported internationally by Canada.

Recommendation

32. Environment and Climate Change Canada should track and report changes in Canada's protected and conserved areas from year to year, including adding, expanding, removing, or reducing areas, to better inform Canadians and parliamentarians about changes over time, the reasons for those changes, and progress towards the 30% by 2030 target.

Environment and Climate Change Canada's response. Agreed.

See [Recommendations and Responses](#) at the end of this report for detailed responses.

Recommendation

33. Environment and Climate Change Canada, in collaboration with partners, should implement a verification system for information on protected and conserved areas provided for national reporting to increase assurance on accuracy and completeness of the information and to provide transparency for Canadians.

Environment and Climate Change Canada's response. Agreed.

See [Recommendations and Responses](#) at the end of this report for detailed responses.

The 2 federal organizations did not consider all qualitative elements consistently in plans to protect and conserve land and inland water by 2030

Why this finding matters

34. This finding matters because establishing protected and conserved areas is not just about reaching an overall percentage in terms of the total area protected. Areas that are well-connected, ecologically representative, and of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services can significantly improve the quality of Canada's system of protected and conserved areas. This makes the system more resilient and capable of halting and reversing biodiversity loss. A coordinated approach to meeting the 2030 target that includes all partners would better address known risks and avoid gaps in planning and implementation.

35. This finding also matters because tracking progress and improvement of the qualitative elements of protected and conserved areas would help the federal government, Canadians, and parliamentarians to identify gaps and prioritize work to meet Canada's 30% by 2030 target.

Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada did not consistently plan for all qualitative elements required in the 2030 target

Findings

36. Overall, we found that Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada were not consistently planning for all qualitative elements required in the 2030 target. Both organizations were considering coverage of areas of importance

for biodiversity in most of the programs we examined. However, connectivity, ecological representation, and ecosystem functions and services were considered in only some of these programs. In our view, considering qualitative elements across Canada's system of protected and conserved areas is important in meeting the 2030 target.

37. We found that Parks Canada developed national criteria for ecological corridors, aimed at protecting and restoring ecological connectivity, but few of the other programs we examined prioritized connectivity between protected and conserved areas.

38. Parks Canada planned to create an ecologically representative national parks system by establishing national parks or national park reserves in each of 39 natural regions across the country. Based on agency public reporting available during our audit period, not all ecological areas were represented.

39. We also found that there was no overall planning specific for the establishment of protected and conserved areas for Canada's inland water. While Parks Canada aimed to have ecological representation across its national marine conservation areas, for inland water, this was limited only to the Great Lakes.

40. Environment and Climate Change Canada's Old Growth Nature Fund prioritized the protection of carbon stores in old growth forests, but few of the other programs prioritized ecosystem functions and services.

41. The federal organizations intended to advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples through the Enhanced Nature Legacy for Canada horizontal initiative. We found that Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada included requirements for collaboration or partnership with Indigenous peoples in the programs we examined in planning for the 2025 target, working towards 2030. In our audit period, the Pituamkek National Park Reserve was established in collaboration between the Mi'kmaq Nation Government of Prince Edward Island with Parks Canada.

42. Overall, while individual programs addressed some specific qualitative elements, Environment and Climate Change Canada, the lead department for the government's commitment under the Convention on Biological Diversity, lacked an overall plan with concrete actions to ensure Canada's protected and conserved areas would be well-connected, ecologically representative, and cover areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services by 2030.

Recommendation

43. As the lead department for Canada's response to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Environment and Climate Change Canada, working with Parks Canada and other partners, should develop a coordinated overall plan to establish protected and conserved areas covering 30% by 2030 that considers ecological connectivity, representation, and coverage of areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem function and services, for both terrestrial land and inland water in Canada.

Response of each organization. Agreed.

See [Recommendations and Responses](#) at the end of this report for detailed responses.

The 2 federal organizations lacked indicators and public reporting for some qualitative elements

Findings

44. We found that the 2 federal organizations were not tracking or reporting on Canada's progress with respect to all qualitative elements required in the 2030 target. Neither organization had performance indicators related to areas of importance to ecosystem functions and services. In some cases where information was tracked and reported, we found that it was limited to 1 organization or program and did not apply to Canada's system of protected and conserved areas overall ([Exhibit 6](#)).

Exhibit 6—Public indicators covering qualitative elements of protected and conserved areas were lacking or had limitations

Qualitative element	Indicator	Organization	Limitations
Connectivity	Number of ecological corridors identified and supported	Parks Canada	• Only public indicator related to connectivity • Limited to Parks Canada ecological corridors program • Does not track progress or report on connectivity of Canada's protected and conserved areas overall
Ecological representation	Proportion of area conserved, by ecozone	Environment and Climate Change Canada	• Only public indicator related to ecological representation of Canada's protected and conserved areas overall • Does not track changes over time
Coverage of areas of importance for biodiversity	No indicators	Not applicable	Not applicable
Coverage of areas of importance for ecosystem functions and services	No indicators	Not applicable	Not applicable

Source: Based on information from Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada

45. We also found that the 2 federal organizations were not specifically tracking progress or reporting on protected and conserved areas of inland water. In Environment and Climate Change Canada's database, land and inland water are combined. In our view, dedicated planning, progress tracking, and reporting are essential steps towards better protection and conservation of inland water in Canada.

Recommendation

46. Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada should develop indicators and report on results that reflect Canada's progress towards qualitative elements under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, including ecological connectivity, representation, and coverage of areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, for both terrestrial land and inland water.

Response of each organization. Agreed.

See [Recommendations and Responses](#) at the end of this report for detailed responses.

Conclusion

47. We concluded that Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada were not on track to establish protected and conserved areas covering 25% of terrestrial land and inland water by 2025. We also concluded that the organizations had not planned for protected and conserved areas, covering 30% of terrestrial land and inland water by 2030, that are well-connected, ecologically representative, and of significance to biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services.

About the Audit

This independent assurance report was prepared by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada on establishing terrestrial protected and conserved areas. Our responsibility was to provide objective information, advice, and assurance to assist Parliament in its scrutiny of the government's management of resources and programs and to conclude on whether the establishment of terrestrial protected and conserved areas complied in all significant respects with the applicable criteria.

All work in this audit was performed to a reasonable level of assurance in accordance with the Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001—Direct Engagements, set out by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada (CPA Canada) in the CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance.

The Office of the Auditor General of Canada applies the Canadian Standard on Quality Management 1—Quality Management for Firms That Perform Audits or Reviews of Financial Statements, or Other Assurance or Related Services Engagements. This standard requires our office to design, implement, and operate a system of quality management, including policies or procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards, and applicable legal and regulatory requirements.

In conducting the audit work, we complied with the independence and other ethical requirements of the relevant rules of professional conduct applicable to the practice of public accounting in Canada, which are founded on fundamental principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality, and professional behaviour.

In accordance with our regular audit process, we obtained the following from entity management:

- confirmation of management's responsibility for the subject under audit
- acknowledgement of the suitability of the criteria used in the audit
- confirmation that all known information that has been requested, or that could affect the findings or audit conclusion, has been provided
- confirmation that the audit report is factually accurate

Audit objective

The objective of this audit was to determine whether Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada were on track to establish protected and conserved areas covering 25% of terrestrial land and inland water by 2025, planning for 30% by 2030, that are well-connected, ecologically representative, and of significance to biodiversity and ecosystem functions.

Scope and approach

Environment and Climate Change Canada identified 8 specific programs that contribute to the 25% by 2025 and 30% by 2030 goals, while Parks Canada identified 5 specific programs:

Environment and Climate Change Canada programs	Parks Canada programs
1. Protected Areas Program—terrestrial establishment (migratory bird sanctuaries / national wildlife areas) 2. Protected Areas and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures Recognition Program 3. Natural Heritage Conservation Program 4. Ecological Gifts Program 5. Nature Agreements 6. Indigenous-Led Area-Based Conservation Program / Target 1 Challenge 7. North American Waterfowl Management Plan 8. Old Growth Nature Fund	1. National parks and national park reserves 2. Freshwater national marine conservation areas 3. National urban parks 4. National Program for Ecological Corridors 5. Expansions of national parks or national park reserves

The audit team gathered and analyzed evidence for each of these programs through document review, including the 2 federal organizations' documents and correspondence, records of engagement with Indigenous governments and organizations and other interested parties, expert recommendations, and interviews with federal officials and external experts.

We undertook data analysis of Environment and Climate Change Canada's 2024 Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database, which we obtained on May 7, 2025. This data represented the most up-to-date information available for our audit period. The database included 20,430 entries, including 19,512 for "terrestrial / freshwater" and 918 for "marine." The team confirmed the accuracy of the database using a representative sampling of 23 protected and conserved areas in the database sufficient for a confidence level of at least 90% that the margin of error was no greater than +10%.

We used geographical data analysis on the database for all area-based calculations in this report. This allowed us to compute the reported values of the number of square kilometres covered by terrestrial protected and conserved areas. Our analyses accounted for potential overlaps across areas so that there is no area that is double counted.

This audit did not examine the management of protected and conserved areas following their establishment or recognition.

It also did not audit the establishment of marine and coastal protected and conserved areas, as this was the subject of a separate audit.

Criteria

We used the following criteria to conclude against our audit objective:

Criteria	Sources
Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada plan and establish protected and conserved areas to meet targets that contribute to conserving 25% of land and inland water by 2025 and contribute to 30% by 2030.	• Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations, 2022 • Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy: Halting and Reversing Biodiversity Loss in Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024 • Policy on Results, Treasury Board, 2016 • Framework for the Management of Risk, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2010 • Guidance to Departments on the Management and Reporting of Horizontal Initiatives, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2018 • Horizontal Initiative: Enhanced Nature Legacy for Canada, 2022–2023 Departmental Results Report
Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada plan and establish terrestrial protected and conserved areas that: • are well-connected • are ecologically representative • protect and conserve areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services • recognize and respect the rights of Indigenous peoples through collaboration	• Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations, 2022 • Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy: Halting and Reversing Biodiversity Loss in Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024 • Horizontal Initiative: Enhanced Nature Legacy for Canada, 2022–2023 Departmental Results Report

Period covered by the audit

The audit covered the period from April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2025. This is the period to which the audit conclusion applies. However, to gain a more complete understanding of the subject matter of the audit, we also examined certain matters that preceded the start date of this period.

Date of the report

We obtained sufficient and appropriate audit evidence on which to base our conclusion on September 8, 2025, in Ottawa, Canada.

Audit team

This audit was completed by a multidisciplinary team from across the Office of the Auditor General of Canada led by Susan Gomez, Principal. The principal has overall responsibility for audit quality, including conducting the audit in accordance with professional standards, applicable legal and regulatory requirements, and the office's policies and system of quality management.

Recommendations and Responses

Responses appear as they were received by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

In the following table, the paragraph number preceding the recommendation indicates the location of the recommendation in the report.

Recommendation	Response
32. Environment and Climate Change Canada should track and report changes in Canada's protected and conserved areas from year to year, including adding, expanding, removing, or reducing areas, to better inform Canadians and parliamentarians about changes over time, the reasons for those changes, and progress towards the 30% by 2030 target.	Environment and Climate Change Canada's response. Agreed. Environment and Climate Change Canada will work with data providers, including provincial and territorial governments, to explore improvements to the current approach to reporting to better inform Canadians and Parliamentarians about the changes of protection from year to year and progress towards the 30x30 target by April 2028.
33. Environment and Climate Change Canada, in collaboration with partners, should implement a verification system for information on protected and conserved areas provided for national reporting to increase assurance on accuracy and completeness of the information and to provide transparency for Canadians.	Environment and Climate Change Canada's response. Agreed. Environment and Climate Change Canada will work with partners through the pan-Canadian process for protected and conserved areas in Canada to collaboratively develop an audit function of areas in CPCAD by December 2028.
43. As the lead department for Canada's response to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Environment and Climate Change Canada, working with Parks Canada and other partners, should develop a coordinated overall plan to establish protected and conserved areas covering 30% by 2030 that considers ecological connectivity, representation, and coverage of areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem function and services, for both terrestrial land and inland water in Canada.	Environment and Climate Change Canada's response. Agreed. Environment and Climate Change Canada will engage with other federal departments, provinces and territories, Indigenous peoples and other landowners to develop a national plan for protected and conserved areas for 30% by 2030, to be published by December 2026. Parks Canada's response. Agreed. Parks Canada will work with Environment and Climate Change Canada and other partners, to develop a coordinated plan to reach the 2030 targets, including consideration of ecological connectivity, representation and areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, for both terrestrial and inland water. This plan will also include how Parks Canada intends to support these targets while respecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Recommendation	Response
46. Environment and Climate Change Canada and Parks Canada should develop indicators and report on results that reflect Canada's progress towards qualitative elements under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, including ecological connectivity, representation, and coverage of areas of importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, for both terrestrial land and inland water.	Environment and Climate Change Canada's response. Agreed. Environment and Climate Change Canada will explore opportunities to build additional qualitative elements into the Canadian Environmental Sustainability Indicators' Canada's conserved areas indicator. This includes engaging with the Science and Technology Branch on the feasibility of a connectivity indicator. It also includes engaging with the Key Biodiversity Area Canada Coalition regarding indicators on coverage of areas of importance for biodiversity. Expected completion date: August 2027 Parks Canada's response. Agreed. Parks Canada recognizes that reaching the 30x30 targets must be undertaken with an intent to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. Parks Canada will work with Environment and Climate Change Canada to better report progress on the qualitative elements of protected and conserved areas including ecological connectivity, representivity and ecosystem services.

Appendix—Text Descriptions of Exhibits

Here are the text descriptions of the exhibits.

Exhibit 3—Canada’s protected and conserved land and inland water is managed by multiple parties—Text description

This pie chart shows:

- 57.3% is under provincial and territorial management
- 33.5% is under federal management
- 8.0% is under management by multiple ownership
- 1.2% is under private (0.7%), Indigenous (0.4%), municipal management (less than 0.1%), or not reported (0.1%)

Note: The calculation is based on square kilometres in 2024.

Source: Based on information from the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database, Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024

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Exhibit 4—There was a gap between the 2025 target and the percentage of Canada’s terrestrial areas protected and conserved as of December 2024—Text description

This chart shows the progress in the percentage of terrestrial protected and conserved areas in Canada compared with 3 targets. The targets are:

- 17% established by 2020, set by the 2010 Aichi Biodiversity Targets
- 25% established by 2025, set by the 2019 Speech from the Throne
- 30% established by 2025, set by the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework

The progress was as follows:

- 2000: established 5.9%
- 2005: established 7.2%
- 2010: established 8.3%
- 2015: established 10.0%
- 2020: established 12.8%
- 2024: established 13.8%

There was a gap of 11.2 percentage points between the 2024 data and the 2025 target.

Source: Based on information from the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database, Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024

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