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B.C. has second highest number of threatened ecosystems in Canada, as 41 per cent face collapse in U.S.: Studies

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The northern spotted owl, a critically endangered species in B.C.



A pair of recent studies — one American and one Canadian — has found a disturbing number of ecosystems in North America face collapse unless there's a significant conservation effort.

B.C. has the second highest number of threatened ecosystems in Canada after Ontario, according to a report earlier this year by a leading Canadian conservation group.

That study, by the Wildlife Conservation Society Canada, found this country has 315 globally threatened ecosystems that are ranked by **NatureServe** as vulnerable to collapse. Of those, 26 are deemed critical, including the Western Red Cedar/Salal Forest ecosystem in B.C. under threat from logging.

“If you ask the average person about threatened ecosystems they think of the Amazon or the Great Barrier Reef in Australia — and that’s great. But I think it’s important for people to realize we have globally threatened ecosystems here in Canada too,” said Daniel Kraus, director of national conservation for the Wildlife Conservation Society Canada.

The American report, by **NatureServe**, analyzed data from more than 1,000 scientists in the U.S. and Canada and found that 40 per cent of animals and 34 per cent of plants in the U.S. are at risk of extinction, while 41 per cent of ecosystems are facing collapse, meaning they won’t be able to sustain wildlife.

California, Texas and the southeastern U.S. are where the highest percentages of plants, animals and ecosystems are at risk, the report, published last month, found. Those areas are both the richest in terms of biodiversity in the country, but also where population growth has boomed in recent decades, and where human encroachment on nature has been harshest, said Wesley Knapp, the chief botanist at NatureServe.

Vulnerable ecosystems closer to home include the East Cascades Moist-Mesic Grand Fir — Douglas Fir Forest, in the eastern Cascade Mountains of Washington state and Oregon, and the Western Hemlock — Sitka Spruce Rainforest, found from central B.C. to California, according to the American study.

Kraus said another example of an endangered ecosystem shared by Canada and the U.S. is the Garry Oak ecosystem. Here it’s restricted to southwestern B.C. and is among the rarest in the province. These forests are threatened by urban development, industry, climate change and pests.

“Unfortunately, (the Garry Oak ecosystem) occurs in some of the most heavily settled areas of British Columbia. So there has been a lot of habitat loss ... and the other problem is we have removed Indigenous stewardship from those ecosystems. But we are starting to bring it back,” he said.

Kraus said protecting the Garry Oak habitat is important because of the biodiversity of animals and plants, the Indigenous cultural aspect and because of how it contributes to B.C.’s landscape and natural beauty. Kraus added that B.C. should consider specific endangered ecosystem legislation to protect those most at risk.

Another at-risk ecosystem in B.C. is the subalpine, where melting glaciers are under threat from climate change.

The problem is Canada, unlike the U.S., doesn’t have a national ecosystem classification system, says Patrick Henry, executive director of Nature Serve Canada.

Henry said most provinces and territories have their own classification systems. For example, B.C. has the Biogeoclimatic Ecosystem Classification, a research branch of the Forests Ministry.

Manitoba is the only province with specific legislation to deal with endangered species and ecosystems.

This has caused a lack of data, particularly in northern and Eastern Canada, and made it difficult to conserve threatened ecosystems, according to the Wildlife Conservation Society Canada.

However, a coalition of conservation groups, including NatureServe, experts and First Nations, is working to change that by mapping Key Biodiversity Areas. The [KBA Canada Coalition](#) identifies natural values of land to identify areas of high biodiversity so governments can make decisions about how to prevent further loss of wildlife.

Kraus added that many globally threatened ecosystems are important habitat for species at risk of extinction such as the northern spotted owl in B.C.

Last week, Canadian Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault recommended an emergency order to protect [the endangered northern spotted owl](#). Conservation groups say there are only four left in the wild in B.C., and they're at risk because of logging old-growth forest.

The B.C. and federal governments have committed to the [30X30 biodiversity targets](#), which mean conserving 30 per cent of land and water by 2030. Currently, only about 14 per cent is protected in B.C., so the government needs to more than double the amount of conserved land in seven years.

— *With files from Reuters*

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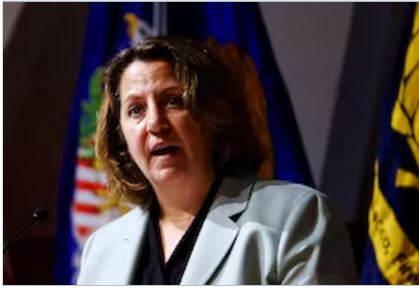
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