



Environment and Climate Change Canada

Species at Risk, Nature Conservation and Nature-Based Solutions Survey for the Canadian Wildlife Service

Executive Summary
March 2021

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a national survey conducted with 2,006 Canadians using an online panel of Canadian households. The survey was conducted from December 3 to December 10, 2020.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Enquête sur les espèces menacées d'extinction, la conservation de la nature et les solutions naturelles pour le Service canadien de la faune

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Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Nadeau", is centered within a rectangular area that has a light gray, dotted background.

Rick Nadeau, President
Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

Executive Summary

Background and Research Objectives

One of the Government of Canada's top priorities is nature conservation, which includes protected areas, species at risk and nature-based solutions to climate change. With the \$1.3 billion historic investment in Nature Legacy in Budget 2018, there is an increased need to communicate effectively on these topics and to understand the public's attitudes, opinions and beliefs, both to create a benchmark but also to gather insights for policy and communication decisions.

Ultimately, this research assesses Canadians' views on these priorities. In other words, the research validates whether Canadians are making the link between nature-based solutions and climate change mitigation, in order to develop a communications approach to inform Canadians about this. The results will help to better develop outreach and communication strategies for species at risk. Finally, the results will also help to better understand how Canadians value and prioritize nature conservation.

This research aimed to identify the proportion of Canadians who are not in support of establishing protected areas and recovering species at risk, compared to those who are, as well as explored why they are not in support of these initiatives.

Methodology

Report findings are based on a non-probability sample, as respondents had volunteered to participate in online surveys using an online panel. The data have been weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the Canadian general population. As the sample is based on those who initially self-selected for participation in the online panel, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated. All research work was conducted in accordance with the professional standards established by the Government of Canada Public Opinion Research Standards.

Data collection occurred between December 3 and December 10, 2020. A total of 2,006 surveys were completed using a stratified random sampling approach within the online panel of Canadian households. For this study, quotas by province were established to generate sufficient data regionally for robust analysis. Data was monitored to aim for a 50/50 gender split in each province, and that no specific age cohort was under-represented. The equivalent margin of error for a probability study would be +/-2.2%.

Summary of Research Findings

A. Nature-Based Solutions and Climate Change Mitigation

Importance of Nature, Concepts and Terms

Nearly 3 in 5 respondents (57%) specified that nature is *very important* to their personal well-being another 39% considered it *somewhat important*.

Respondents were presented with a list of nature-based concepts and asked to describe their level of familiarity with each. Respondents were most familiar with climate change (89% were *very or somewhat familiar*), followed by nature conservation (83%), greenhouse gas emissions (81%) and species at risk of extinction (78%). Familiarity decreases further for concepts like nature restoration (64%), biodiversity (63%), climate change adaptation (60%) and climate change mitigation (58%). Familiarity was at its lowest when it came to international environment agreements (50%) and nature-based climate solutions (43%).

Government of Canada Environmental Initiatives

Across a list of Government of Canada environmental initiatives, respondents were most aware of the banning of certain types of single use plastics by 2021 (76% were either *very or somewhat aware*). This was closely followed by initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (67%) and ensuring carbon tax or cap and trade systems exist across Canada (61%). Awareness falls below 60% for initiatives such as the initiative to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 (57%), initiatives to restore important ecosystems (48%), to ensure pollution pricing (48%) and to introduce the clean fuel standard (44%). Among the initiatives presented, awareness was the lowest (37%) for the initiative to protect 25% of Canada's lands and 25% of its oceans by 2025.

Nature-Based Solutions Knowledge

Respondents were presented with the definition of “Nature-Based Solutions” and were asked how realistic several statements appeared to be based on that definition. Respondents felt that the most realistic solution was trees capturing carbon from the air and storing it to reduce the amount of carbon in the air (79%), followed by farmers using cover crops to prevent erosion to help to build carbon in the soil (65%), and having large enough amounts of carbon captured and stored by trees and plants to help reduce Canada’s greenhouse gas pollution (55%).

Based on previous knowledge, 81% of respondents agree (*very and somewhat agree*) that Nature-Based Solutions focus on protecting, restoring, and sustainably managing nature to help solve challenges to society, and 75% agree Nature-Based Solutions help reduce impacts from extreme weather events, such as flooding.

Nature Conservation Concepts and Definitions

Respondents were asked to describe in their own words the concept of *nature conservation*. Respondents provided a diverse list of responses, mainly mentioning the *preservation of the environment* (14%) and the *preservation of nature or ecosystems* specifically (12%). These terms were followed by the *protection of a green space* (8%), the *management of forestry* specifically (8%), the *importance of reducing carbon footprints* (7%), the *reduction carbon emissions* (7%) and the *protection of species from extinction* (7%). Many respondents (37%) *did not know* what words they would use to explain the concept of *nature conservation*.

When presented with specific nature conservation definitions, 88% agree conservation refers to activities that help nature to recover from damage caused by human activity or natural disturbances, while 85% agreed conservation means allowing human activity that is low-impact, and managing it so that nature is not degraded or destroyed, and 74% agreed it refers to protecting nature exactly as it is, not allowing people to change it.

Benefits of Restored Wetlands

Respondents were asked to describe their level of familiarity with some benefits to nature of wetland restoration, and the revitalizing of their natural functions. Three quarters of respondents (74%) were *very or somewhat familiar* with the benefit that explains that restored wetlands can create food and habitat for birds, pollinators, and other animals. This was followed by the benefits that restored wetlands can reduce the risk and extent of flooding by soaking up excess water (63%) and that they can provide recreational and educational opportunities for people (61%). Respondents were least familiar (55%) with the benefit that explains that restored wetlands can capture and store carbon from the atmosphere.

Perceived Cost-Effective Actions to Fight Climate Change

Based on their previous knowledge, over 4 in 5 respondents (83%) assert that the action of planting and keeping a lot of mature trees in cities to clean the air is a cost-effective action (*very*

or *somewhat cost-effective*), while 72% say that investing in the protection or carbon-rich ecosystems, as well as restoring and enhancing wetlands are *cost-effective* actions.

B. Nature Conservation

Most respondents (87%) *strongly supported or supported* the federal government's commitment to protect and conserve 25% of land and freshwater by 2025, after reading the following text:

Since 2017, Canada has recognized additional land and freshwater protected and conserved areas equivalent in size to three times the size of Nova Scotia, and now protects 12.1% of our land and inland waters. In the September 2020 Speech from the Throne, the federal government re-iterated its commitment to protect and conserve 25% by 2025. This commitment would include the creation of new parks, wildlife conservation areas and other types of protected areas.

Funding and Management to Protect and Conserve Nature

Respondents were informed that provinces and territories control over 80% of Canada's land and inland waters. They were then asked to state their level of agreement with the federal government providing funding to provinces and territories in order to assist the creation of new parks and protected areas to advance the 25% target. Over 4 in 5 respondents (85%) *strongly or somewhat agreed* that the federal government should provide this funding to provinces and territories.

Following, respondents were asked to state their level of agreement with three approaches to ensuring that Canada can continue to have the necessary funding to manage and grow protected and conserved areas. Over 3 in 4 respondents (76%) *strongly or somewhat agreed* with the approach of offering greater federal tax benefits for Canadians who donate land for nature conservation purposes. This was followed by the federal government allowing taxpayer money to be invested in new financing mechanisms with specific environmental benefits (69%) and the prospect of raising money to expand nature conservation through a border tax of \$25 or less for foreign tourists (65%).

In terms of the roles the federal government could play to assist with environmental protection and biodiversity conservation, over 4 in 5 respondents (84%) *strongly or somewhat agreed* that the federal government should assist and provide funding to municipal governments to support biodiversity conservation at the local level. A similar proportion (81%) felt that the federal government should require improved land management practices. The lowest level of agreement

(76%) was that the federal government should enable greater involvement of Indigenous peoples in protecting nature.

Compensation for Environmental Damage

Survey participants were explained that some governments require that companies undertaking projects like mines and pipelines compensate for environmental damage caused by their project. They were also explained that compensation can be done by undertaking conservation projects, paying a company or a non-profit environmental organization to undertake a specific conservation project, or paying into a fund that supports conservation projects. Respondents were asked to provide their level of agreement with the idea of having the federal government develop an initiative requiring companies to compensate the damage to the environment caused by their projects as a condition of their federal project approval, to which 84% of respondents *strongly or somewhat agreed*. These respondents were then asked to select a single compensation approach from a list of alternatives. Support was highest for *companies to pay into a fund that supports conservation projects* (36%) and *requiring companies to pay non-profit environmental organizations to carry out conservation projects* (35%). Support reached 16% for the option that would require *companies to pay other companies to carry out conservation projects* and 14% supported the option that would require *companies undertake conservation projects themselves*.

Perceived Priorities for the Government of Canada to Protect Nature

Respondents were asked to indicate how much of a priority a list of environmental issues should be for the Government of Canada, using a scale of 1 to 10, with a rating of 10 being the highest priority. Support was highest (provided a rating from 7 to 10) for protecting natural habitats for wildlife (91%) and reducing water pollution (90%). These were closely followed by protecting Canada's National Parks and National Wildlife Areas (89%), reducing air pollution (86%), protecting endangered species (86%), and reducing garbage and waste (86%). Many felt that protecting endangered plant species (82%), fighting climate change (82%), and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (81%) were high priorities. Less respondents prioritized creating clean jobs (79%), creating more urban parks and green spaces (78%), creating new National Parks and National Wildlife Areas (75%) and creating green jobs (74%).

C. Species at Risk

Importance of Species at Risk

Respondents were made aware that there are currently 622 terrestrial and aquatic species at risk of extinction in Canada. They were then asked to rate the extent to which it is important to them personally that species at risk of extinction across Canada be protected. Most respondents (88%) indicated it is *very or somewhat important* to them personally that species at risk are protected across Canada.

Support for Federal Government Focusing on Specific Species

Over 4 in 5 respondents (83%) *strongly or somewhat agreed* that the federal government should focus its species-specific conservation efforts and investments on a manageable number of ecologically important and wide-ranging priority species, such as caribou, greater sage-grouse, and wood bison. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate if they preferred that the Government of Canada spread resources across all species at risk of extinction or if it should focus on a select set of species and ecosystems. Respondents could also select a balance of both of these approaches or none of them at all. Over half of respondents (57%) felt that the federal government should adopt a balanced approach. Roughly one quarter of participants (24%) would prefer the federal government focuses on *spreading resources across all species at risk of extinction*, while 13% would prefer efforts be focused on a *select set of species and ecosystems*.

Additionally, 35% of respondents ranked *selecting species most at risk of extinction* as the number one criterium to use to prioritize resources in Canada to protect some species instead of others. The remaining criteria received similar rankings such that, overall, they are all equally important. This includes selecting species found only in Canada, (16%), species found all across Canada (instead of species that only live in one area or province/territory – 14%), species iconic or emblematic to Canada (i.e., polar bear, caribou – 13%), species with the best chance of recovery (12%), and species that contribute to global biodiversity (11%).

Respondents were also asked the extent to which they would agree with an approach that would have the government abandon recovery efforts for some species, in favour of focusing on other species that have a higher chance of survival. Over half of respondents (59%) *strongly or somewhat agreed* with the proposed approach.

Primary Responsibility for Species Protection

Respondents were asked to rank a list of key stakeholders based on who they believed should take primary responsibility for the recovery and protection of species at risk of extinction in Canada. Nearly two thirds of respondents (62%) ranked the federal government as having the primary responsibility for the recovery and protection of species at risk of extinction in Canada. The next most important stakeholder would be provincial and territorial governments, who were considered the primary choice by 18% of respondents.

Primary Responsibility of Species Located in One Province or Territory

Survey participants were also asked to rank a list of key stakeholders based on who they believed should take primary responsibility for the recovery and protection of a species if it is within one province or territory. Over a third of respondents (38%) ranked as number one the provincial or territorial government to have the primary responsibility for the recovery and protection of species primarily found within one province or territory, and 39% as the number two responsible. In addition, the federal government was considered the primary choice by 41% of respondents, and the secondary choice by 21% of respondents. In terms of average ranking, municipal governments ranked third and Indigenous communities ranked fourth. Individuals/landowners and private business were ranked lowest.

Protection of Species Over Commercial Development and Private Land

Over three quarters of respondents (78%) *strongly or somewhat agreed* that if an **animal** species at risk of extinction was found on land slated for commercial development bringing new employment opportunities, protection of these animal species should take priority over developing that land. Nearly as many (72%) felt the same way about a **plant** species at risk.

Over half (53%) of respondents who agreed with the protection of either animal or plant species on land slated for commercial development felt that the provincial government should be responsible for protecting the species. Slightly fewer felt the federal (48%) and the municipal governments (46%) should be responsible. To a lesser extent, respondents believed the landowner should be responsible (37%).

In terms of responsibility for ensuring the protection of endangered plant populations and their habitats if these are found on privately managed land, results suggest that the federal government (34%) is seen as the most popular stakeholder to take primary responsibility,

followed by property owners (30%), and the provincial government (20%). Considering the results for the number two responsible for protecting endangered plant populations, provincial governments take the lead at 42% preference.

Responsibility for Action to Protect Species

Respondents were asked to state their level of agreement with statements regarding increased responsibility with and regulatory action among stakeholders to protect species at risk in Canada. Over 4 in 5 respondents (84%) either *strongly agree or somewhat agree* that private natural resource and urban development companies should do more to protect species at risk of extinction. Similarly, 84% agree that the federal government should take stronger regulatory action and enforcement action, since it currently relies heavily on voluntary stewardship to protect species at risk of extinction.

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