

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE BOREAL IN THE BALANCE: SECURING THE FUTURE OF CANADA'S BOREAL REGION



Photo: Fritz Mueller

The Boreal. Synonymous with the north. Evocative of vast expanses of wild lands and waters. At the heart of our Canadian identity.

Canada's Boreal region represents an unprecedented global conservation opportunity.

Canada's Boreal region is a place of immense beauty and power. It is home to abundant populations of wildlife – including billions of migrating songbirds, some of the largest caribou herds in the world, and the predators who depend on them. Its forests, lakes and wetlands purify our water, produce oxygen, and moderate our climate – vital ecosystem services upon which we depend for life. Home to over 600 Aboriginal communities, it is also a source of spiritual renewal and economic livelihood for many Canadians.

Representing 25% of the world's remaining intact forests, the Canadian Boreal is one of the last places left on earth that can maintain a fully functioning ecosystem capable of sustaining such abundance.

The region also contains a wealth of natural resources that sustain thousands of jobs, many communities, and contribute billions to the Canadian economy. Over the years, human and industrial developments have advanced throughout the region. The growing pace of these forestry, oil and gas, hydroelectric, agricultural and mining developments could dramatically alter the fragile balance in the region over the next five years.

As a result, Canada's Boreal region offers a tremendous opportunity for conservation at a large scale, but there is a diminishing window of time to plan for conservation solutions.

The Canadian Boreal Initiative was established in response to this unique opportunity and challenge. In addition to supporting conservation projects in every Boreal province and territory, the CBI convened the Boreal Leadership Council – an unlikely alliance of resource companies, First Nations and conservation groups – to develop a national vision for conservation of Canada's Boreal region.

The result was the Boreal Forest Conservation Framework, launched in December 2003. The Framework's goal is to conserve the natural, cultural and sustainable economic values of the Boreal region by protecting about half of the region in a comprehensive network of protected areas and promoting world-leading industrial practices on the remainder of the landscape where appropriate.

The Framework represents a balanced conservation solution that offers the opportunity to meet ecological objectives, uphold the rights and interests of Aboriginal peoples and accommodate appropriate sustainable development. It is a national vision and goal for the region as a whole, which sees land use planning as a key mechanism to develop more specific solutions on the ground that reflect regional conditions and priorities.

The Framework is intended to provide a forum for dialogue and engagement among those with an interest and role in shaping the future of the region. In that same spirit, this report assesses the status of Boreal conservation in five key areas. It also highlights exciting new approaches and opportunities emerging across the region. Recognizing the important roles that all parties have in advancing conservation solutions, the report also outlines recommended priorities for action.

STATUS OF CONSERVATION IN CANADA'S BOREAL

Land Use Planning

As envisioned in the Framework, the goal of land use planning is to achieve integrated conservation solutions – including the establishment of new protected areas and the determination of appropriate development activities – in advance of new industrial developments wherever possible. Achieving this goal will require the commitment and participation of all stakeholders. Governments especially have a leadership role to play in establishing comprehensive, conservation-based planning processes, and ensuring that they occur before land use decisions are made.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Nearly 60% of the Boreal region is subject to existing and proposed land use planning exercises that will play a significant role in shaping its future. While a number of these exercises reflect efforts to protect the natural, cultural and sustainable economic values of the existing landscape in advance of industrial allocations, none of the existing processes fully incorporate the principles articulated in the Framework.

While nearly every Boreal jurisdiction requires some form of land use planning in advance of forestry activities, the same requirements are generally not in place for the mining and energy sectors.

There is considerable variation between jurisdictions in both establishing conservation objectives prior to development, and their degree of commitment to integrated land use planning. In the northern territories of the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, land use plans are mandated under the terms of comprehensive land claim and self-government agreements with Aboriginal peoples. Among the provinces, British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan have made significant commitments to integrated land-use planning.

Several land use planning exercises offer significant opportunities for integrated conservation solutions over the next three years – including the East Side Planning Initiative in Manitoba and efforts to plan for protected areas in advance of new developments in the Northwest Territories.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing the tremendous value of planning proactively for conservation, it is recommended that:

- As a priority, governments initiate comprehensive conservation-based land use planning exercises before permitting new industrial developments in unallocated regions.
- Conservation organizations, Aboriginal peoples and industry work with governments in good faith to identify opportunities to expand the scope of existing land use planning processes in the allocated portions of Boreal region to apply conservation-based planning principles.



Photo: Fritz Mueller

One of the most important tests of the land use planning process in Canada's Boreal region is occurring in the Mackenzie Valley of the Northwest Territories,

where proposals are being considered for a major energy pipeline through largely pristine landscape that is also subject to land claims negotiations with First Nations. In late December 2004, the federal government announced that it would contribute \$9 million — an estimated one-half of the costs to support collaborative efforts between various levels of government, communities, environmental organizations and industry to support a conservation planning process intended to protect 16 eco-regions in the Mackenzie Valley in the face of increasing exploration and development. Environmental non-government organizations and the Government of the NWT have also made funding commitments.

Establishing Protected Areas

Emerging scientific findings underscore the critical role that protected areas play in maintaining ecological integrity. These areas need to be large enough to maintain viable populations of native species, key ecological processes and ecosystem resilience to both short- and long-term environmental changes. Establishing these areas at a large scale is particularly important in the Boreal, given the vital role of large natural disturbances such as fire and the extensive intact landscapes required by Boreal species such as caribou. As a result, the Framework calls for the protection of at least one-half the region in a comprehensive network of protected areas.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Nearly 10 percent of the Boreal region is protected from industrial development. About 5.8 percent of the Boreal region is permanently protected from industrial activity, and 3.6 percent is under interim protection — meaning that their ecological integrity and associated cultural values are protected on a temporary basis, although they lack permanent legislated designation.

While most jurisdictions have protected areas programs in place, they have not yet established conservation goals and planning initiatives specific to — or at the scale required — for the Boreal, given its unique attributes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the important role that protected areas will play in securing the future of the Boreal region, it is recommended that:

- Governments continue to work to meet their existing commitments to establishing protected areas.
- Governments begin to develop new protected area goals for the Boreal region reflecting both our emerging understanding of conservation biology and the unique opportunity in the Boreal.
- Drawing on leading examples, governments, conservation organizations, Aboriginal peoples and industry continue to demonstrate creativity and innovation in setting aside interim protected areas within their spheres of activity.

Since 2002, several large-scale announcements of interim protected areas in the Boreal region have resulted from collaborative work among Governments, First Nations, local communities and conservation organizations, such as the Northwest Territory's Edézhie/ Horn Plateau area, and the Poplar/Nanowin Rivers Park Reserve in Manitoba. Combined with the 2002 federal commitment to significantly expand Canada's national parks system, these are encouraging signs that more of Canada's Boreal region will become permanently protected in coming years.



Photo: PhotoDisc

Creating Sustainable Development Practices

The Framework calls for appropriate, sustainable development activities on the Boreal landscape outside of protected areas to generate economic benefits and sustain the ecological, cultural and social values of the region. In part, the extent of progress by companies towards higher standards of sustainability can be measured through the development and implementation of independent third-party performance standards. For this report, relevant information was reviewed about such standards for the forestry, mining, oil and gas and hydro-electricity sectors – the most important industrial actors in the Boreal region.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Some leading companies in each major industrial sector have initiated projects to improve their environmental and social impacts.

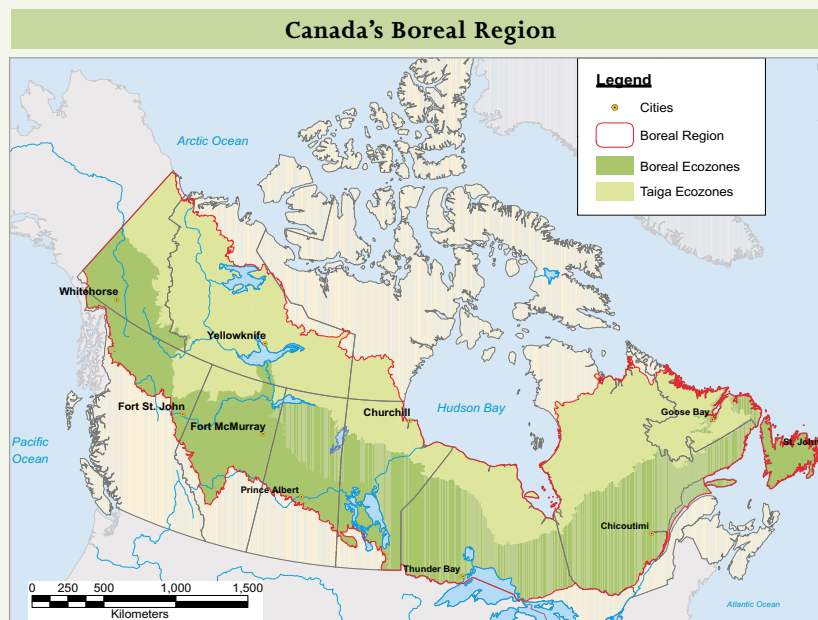
Of all the sectors active in the Boreal region, forestry has the largest industrial footprint and has made the most progress towards the development and implementation of credible performance standards. However, much remains to be done to ensure that independently verified performance standards are developed and applied more broadly.

The mining, oil and gas and hydro-electric development sectors all lag behind the forestry sector in creating and implementing sustainable development standards and practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the important contribution that best management practices and credible third-party performance standards can make to conservation in the Boreal, it is recommended that:

- Resource industries increase efforts to define, implement and participate in third-party verification of standards for world leading sustainable development practices in the Boreal region.
- Industries promote the business case for responsible and innovative conservation-oriented activities in the Boreal among corporate partners and investors.
- Conservation organizations promote financial and economic incentives to support responsible and innovative conservation-oriented activities in the Boreal region.
- Governments develop financial and economic incentives for leading edge sustainable development practices in consultation with industry, conservation organizations and Aboriginal communities.



Aboriginal Peoples

Aboriginal people are working to sustain their natural environment and to overcome the many barriers that have historically excluded them from benefiting from resource developments within their traditional territories. The Framework respects the lands, rights and ways of life of Aboriginal people, and is committed to ensuring their meaningful involvement in resource management and conservation planning efforts. It further acknowledges and respects the leadership role of Aboriginal people on their traditional lands.

MAJOR FINDINGS

In the Boreal provinces, land claims and treaty entitlement negotiations towards greater Aboriginal control over resource management and conservation planning decisions have been slow. Available evidence suggests that the level of consultation with Aboriginal peoples varies significantly among and even within jurisdictions.

In the northern territories, Aboriginal people are more able to control the direction and the outcomes of resource management and conservation planning decisions under the terms of land claims settlements.

While consultation and accommodation are important steps, achieving the goals of meaningfully involving Aboriginal people in resource management and conservation planning decisions and respecting the leadership role of Aboriginal people on their traditional lands will require a significant reorientation of the present relationships between governments, Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In working to ensure the meaningful involvement of Aboriginal peoples in land use planning and resource management activities, it is recommended that:

- Governments, industry and conservation organizations respect the leadership role and the rights of Aboriginal peoples to maintain their traditional ways of life and to exercise self-determination in determining the use of lands and resources within their traditional territories
- Drawing on leading examples, industry work cooperatively with Aboriginal peoples to create sustainable partnership ventures that benefit local communities and build Aboriginal capacity.
- Governments implement policies and practices that empower Aboriginal communities and institutions to assume responsibilities for conservation and the sustainable management of resources within their traditional lands in the Boreal region.
- Governments support and promote equitable sharing of benefits from resource development with Aboriginal peoples on their traditional lands (including through impact-benefits and resource revenue sharing agreements).



Mike Beedell Photography

Furthering Scientific and Traditional Aboriginal Knowledge

The Framework identifies the collection and use of scientific and traditional knowledge about the ecology of the Boreal region as fundamental to establishing effective conservation and sustainable development practices. This report uses as an indicator of key data collection the gathering of information in five areas also determined to be of critical importance by the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers for sustainable forest management: forest inventory, biodiversity, protected areas, ecosystem change, and the economic value of non-timber products and ecosystem services.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Some promising data-gathering initiatives are underway by governments and by government/ industry/ academic consortia. These should provide valuable new information on items such as measuring changes to forest ecosystems over time.

At the same time, significant gaps exist in the knowledge base needed for land-use planning and management in the Boreal region. Of particular concern is the inadequacy of biodiversity data to monitor how species interact with each other and the landscape — a deficiency that severely limits capacity to develop ecologically sustainable land-use plans for the region. Also of concern is the limited documentation and integration of traditional ecological knowledge into land use decision-making to date.

Most datasets that are publicly offered are only available in summary form, greatly restricting the utility of the information for conservation planning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the importance of western scientific and traditional knowledge in improving understanding and management of the Boreal region, it is recommended that:

- Governments, industry, conservation organizations and Aboriginal peoples collaborate on scientific research and traditional ecological knowledge to increase general understanding of the ecological function and cultural importance of the Boreal region.
- Industry contribute resources and expertise to advance knowledge about the Boreal region.
- Governments improve monitoring of Boreal ecological integrity and ecosystem response to the cumulative impacts of development activities.
- Governments provide access to the complete datasets collected on the Boreal region to researchers and the public.



Photo: Tembec Inc.