

LIVING

Nature faces a policy assault

Governments slashing environmental protection in favour of resource industries

My friend, Mitch, and I had just finished a wonderful day of birding at Point Pelee National Park, a world-class nature destination in south-western Ontario. Not only were the birds plentiful and varied but we were once again impressed by the large numbers of birders from Europe, the U.S., and Quebec. It therefore came as a shock when I learned from one of the park’s employees that Point Pelee will see its number of permanent employees slashed from 25 to 10.



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OUR
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Suffice it to say that a quiet political grenade is being thrown at Canada’s environment, and mostly by the federal government. In my eight years of writing this column, I don’t recall anything quite as depressing. As we innocently enjoy magnificent spring weather and nature at its most beautiful, the gutting of Canada’s environmental laws and program funding is proceeding full-steam ahead. Our extraordinary natural legacy is under full assault. The federal government is drastically weakening the foundation of Canada’s ability to do basic scientific research, to identify problems and monitor changes in the environment, and to communicate the findings to the public.

I have prepared a list of some of the most egregious program cuts and changes to laws that are taking place. Undoubtedly, others are in the works and have not yet been made public.

Cuts to Environment Canada: This critical government department will see a reduction of \$222.2 million from last year’s total planned spending. This will mean the elimination of 1,211 jobs (full-time equivalents) over the next three years. Some of the biggest cuts are in the program activities of Climate Change and Clean Air, Substance and Waste Management, Weather and Environmental Services, and Water Resources.

Changes to the environmental review process: After slashing funding to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, the federal government will now move to a “one project, one review” policy on environmental projects. It will also reduce the number of departments and agencies that can do environmental reviews from 40 to just three to speed up approvals. There will be less time, less resources from the federal government to actually look at and understand these projects and less opportunity for the public to point out errors and omissions in what developers want to do. The impact of the changes to the environmental review process are being made even worse by firing hundreds of Environment Canada scientists who contribute to the environmental review process. Some reviews will also be handed over to the provinces. However, the provinces environmental assessment processes are inconsistent from each other and often weak. No one ever said the process was perfect in the past and, yes, there probably were unnecessary delays, but what is being proposed here is even far more than what much of industry itself was asking for.

Elimination of the National Round



Wikipedia Commons photos

Point Pelee National Park and the endangered loggerhead shrike are threatened by changes in federal government policy that favour petroleum and resource industries over the environment.

Table of Environment and Economy (NRTEE): The purpose of the NRTEE, created under Brian Mulroney, was to help Canada achieve sustainable development solutions that integrate environmental and economic considerations. It brought government, business and community leaders together to research and explore sustainable pathways and to advise Parliament. Maybe the NRTEE’s downfall was a result of having continued to talk about climate change, a dangerous thing to do if you are by statute an advisor to government.

Limiting the political engagement of environmental charities: The Harper government is attempting to suppress those who speak out for environmental protection. This includes a host of legitimate organizations like the David Suzuki Foundation. In particular, they are trying to silence groups that question the government’s plans to push the western pipeline and super tankers project through and recklessly expand the tar sands at all costs. The Canada Revenue Agency will receive an additional \$8 million to investigate charities believed to be spending more than the allowable 10% of their revenues on political action. That’s why environmental and other organizations are joining with Canadians from all walks of life in the Black Out Speak Out protest which culminates in website

blackouts on June 4.

Muzzling scientists: Scientists whose research touches on everything from global temperature increases to an ozone hole over the Arctic have seen their media availability carefully dictated or ruled out completely. Prof Thomas Pedersen, a senior scientist at the University of Victoria, believes there are political motives in some cases. “I suspect the federal government would prefer that its scientists don’t discuss research that points out just how serious the climate change challenge is,” he said.

Cuts to Ozone Monitoring Programs: Scientific research related to the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere and pollution in the lower atmosphere is being threatened. These reductions in personnel and projected budget cuts also threaten existing international agreements. “Canada is a bellwether for environmental change, not only for Arctic ozone depletion but for pollutants that stream to North America from other continents,” said Anne Thompson, professor of meteorology at Penn State. “It is unthinkable that data collection is beginning to shut down in this vast country, in some cases at stations that started decades ago.”

Shutting down the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences (CFCAS): The CFCAS is

Canada’s main funding body for university-based research on climate, atmospheric and related oceanic work. Because of this, we are losing the ability to know what’s going on in the Arctic. This is where many changes in world climate occur first and therefore a critical early warning system.

Amendments to the Fisheries Act: The Fisheries Act is Canada’s most significant and oldest piece of environmental legislation. However, proposed new wording to the act will eventually allow industrial development as long as fish deemed important for commercial or aboriginal use or for a sports fishery aren’t actually killed. This will erect serious barriers to conservation. According to Dalhousie University marine biologist Jeff Hutchings, it doesn’t make sense to single out fish perceived to be of commercial value. Of the 70 freshwater fish deemed at risk, he said, 80% would not be protected by the new legislation. The changes should allow for speedier approval of megaprojects like the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline, which will have to cross 600 different rivers and streams.

Closing the Experimental Lakes Area program: Just last Thursday, we learned that the world famous EAL program in northwestern Ontario will no longer be funded by the federal government. The program studied 58 small, pristine lakes

– mostly unaffected by direct human activity – and how they have been affected by a changing environment. Research here was instrumental in banning phosphorus in detergents and stopping acid rain. It also made a huge contribution to the battle against the green algae that fouls beaches. Scientists from elite research centres around the world are condemning this decision.

Cuts to Parks Canada: Possibly the most serious impact of the cuts to Parks Canada is that many of the scientists that were hired over the last decade to help protect the ecological health of the parks – habitat, biodiversity, etc. – are being let go.

Dalton McGuinty, too, would appear to have been inspired by the weakening of environmental protection happening at the federal level. No fewer than seven environmental laws will be affected by changes contained in Ontario’s Bill 55 budget document and impact negatively on conservation efforts. Hiding the amendments in a budget bill sidesteps the public’s right to participate in proposed changes to environmental laws and to voice an opinion. Among the most worrisome changes are those being made to the Endangered Species Act. Although some changes to the act were probably necessary, this gives sweeping new powers to exempt private landowners from the requirement to protect endangered wildlife or habitat. Yet most species at risk are found in southern Ontario, and most of southern Ontario is securely in private hands. In other words, protection will be weakened in the region where you find the highest concentration of endangered wildlife.

There is also the creation of a loophole for a broad range of activities, including industrial and commercial operations, so that requirements that were specifically designed to compensate for damage or loss of endangered wildlife or habitat can be circumvented. The 2013 deadline to complete plans outlining the recovery of dozens of endangered and threatened species has also been eliminated.

It’s not hard to understand that reducing environmental protection makes perfect sense in an economic system devoted to continual growth. Simply stated, meaningful protection of the environment is fundamentally at odds with a growing economy. However, to end on a more positive note, I recommend reading Jeff Rubin’s new book, *The End of Growth*. The former CIBC World Markets chief economist argues that sustained high oil prices will force advanced economies to gear down into a new era of slow – or no – economic growth. Gasoline at two or three dollars a litre will do more than any regulations to curb greenhouse gas emissions, slow urban sprawl and reduce habitat destruction and species loss. Rubin believes that after the short-term pain, both the environment and citizens in general might be better for it.

Some of the happiest people on Earth live in slow-growth economies. As counterintuitive as it might seem for our short-term interests, we should all be cheering when the price of oil and gasoline go up. It might be our only hope.

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