

INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

Indigenous-Led Conservation

THE KEY TO SUSTAINING
BIODIVERSITY IN CANADA



Indigenous Nations are leading the biggest, most ambitious plans for sustaining lands and healthy communities across Canada.

These plans draw on thousands of years' of knowledge about the land and water. They reflect the understanding that if we care for the land, the land will care for us.



Indigenous-led approaches to conservation help animals and landscapes thrive. They also nourish Indigenous languages and cultures, support people's health and wellbeing, and ensure Indigenous knowledge systems are passed on to future generations.

Now this leadership is taking on new significance. Canada is hosting the UN biodiversity summit, where the international community will agree on new targets for addressing the extinction crisis. Canada has pledged to protect 30 percent of lands by 2030. Indigenous-led conservation offers the most effective way to achieve that goal. It also provides a global model for how to sustain lands, respect human rights, and strengthen communities.



Indigenous Nations are looking for countries to match our ambition.

- Eighty percent of the world's remaining biodiversity is on lands managed by Indigenous Peoples.
- When Indigenous Nations within Canada hold the pen on land-use decisions, they protect more than 60 percent of territories, on average.

With greater recognition and support, we can do what Indigenous Peoples have done for millennia: help sustain the planet.

Indigenous Nations Are Transforming Conservation

Indigenous Peoples have lived on this continent for millennia. We have a relationship with these lands and waters and deep knowledge about how to sustain them. Indigenous Nations are drawing on this enduring relationship to transform what conservation looks like in Canada.

“For too long, protecting nature has focused on building a fence to keep people out. The Indigenous approach puts people back in the picture as guardians. We have long recognized that land needs people and people need the land.”

–Ethel Blondin-Andrew

Indigenous-led approaches to stewardship reflect knowledge that’s often missing from mainstream society. Instead of viewing land as a resource to be exploited, Indigenous Peoples recognize that people and the land are interdependent: If we take care of the land, the land takes care of us.

Indigenous Nations create large-scale protected areas that reflect the need for ongoing stewardship. It isn’t about conservation per se, but about rebalancing our relationships with our lands and waters and respecting that the health of the lands and waters is fundamental to our own existence.

Indigenous Nations Lead the Creation of New Protected Areas

Indigenous Nations are at the forefront of protecting lands in the country.

- About one-third of existing national parks in Canada, for instance, were created through leadership or engagement of Indigenous Nations. Indigenous Nations have also driven the creation of provincial parks, national wildlife areas, and biosphere reserves.

Many Indigenous Nations are creating Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA). In an influential [report](#), the [Indigenous Circle of Experts](#) explained that IPCAs can take many forms, but they share these common elements:

- They are Indigenous-led.
- They represent a long-term commitment to conservation.
- They elevate Indigenous rights and responsibilities.

IPCAs reflect Indigenous laws and knowledge systems. They support Indigenous cultures and languages and foster community wellbeing. They also maintain healthy landscapes, animals and plants, and massive storehouses of carbon.



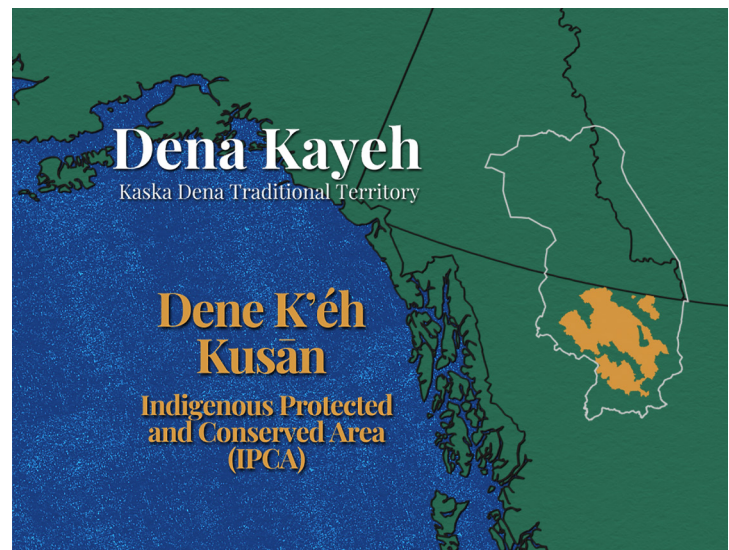
In the Northwest Territories, three large-scale IPCAs have been established since 2018. These IPCAs alone total over 50,000 sq km—about the size of Costa Rica.

- The Łutsël K'é Dene First Nation finalized Thaidene Néné (the Land of the Ancestors) in 2019. Spanning over 26,000 sq km of boreal forest, tundra, and caribou grounds east of the Great Slave Lake, it includes a national park and a territorial park. It is one of the largest protected areas in North America.
- The Dehcho First Nations passed a Dene law in 2018 creating the Edézhzié Dehcho Protected Area, then finalized a partnership with Canada to also designate it as a National Wildlife Area. Edézhzié holds great significance for Dehcho culture and identity. It is home to headwater lakes, mature spruce forests, vibrant wetlands, supporting 36 mammal and nearly 200 bird species.
- The K'asho Got'ine northwest of Yellowknife led the protection of Ts'udé Niljné Tuyeta as an Indigenous and Territorial Protected Area. The area includes wetlands that filter millions of litres of water a day and provide nesting grounds for ducks, geese, and loons. The K'asho Got'ine continue to rely on the moose, beaver, muskrat and fish in Tuyeta. Mountain and boreal woodland caribou are also found in the IPCA along with other species at risk, including peregrine falcon, grizzly bear, wolverine, and the short-eared owl.

Momentum Is Building

Scores of Indigenous Nations are in the process of creating additional **Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA)**. Taken together, these areas could protect over 500,000 sq km.

- Over **25 IPCA proposals were funded** by the federal government and more than 20 capacity investments were made in 2019 as part of Canada's strategy for meeting biodiversity commitments.
- In northern Manitoba, for instance, four Indigenous governments have proposed protecting 50,000 sq km of the **Seal River Watershed**. The watershed holds 1.7 billion tonnes of carbon—equivalent to 8 years' worth of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada.
- The Kaska Dena in northern British Columbia are leading the creation of Dene K'éh Kusān, an area the size of Switzerland free of roads, power lines, and development. The Kaska have lived on these lands for nearly 8,000 years, and their vision for the protected area will nurture Kaska language and culture and support sustainable economic opportunities.



The Dene K'éh Kusān Indigenous Protected Area proposed by the Kaska Dena. It spans 40,000 square kilometres in northern British Columbia. Credit: Dena Kayeh Institute

Indigenous Stewardship Sustains Intact Healthy Lands

From Indigenous perspectives, IPCAs thrive and flourish best when people are on the ground to steward them and care for them. What helps guarantee the longevity of IPCAs is having people on the land, serving as eyes and ears. Often those people include Indigenous Guardians.

Guardians are trained experts who manage lands and waters on behalf of their Nations. They monitor animals and plants, manage protected areas, support cultural programs, and conduct research on climate impacts. They combine ancestral knowledge and Indigenous law with western tools to track changes in water temperature, animal migration, permafrost, and other impacts.

The Guardians movement is growing rapidly. The number of Guardians programs has tripled in the last five years. Now there are over 120 First Nations Guardians program operating across the country.

Many Guardians programs help monitor IPCAs.

- The Dehcho First Nations led the establishment of the Edézhzié Dehcho Protected Area/ National Wildlife Area in 2018. Members of the Dehcho Guardians co-manage the site, testing water quality and monitoring woodland caribou, migratory birds, and cultural sites.
- Northwest of Yellowknife, K'asho Got'ine Guardians are clearing trails, monitoring wildlife, water and permafrost thaw, and supporting culture and language programs in the recently created Ts'udé Niljné Tuyeta Indigenous and Territorial Protected Area.



A sample of some of the Guardians programs operating across the country. Source: [ECCC](#)

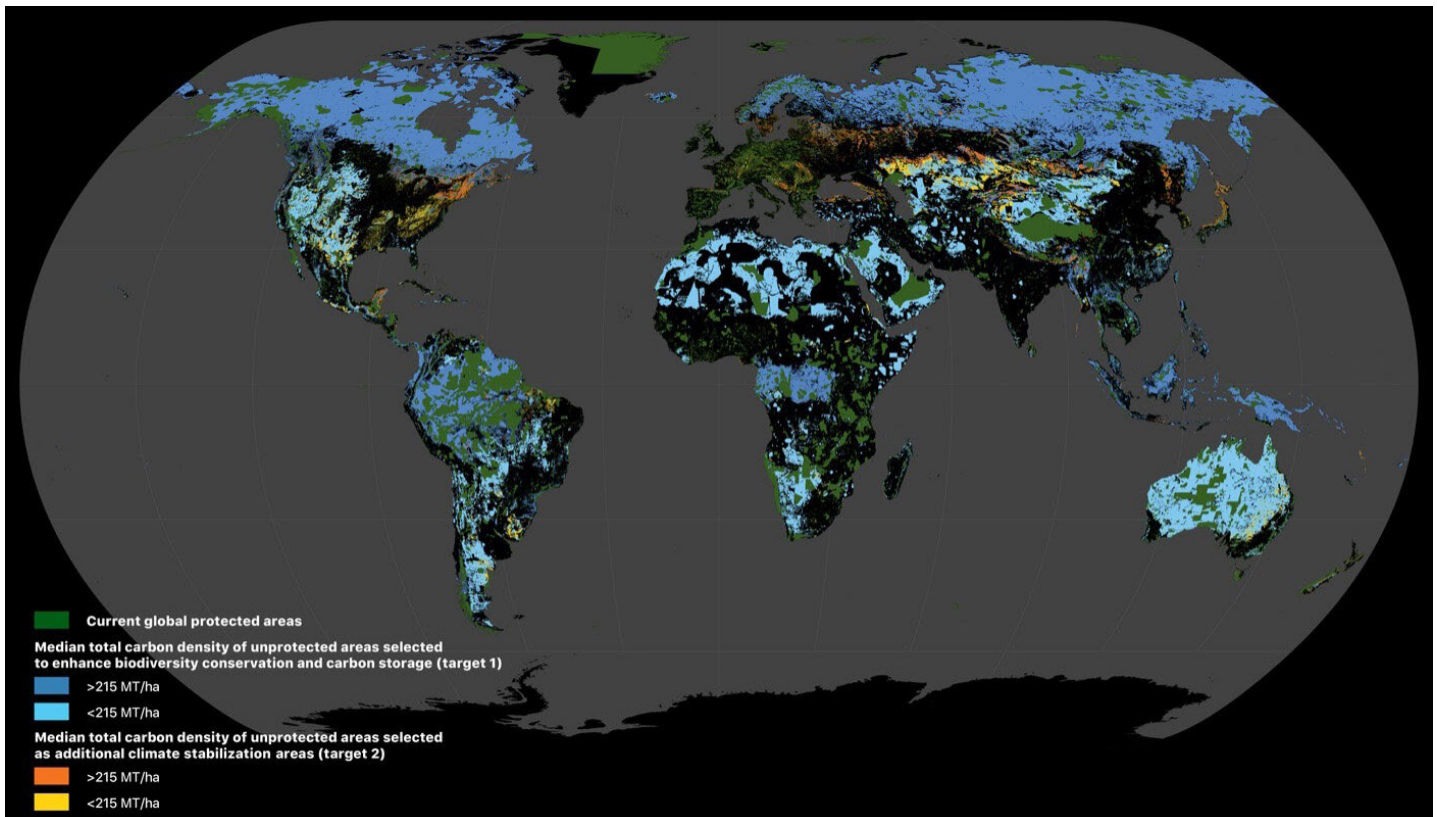
“We are sustaining our traditional territory not only for us, but for the whole world. We are here protecting Mother Earth in order for the rest of the world to live on her.”

—Gloria Enzoe, Former Ni Hat’ni Dene Guardian, Lutsël K’é Dene First Nation

Caring for Globally Significant Lands

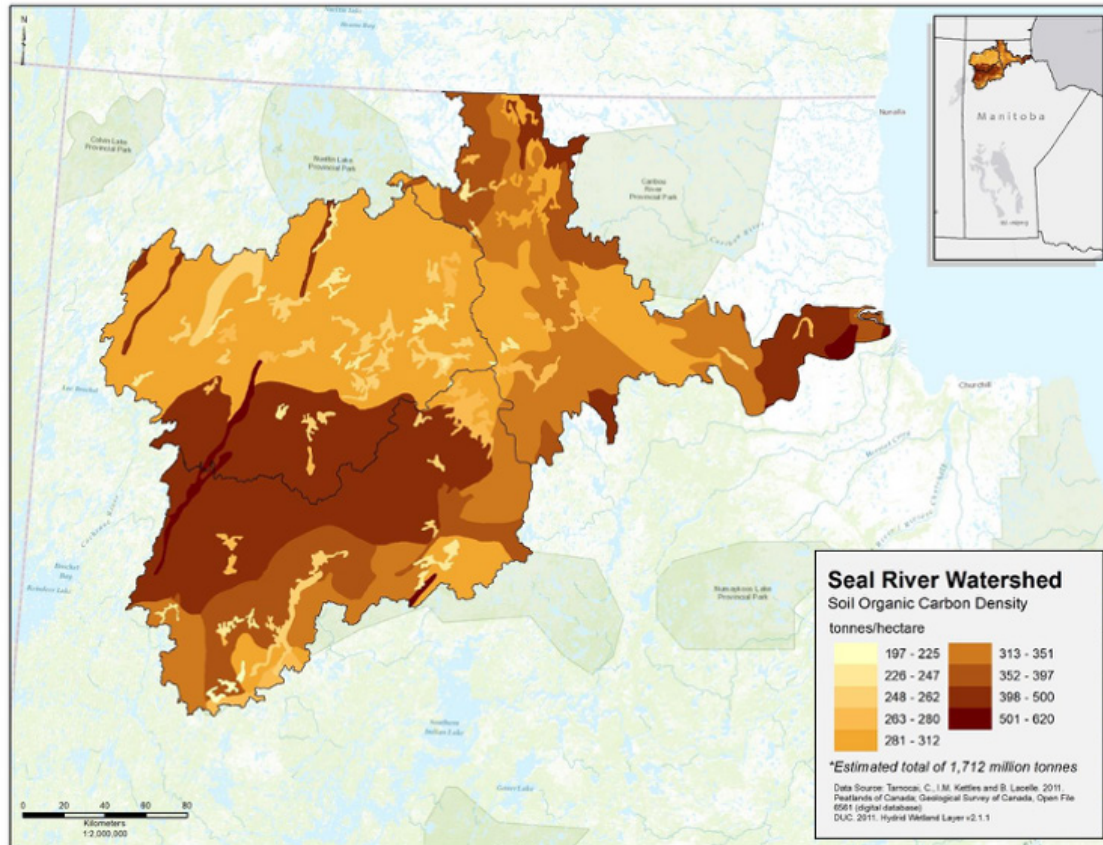
Over 600 Indigenous communities are located within the Boreal Forest in Canada. This boreal region is the largest intact forest left on the planet—larger than the Amazon Rain Forest. It is home to 25 per cent of the world’s wetlands, over 1.5 million lakes, and more surface freshwater than anywhere else on Earth. These vibrant lands and waters sustain healthy populations of large mammals that have lost range elsewhere. They also serve as the nesting ground for billions of migratory birds that migrate across the hemisphere, pollinating and spreading seeds as they go.

IPCAs conserve many ecologically significant areas within the boreal, ensuring they continue to support an abundance of life. A [University of British Columbia study](#) looked at land and species data from Canada, Australia, and Brazil and found that the number of birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles were highest on lands managed by Indigenous communities.



Interdependence of carbon and biodiversity. Copyright © 2020 The Authors, some rights reserved; exclusive licensee American Association for the Advancement of Science.

The boreal in Canada also stores an enormous amount of carbon: equivalent to up to 36 years' worth of global carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels. By conserving large areas, Indigenous Nations are keeping carbon in place and helping the world reduce the threat of unchecked climate change.



Four First Nations are working to create the Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected Area, 50,000 square kilometres of intact lands in northern Manitoba. The watershed holds 1.7 billion tonnes of carbon—equivalent to 8 years' worth of ggh emissions in Canada. Credit: [SRWA/DUC](#)

Achieving Shared Goals

Indigenous Nations are offering a transformative model for conservation—one that sustains the land, respects rights and responsibilities, and nurtures language, culture, and well-being. This is a path out of climate and biodiversity crises: if we take care of the land, the land takes care of us.

The Government of Canada recognizes that partnerships with Indigenous Peoples are central to implementing its biodiversity strategy and achieving the goal of protecting of 30 per cent of lands by 2030. It has begun to support both IPCAs and Guardians. Now it's time to build on that foundation by providing more long-term funding and committing to innovative financing tools, such as proposed Project Finance for Permanence efforts. These kinds of respectful partnerships will ensure we create a better shared future for all.

The Indigenous Leadership Initiative is a network dedicated to supporting Indigenous Nations in honouring the cultural responsibility to lands and fostering Indigenous Nationhood.

The Indigenous Leadership Initiative

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