



**SDG 15** is our global commitment to protect, preserve and regenerate the world's terrestrial ecosystems.



COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATIONS  
OF CANADA

**The Learning  
Institute**

Many community foundations are exploring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within their planning, granting, convening, Vital Signs and more. This Fact Sheet is part of a series that focuses on specific SDGs to engage and inspire community foundations of all sizes to deepen their work around these goals.

## What is this approach?

The targets of SDG 15 include ending deforestation and desertification, protecting wildlife and natural habitats, combatting invasive species and incorporating conservation into government planning. Over a quarter of the world's species are threatened with extinction, and our efforts to protect biodiversity have stalled over the last five years (source). Humans have dramatically altered over 70% of all landscapes, resulting in massive biodiversity loss and the threat of mass extinction (source). However, there are signs of hope. Rates of deforestation are slowing, and governments worldwide are strengthening environmental legislation (source).

In Canada, at-risk species declined by 59% in less than 50 years between 1970 and 2016 (source). While the Government of Canada has committed to conserving 25% of land by 2025 (source), biodiversity across the country is threatened by climate change, invasive species and continued destruction of natural habitats (source).

### Canada's Biodiversity

Canada has:

- 9% of the world's forests, including about 270 million hectares of boreal forest
- 25% of the world's wetlands
- 37% of the world's total lake area
- 673 species of birds
- Some of the largest remaining herds of free-ranging caribou and other large mammals, such as polar bears

— CANADA VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEW 2018



*Conservation cannot move forward ethically or legally without the full involvement of the people on whose territory the conservation is happening.*

— KYLE ARTELLE,

CANADA WORKING TOWARDS NEW FUTURE FOR INDIGENOUS-LED CONSERVATION

Canada's national approach to SDG 15 is outlined in the Canadian Biodiversity Strategy and its subsequent frameworks and targets. Canada's Federal Sustainable Development Strategy also brings a focus to SDG 15, with targets for achieving sustainably managed lands and forests.

**The national lead on SDG 15 is Environment and Climate Change Canada, which oversees a national approach that incorporates:**

- Biodiversity protection, including the expansion of parks and protected areas.
- Sustainable forest management.
- Sustainability in the agricultural sector.
- Wetland conservation and restoration.
- Healthy and sustainably managed wildlife populations.
- Control of invasive species.



*Indigenous people currently manage or have tenure on 40% of the world's protected areas and remaining intact ecosystems. The deep connection to land and water that characterizes Indigenous cultures around the world suggests a natural alliance with conservationists working to protect those places.*

— CANADA WORKING TOWARDS NEW FUTURE FOR INDIGENOUS-LED CONSERVATION

Any effort to advance SDG 15 must recognize Indigenous peoples' rights to their traditional lands and territories and seek to align conservation with reconciliation. Indigenous people are the original inhabitants and stewards of this land. It is vital to recognize the harmful legacy of conservation practices that stripped them of their lands and rights, and the importance of working with Indigenous people as partners in protecting biodiversity ([source](#)). Canada's approach to SDG 15 incorporates the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was ratified in 2016, and became law in Canada in 2021, following the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ([Call to Action 43](#)). This means that conservation on Indigenous lands should involve them and respect their rights, including hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering ([source](#)).

Communities coast to coast to coast are connected to diverse ecosystems that create a sense of belonging and cultural identity, and that provide for diverse livelihoods and recreational activities. Local communities continue to care for their wildlife and natural environments.

#### Local approaches to SDG 15 include:

- Creating and managing community conservation areas.
- Buying and consuming products that do not destroy natural habitats.
- Planting and protecting trees in cities, towns and wilderness areas.
- Creating local wildlife corridors to allow species to move between natural habitats.
- Greening our cities and encouraging urban biodiversity, including plants and wildlife.
- Supporting Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) that are Indigenous-led and that value traditional knowledge and conservation techniques.

## Why is it important for grantmakers?

Canadian identities, communities and cultures are deeply connected to nature. Biodiversity and natural resources drive local and national economies. Almost 16 million people visited Canada's national parks in 2019–2020 ([source](#)), and in 2016 the forestry sector generated \$23 billion and directly supported over 200,000 jobs ([source](#)). A survey of over 2,000 Canadians in early 2021 found that the vast majority (94%) felt that “nature has helped them relieve stress and anxiety during the pandemic” and “about three-quarters said spending time outdoors has become more important than ever” ([source](#)).

Currently, Canada is taking action on SDG 15. Forest area as a proportion of total land area has remained stable at 38% ([source](#)), and Canada is meeting many of its biodiversity goals (including protecting 13% of terrestrial ecosystems and waterways by 2020 ([source](#))). Canadian grantmakers have contributed to these recent gains; SDG 15 is one of the best-funded goals, with grantmakers providing over \$225 million in 2016/2017 ([source](#)). However, challenges remain. The top factor for biodiversity loss in Canada is habitat degradation resulting from development and industrial activities. Community foundations will have a key role to play in achieving SDG 15 and ensuring that the growth and prosperity of our communities do not come at the expense of the natural environment and wildlife that we cherish.



*Canadian cities have doubled in size over the past century, destroying forests, draining wetlands, burying rivers and streams, and fragmenting habitats to make room for, well, all of us. And this isn't ancient history — 216,000 square kilometers of intact forest have been lost between 2000 and 2013 alone.*

— [NATURE-BASED CITIES](#)

While expanding cities have destroyed natural environments, scientists are realizing that urban landscapes can provide new habitats for plants and animals, including threatened and endangered species ([source](#)). Greening our cities and towns is one of the ways that grantmakers focused on urban areas can support SDG 15. For example, urban forests offer many benefits, including providing wildlife habitat, absorbing air pollution and greenhouse gases, protecting communities from climate change impacts (e.g., heatwaves) and improving mental health ([source](#)). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have sought refuge in packed city parks, drawing attention to the need for more green space and the value of natural environments in our towns and cities. More and more administrations are focusing on SDG 15 by incorporating biodiversity into their city plans and strategies, including Calgary’s biodiversity strategy, which “aims to be a compilation of best practices, policy implementation strategies, and ecosystem research tools with the goal of building upon existing environmental policies undertaken by the City for over twenty years” ([source](#)).

#### WORDS YOU SHOULD KNOW

##### **Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas**

Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA) 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

Determining the future of traditional territories is at the root of Indigenous Nationhood. With IPCAs, Indigenous Nations hold the pen when lines are drawn on the map, sit at the table when decisions are made and are on the ground caring for lands and waters through Indigenous Guardians programs.

— [INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE](#)



*Land Back is really about the decision-making power. It’s about self-determination for our Peoples here that should include some access to the territories and resources in a more equitable fashion, and for us to have control over how that actually looks.*

— [JESSE WENTE, OJIBWE](#)

[CHAIR OF CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS](#)

Grantmakers also have an opportunity to advance reconciliation through their SDG 15 initiatives by supporting Indigenous-led Land Back efforts. Funding towards SDG 15 initiatives must be evaluated through a reconciliation lens honouring the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girl Calls for Justice.

Indigenous communities are national leaders in establishing and managing conservation areas in partnership with the government, as well as through their own IPCAs. There is evidence that IPCAs can generate greater returns on investments, providing opportunities for impact investing from grantmakers ([source](#)). Most importantly, partnering with and supporting Indigenous Land Back efforts is an opportunity to promote Indigenous rights and land sovereignty, traditional stewardship of Indigenous lands, and the practice and transmission of Indigenous culture and knowledge ([source](#)). Traditional conservation has largely ignored Indigenous voices and sought to protect “wilderness areas” from any presence of people; Indigenous-led land conservation recognizes that people are part of nature, not separate from it, and a relationship with the land is vital.

At the national scale, [Environment Funders Canada](#) brings together 74 grantmakers, including eight community foundations, to learn from and support one another in their environmental grantmaking work.



*Where Indigenous Peoples are, is where there's the most intact biodiverse areas, probably even more so than parks as far as I've seen. (...) Indigenous Peoples do have their own conception of what nature-based solutions are... It's always about being on the land... being there, understanding, hearing what the land has to say about what's happening ... this is the most effective way to figure out a path forward.*

— DEBORAH MCGREGOR, ANISHINAABE FROM WHITEFISH RIVER FIRST NATION  
CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR IN INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, YORK UNIVERSITY

**At the local scale, community foundations have a long history of protecting and conserving local environments through environmental funds and other approaches:**

- The Centre Wellington Community Foundation partnered in the Green Legacy Program and planted 24,000 trees in the County of Wellington.
- In Quebec, the Eastern Townships Community Foundation has worked closely with government to create biodiversity endowment funds that recognize environment and ecosystems as an “integral part of the whole community picture.”
- The Niagara Community Foundation helped fund an outdoor classroom at the Glynn A. Green Public School that encourages children to connect to their environment as part of their learning and involved students and parents in the greening of their school.
- London Community Foundation’s Field of Interest Fund supports projects that focus on protecting, restoring and preserving the environment. The fund has granted to many organizations including ReForest London, Salthaven Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Centre, the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Carolinian Canada Coalition.
- The Whistler Community Foundation used the SDGs to host Vital Conversations in the community that explored key environmental topics linked to SDG 15, including climate change, ecological thinking, habitat destruction and species loss.

## Common principles to get started

Action on SDG 15 will look different for each community foundation based on the unique ecosystems their communities are connected to. SDG 15 creates a powerful opportunity for community members to reflect on their relationship to the land they operate on, and to one another.

### 01 Learn and understand

- Use Vital Signs reporting to track the health of your community’s ecosystems and biodiversity. See the work of Muskoka Community Foundation.
- Learn more about Indigenous conservation practices and ecological knowledge. See the work of the Eenou-Eeyou Community Foundation, which focuses on preserving and protecting the boreal forest while honouring the cultural connections that the community has to their lands.
- Review examples of urban communities that have taken action on SDG 15 in the Cities and Biodiversity Case Study Series report.

## 02 Strategic grantmaking

- [Iron & Earth](#) in Alberta received support through the Investment Readiness Program to assist with building a program that reskills and retrain oil industry workers to build a sustainable energy economy, with Indigenous leadership and collaboration.
- [Mask-wa Oo-ta-ban](#) (the “Bear Train”) also received support through the Investment Readiness Program to help build awareness for the need for additional transportation to and from remote communities in Algoma, Ontario. Travel by train is more carbon-efficient than flying or driving.
- Support community monitoring of biodiversity and ecosystem health. See the work of the [Port Moody Foundation, which funded a “Bio Blitz”](#) that engaged citizen scientists to create a baseline inventory of local biodiversity.
- Provide strategic grants to address gaps in community conservation funding. See the [Otonabee Conservation Fund](#) created by the Community Foundation of Greater Peterborough to maintain the legacy of local conservation lands.
- Consider funding native tree planting, urban forests and green spaces to support urban biodiversity. Visit [Tree Canada](#) for examples of the benefits of urban forests and examples of funding programs.

## 03 Lead and collaborate

- Encourage your municipality to develop a [biodiversity strategy](#) and to consider accessing the [Green Municipal Fund](#) to support local environmental initiatives.
- Partner with schools and other funders to support environmental education programs for the community. See the [Rivers Wetland Centre of Excellence](#) supported by the Rivers and Area Community Foundation.
- Use the SDGs and Vital Conversations to convene community stakeholders and explore environmental issues and opportunities for action. See the above example of the [Whistler Community Foundation](#).
- Join other foundations to share and learn from one another’s approaches to environmental grantmaking. See the work of [Environment Funders Canada](#) and consider joining.

## Resource list

### **Environment Funders Canada**

- A network of foundations and philanthropic organizations dedicated to increasing their environmental impact.
- The Collaborate tab has subtopics on funder groups and collaboration opportunities, while the Learn subpage contains reports, information on upcoming webinars and a grants database.

### **Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership**

- A website dedicated to supporting the Indigenous-led conservation movement.
- The About tab introduces IPCAs and provides guiding principles.
- The Our Work tab has a searchable database of resources on Indigenous conservation and reconciliation as well as stories and updates.

### **Advancing a Sustainable Future: A Profile of Environmental Philanthropy**

- Pages 12-17 provide a breakdown of environmental funding in Canada by issue area.
- Pages 18-21 look at top funding strategies and explore funding priorities by SDG.
- Pages 25-26 present opportunities and next steps for environmental philanthropy.

### **Toward Best Practices in Environmental Grantmaking: Strengthening Community Engagement and Capacity at the Local Level**

- An older report (2004) that looks specifically at the role of community foundations in environmental grantmaking.
- Pages 9-12 provide an overview of community foundations and environmental grantmaking.
- Pages 13-48 look at roles for foundations including capacity building, collaboration and public engagement.

### **Conservation Finance Network**

- A website that advances land and resource conservation by expanding the use of innovative and effective funding and financing strategies.
- The Getting Started tab provides a Conservation Finance 101 section and a Conservation Finance Toolkit with case studies, tools and techniques for financing conservation efforts.

### **Capitalising Conservation: How Conservation Organisations can Engage with Investors to Mobilise Capital**

- Pages 8-20 provide examples of what investors are funding in conservation.
- Pages 45-52 provide case studies of investments in conservation initiatives.

### **Cities and Biodiversity Case Study Series: Canadian Best Practices in Local Biodiversity Management**

- A 40-page report that presents case studies from Canadian cities and towns.
- Pages 1-3 introduce urban biodiversity and local scale action for biodiversity.
- Pages 4-35 present case studies from across Canada from small towns to cities.

### **Tree Canada**

- The website for the only national non-profit dedicated to planting and nurturing trees in rural and urban environments.
- The Resources page includes a tree planting guide, a list of the benefits of trees for communities and a carbon calculator for reforestation projects.
- The Plant With Us section provides opportunities to partner in planting projects.