

Biodiversity Loss Is Our Loss

I'm sure many of you have read or watched the news reports on COP 27, the international climate change conference being held in Egypt. But I'll bet most of you have never heard of COP 15, an upcoming conference that will be held in Montreal this December.

The aim of COP 15 is to address biodiversity loss worldwide and here's why:

Based on the most comprehensive index tracking the health of the natural world, experts have observed an unprecedented 69% decline in wildlife populations worldwide.

The reasons behind this staggering loss in biodiversity are linked to several factors, among them, climate change, pollution, over exploitation and habitat loss. And those losses aren't just happening out there in the wilds of nature. They're happening right here, in urban centers like Winnipeg.

Which is why, in addition to the conference of national governments, COP 15 will also include the 7th summit of non-national governments and cities, to encourage local governments like ours to take action to combat urban biodiversity loss.

In fact, one of the conference's targets pertains specifically to the development and protection of green spaces in urban centers. And many of the issues COP 15 will tackle, such as pollution and loss of habitat due to development, actually originate in cities.

Leading the charge to protect urban biodiversity is Montreal, host city for COP 15 and an urban center that has already committed \$300 million to expand its protected land from eight per cent to ten per cent of its total area by 2030 and create at least five wildlife corridors to link the city's natural areas.

And it doesn't stop there. Montreal is also initiating actions to protect pollinators and enhance food security by reducing mowing on city land and revising bylaws that limit where citizens can grow vegetables as well as flowering and native plants, like milkweed.

So what is Winnipeg doing? Well, as far as my sources have been able to determine, no one from city government is even attending the 7th summit. Which speaks volumes about this city's commitment to protecting its natural infrastructure, including key wildlife habitats such as wetlands, rivers, native grasslands and intact urban forests.

But there are signs Winnipeg may be changing its stripes, and it's largely thanks to the pressure brought to bear by you, its citizens, led by local organizations such as OURS-Winnipeg (Outdoor Recreational Spaces-Winnipeg), Save Our Seine and Trees Please Winnipeg.

It's thanks to the lobbying efforts of OURS that public golf courses such as John Blumberg were taken off the city's auction block to be preserved as greenspace habitat and transformative amendments were made to key Winnipeg planning documents to create A Master Greenspace and Natural Corridor Plan that will include a biodiversity policy. And - happy days! - the amendment also includes a commitment to acquire an additional 1000 acres of land to expand the city's public greenspace.

While 1000 acres represents less than half of what the City of Montreal plans to acquire by 2030, it's a start. And even though Winnipeg is, sadly, late to the game – 7 other major Canadian cities already have master greenspace plans in place – we can play catch up.

One of the ways the city can do that is by ensuring that key elected officials and city employees attend the 7th Summit at COP 15, where they can learn about the innovative strategies other national and international cities have already initiated, to protect and preserve urban biodiversity.

Because it's one thing to say you'll develop a greenspace plan. It's quite another to actually implement it.

In order to do that, a paradigm shift needs to happen – a shift away from equating growth exclusively with urban development, whether in the form housing construction or road building, to one that views our natural assets as precious resources that should be preserved and protected. Not only because they are inherently valuable, but also because they contribute, in significant, measurable ways, to the health, safety and well-being of our city and its citizens.

Because as other cities have already discovered, COP 27 and COP 15 are inextricably linked, when measured in terms of emission reductions or climate resiliency. In fact, the protection and expansion of our natural infrastructure – whether in the form urban forests, wetlands or grassland parks – won't just help to protect other endangered animal species. It will also protect us, by improving our city's resiliency in the face of extreme weather events and helping us to achieve our emission reduction goals.

So, if the City of Winnipeg is really serious about its Greenspace Plan, that's what needs to happen. And attending the 7th Summit at Cop 15 would be a very good place to start.