

# Corporate Interests Threaten Biodiversity

By Lynn Palmer

Species are going extinct at an unprecedented rate. Over the past few decades, we have lost so many species so quickly that international concern over the protection of biodiversity—the great variety of plants and animals living on earth—has become extraordinarily high. Loss of biodiversity affects us all as it means diminished access to food, forest products, medicine, quality soil and clean drinking water. The fact that we don't fully understand the natural systems we rely on is all the more reason to take great care in maintaining these systems that have evolved over the past four billion years.

After the 1992 Rio Earth Summit in Brazil, world leaders negotiated the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) which aims to promote the conservation, sustainable use and equitable sharing of biodiversity. In 2002, the parties to the convention—now comprised of 191 signatory countries including Canada—committed themselves to reducing the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010.

At the ninth Conference of the Parties to the CBD held in Bonn, Germany last month, however; Canada was singled out, along with Brazil, as one of the signatory countries that embraced the interests of industry over biodiversity, justice and equity. Canada was seen to have blocked advances in agricultural and forest biodiversity, protected areas and the rights of indigenous peoples.

Canada's habit of pressing for voluntary measures instead of progressive conservation agreements was also seen as too industry friendly and as counterproductive to the protection of biodiversity.

Furthermore, Canada was seen to support questionable solutions to climate change that may, in fact, threaten biodiversity in order to benefit the corporate sector, such as commodity bio-fuel production and use of genetically engineering trees. Meanwhile, all African countries and many others firmly opposed such approaches, recognizing that these methods will do little to address the root cause of biodiversity loss and climate change: our collective over-consumption of finite resources.

This business-first, conservation-second approach to the protection of Canada's biodiversity parallels what we now see happening in Northern Ontario with regard to forests. While the federal government is responsible for meeting our international biodiversity conservation commitments under the CBD, it is the provinces and territories that actually have jurisdiction over most Crown lands and therefore have the greatest influence.

When the Ontario government unveiled its new Endangered Species Act (ESA) in May 2007, Environment North viewed the new legislation as a tremendous opportunity to protect biodiversity in Ontario. If well-implemented, this progressive legislation would also make a major contribution to meeting Canada's international forest biodiversity conservation commitments.

The ESA made Ontario a leader in North America in terms of protecting the most vulnerable plants and animals across a wide variety of ecosystems, from temperate forests in the south to tundra in the north. Now, proposed exemptions for the forest industry threaten to render the ESA as ineffective as the CBD has now become for conserving biodiversity.

In order to ensure that both the forestry industry stays afloat and Canada leads the way in international biodiversity conservation, a shift in thinking must take place. Canada cannot compete with countries in the south in the low value commodities out forestry industry insists on producing.

Making a scapegoat of the ESA masks the real problem: Ontario has not adequately invested in diversification or in implementing standards that will allow us to sell high-value, eco-friendly forest products.

All voices throughout Northern Ontario must be heard before decisions are made that affect the conservation of biodiversity and its sustainable use for resource-based jobs. Let's hope the provincial government makes good on the original ESA and, unlike the federal government, refuses to be coerced by industry views alone.

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