

Wilkinson Column - August 11, 2021

Protecting Mother Earth on the Road to Reconciliation

It's been said that some of humankind's most profound journeys have a way of circling back to where they began.

When I was just a toddler, my family home was Moose Factory and Moosonee at the foot of James Bay in northern Ontario.

I had the opportunity to travel back there earlier this week to mark an historic milestone in the Government of Canada's work with Indigenous partners to protect and conserve our natural and cultural heritage.

The occasion was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Mushkegowuk Council, to work together on the feasibility of a massive National Marine Conservation area in western James Bay and southwestern Hudson Bay.

During the flight, my mind was alive with converging thoughts.

We appear to be approaching a tipping point in human development when a return to the fundamentals of protecting the natural world, from which we all sprung, is imperative to our survival.

Our world faces the twin crises of climate change and rapid biodiversity loss. We no longer have the luxury of time to address these matters. Urgent action must be taken to put Canada and the world on a sustainable pathway to a carbon-neutral, nature-positive future.

As I gazed at the vastness of Canada passing below, I was also struck by a statement made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – which underlined there can be no reconciliation among people until there is reconciliation with Mother Earth.

The Memorandum of Understanding I was there to sign covers a marine region of 91,000 square-kilometres – an area the size of Portugal.

The “breathing lands”

This area also connects to the Hudson-James Bay Lowlands -- the largest wetland in North America and the third largest in the world. These ancient, carbon-rich peatlands are called the “breathing lands” by Elders, and they play a very important role in storing carbon – which effectively helps to cool the planet. The marine and peatland ecosystems support each other.

These are what we call “nature-based climate solutions” -- healthy ecosystems helping nature and people adapt to climate change.

This means the decisions we make and actions we take in James Bay and Hudson Bay will impact not only the Ojibwe way of life but will impact the lives of millions, if not billions, of people around the world. The decisions of Canadians in this region have global significance.

It is home to beluga whales, polar bears and other iconic Arctic and subarctic species. And it is an important global stopover for billions of migratory birds. Protection of this natural space can be an important step in halting and ultimately reversing biodiversity loss.

We can and must learn from Indigenous people. And we must transform our relationship with the natural world from one of intertwined crises of climate change and biodiversity loss to a hopeful nature-positive, carbon neutral future.

Protecting Canada’s natural legacy

The Government of Canada has committed to protecting and conserving 25% of land and inland waters and 25% of marine and coastal areas by 2025, working toward 30% by 2030. Along the way, we’ve exceeded Canada’s goal of protecting 10% of our oceans by 2020 – going from less than 1% in 2015 to 14% in 2020.

The federal Budget for 2021 made a historic investment of \$2.3 billion over five years in Canada’s Nature Legacy to address the biodiversity crisis, protect and conserve nature, and create jobs in nature conservation and management. It builds on the previous biggest federal investment in nature, \$1.3 billion in 2018.

We’ve only just begun, but a National Marine Conservation Area for James Bay is another momentous step.

And for me on a personal level, this week’s circling back to the family home of my early years was a profound confirmation of why I entered politics in the first place.