

Letter from scientists regarding the Boreal Forest

Dear Premier Charest,

In a letter sent in May 2007, 1,500 scientists from more than 50 countries around the world, including 71 from Quebec, asked Canadian government leaders to ensure the protection of at least 50% of Canada's Boreal forest. Since making this appeal, we have followed the progression of this file with keen interest.

We were delighted to hear, on November 15, 2008, the commitment that "*by 2015, [...] 50% of the area covered by the Plan Nord will be protected from industrial, mining and energy development.*" This commitment was reiterated in March in your speech at Mont Saint-Bruno National Park announcing that Quebec had reached its objective of 8% protected areas. Your commitment deserves our public support; in protecting northern Quebec's natural environment and ensuring responsible development in the rest of the area, your government will set in motion one of the most ambitious sustainable development and nature conservation projects in North America, and one that could serve as a model for the rest of the world.

Scientists have already catalogued some of the natural resources that constitute the natural heritage of northern Quebec. In terms of wildlife, northern Quebec provides habitat for 340 million birds,ⁱ more than a million tundra caribou and some of the largest populations of freshwater fish in North America. However, the populations of some species are too low: the woodland caribou, the wolverine and the golden eagle are all on Quebec's threatened or vulnerable species lists. In terms of the region's ecological benefits to society, including water filtration and carbon storage, their value is estimated at 13.8 times the value of the natural resources extracted from it each year.ⁱⁱ

In addition to the considerable biodiversity of this region, climate change is a major concern that influences our vision for the conservation planning of northern Quebec. Every day, new factors indicate that environmental degradation is fundamentally affecting our natural heritage, and the reduction of industrial carbon emissions is a top priority. While it is tempting to rely on costly unproven technological solutions, a responsible and sustainable approach fits within our current frame of knowledge. Our Boreal ecosystems already efficiently store more carbon in their trees, soils and peat than any other environment. It is our responsibility to be the stewards of these vast northern carbon reserves.ⁱⁱⁱ

The field of conservation biology identifies four objectives that must be achieved to ensure the long-term viability of an ecosystem:

1. all native ecosystem types must be represented in protected areas;
2. populations of all native species must be maintained in natural patterns of abundance and distribution;
3. ecological processes such as hydrological processes must be maintained; and
4. the resilience to short-term and long-term environmental change must be maintained.

In the context of the Plan Nord, it is important that our conservation and development decisions be based on sound scientific data.

It is our firm hope that northern Quebec can be maintained intact for future generations, and that a planning process will ensure conservation while planning for future development in a manner that is consistent with those objectives. It will also be important to move quickly to identify areas that meet these criteria and that may be vulnerable to industrial development so that potential conflicts can be addressed and resolved.

We would urge you, Mr. Premier, to put this planning process in place quickly. We ask that this is done in a manner that fully engages the communities in these regions, especially Aboriginal peoples, whose knowledge, relationship and rights must be respected.

Finally, we feel certain that, in taking this action, Quebec will emerge as a world leader in sustainable development, biodiversity conservation and combating climate change, while creating a new ecosystem management model for the 21st century that will set the standard for countries around the world.

We, the undersigned scientists, encourage you to maintain your commitment to conserve at least 50% of the region north of the 49th parallel. We, in turn, promise to work with you and with the research organizations, Aboriginal people, local communities, various sector stakeholders, conservation groups and businesses of Quebec's Boreal region to bring about this vision.

Respectfully yours,

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i Unpublished estimates of the Partners in Flight Program.

ii M. Anielski and S. Wilson, 2009. Counting Canada's Natural Capital: Assessing the Real Value of Canada's Boreal Ecosystems, Canadian Boreal Initiative and The Pembina Institute, p. 61.

iii This responsibility was expressed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which has recommended that Canada and Russia ensure the protection of their Boreal regions.

iv Page 39 in A. Guérette Montminy, E. Berthiaume, M. Darveau, S. Cumming, D. Bordage, S. Lapointe and L.V Lemelin. 2009. Répartition de la sauvagine en période de nidification entre les 51^o et 58^o de latitude nord dans la province de Québec. Rapport technique n^o Q14, Canards Illimités Canada – Québec, Québec.