

Protecting Our Land and Water Is An Election Issue (796 words)



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Well, I have to say it's a blessed relief to see the environment and climate change finally get some play in the provincial election. Rather than burying themselves in platform platitudes, the NDP held a press conference on August 18th and committed to a number of important initiatives, including a promise to triple Manitoba's protected areas to 30% by 2030.

It's a bold move, and a critically essential one. So essential that all parties hoping to win the October 3rd provincial election should make the same commitment.

Why? Well, as the nations and scientists at COP 15 observed, we might just have a running chance at protecting biodiversity and mitigating climate change if we act now to protect 30% of the world's land and waters.

And where better to start than right here in Manitoba.

Because while most of our politicians may think this election is going to be won or lost on health care and the economy, many fail to realize that you can't separate the economy or health care from the environment.

The economic costs of extreme weather events caused by climate change - from wildfires and floods to droughts and intense storms - is staggering. In 2012, wildfires alone were estimated to cost Canadians some \$11 billion a year.

Health costs are appalling. Air pollution led to 15,300 premature deaths in Canada in 2016 while the cost of asthma attacks and other respiratory symptoms was \$120 billion, according to a Health Canada study.

And that was the before times.

We're not even close to the end of this year's wildfire season, and we've already seen 6 times the 'normal' number of hectares burned, resulting in the release of a billion tons of carbon dioxide.

One can only imagine what the staggering economic and health care costs will be for this year alone.

Given that, provincial politicians might want to pay attention to the fact that Manitobans - who've spent this summer wheezing from wildfire smoke or suffocating in record-breaking temperatures - will very likely expect their next government to take bolder action on climate and the environment.

To do that we need to protect nature as a shield against climate change.

Protected forests, wetlands and native prairie grasslands, whether rural or urban, act as carbon sinks, absorbing the carbon dioxide we release that would otherwise accumulate in the atmosphere further accelerating climate change.

And the return on investment in protected natural areas doesn't stop with carbon capture. These habitats also act as a buffer, reducing the impact of extreme weather by absorbing and retaining run off and flood waters, cleaning the air and providing shade during heatwaves, potentially saving cities, towns and farms millions of dollars.

Protected wild spaces also provide critical habitat for threatened wildlife facing an increasingly hostile world. So hostile, that this year experts documented a staggering 69% decline in animal populations worldwide.

The reasons behind this shocking loss in biodiversity are linked to several factors — among them, climate change, pollution, development and over-exploitation which all result in habitat loss.

For humans the impact goes far beyond any loss of the wonder we may feel when an eagle soars overhead or we hear the call of a loon. We're losing the pollinators that fertilize our food crops and are at increased risk of disease as human settlements continue to encroach on natural habitats.

These are just some of the reasons why we need to protect 30 per cent of Manitoba by 2030, a goal that is not only achievable, according to the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. It's essential.

Here in Manitoba, much of the work has already been done to identify which areas to protect, and indigenous communities are leading the way.

One of the most promising opportunities is the Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected Areas Initiative, which aims to protect 50,000 square kilometres west of Hudson Bay, home to thousands of migratory birds, endangered polar bears and beluga whales. That single initiative would take us from 11.1 percent protected land and water to 19 percent in one fell swoop.

Seven other Indigenous-led initiatives could protect another 10.3%, while other proposed areas could protect as much as 11.3%.

So, acting now to protect 30% of nature isn't just the right thing to do. It's the smart thing to do.

It's also everybody's job.

We, as citizens, need to demand that our leaders take decisive action to protect nature and address climate change. If we don't, they won't make it a priority.

So, the next time you have a politician at your door, tell them that protecting 30% of the province by 2030 is a commitment every political party needs to make.

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