
International Boreal Conservation Science Panel

March 16, 2011

An Open Letter to The Honorable Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada, Premiers of the boreal forest jurisdictions of Ontario, Quebec, Northwest Territories, Yukon, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Newfoundland & Labrador, Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Clément Chartier, Métis National Council President, and Mary Simon, President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Canada has Responsibility for the Future of the World's Largest Remaining Freshwater Reserves in the Boreal Forest

Water is the essence of all life, yet fresh water continues to be the most undervalued and overexploited of our scarce natural resources. Declining water availability is increasingly stressing regional water supplies worldwide and predictions suggest that by 2025 humans will have appropriated seventy-percent of the global renewable annual freshwater supply. Freshwater ecosystems and the biodiversity contained within them are now among the world's most threatened.

Given these facts, much world attention has been given to engineering solutions to the increasing threats of water scarcity and pollution. However, global leaders must acknowledge that this crisis cannot be solved without giving equal attention to protection of the earth's remaining pristine lakes, rivers, wetlands and peatlands.

The global importance of Canada's boreal forest is well-known, but the outstanding values of the boreal forest's freshwater resources are generally unrecognized. The forest houses the world's largest intact freshwater ecosystems, contains the highest concentration of wetlands—which hold billions of tonnes of carbon—with countless pristine lakes and free-flowing rivers and streams. The boreal is home to many of Canada's First Nations peoples, but it also benefits the lives of hundreds of millions of people across the world by stabilizing climate, supporting ocean health, enhancing food security, protecting wildlife and influencing the global economy. Unfortunately Canada's boreal forest wetlands and waterways are increasingly affected by a growing footprint of industrial natural resource extraction activities that could degrade the ability of the boreal to provide clean water and its many other ecological values.

An international science report, *A Forest of Blue*, being released today, highlights these globally important conservation values and reveals that while fresh water and biodiversity are globally endangered, Canada has a

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unique opportunity to lead the world in freshwater protection solutions. The report provides the rationale for protecting Canada's boreal forest and the pristine water that it safeguards, laying out initial steps that Canada can take to seize this unprecedented opportunity.

Recently, exceptional leadership by federal, provincial and Aboriginal governments has led to enactment of policies that protect large portions of intact boreal landscape. However, this report underscores the need for the governments of Canada to respond quickly to the increasing impact of industry on the boreal forest's freshwater resources and to increase their commitments to protect the forest's critical resources.

Protection of Canada's boreal forest, along with limiting greenhouse gas emissions, should be among the top global conservation priorities, and the work to protect it can only be led by Canada's federal, provincial and Aboriginal governments. Canada has the unrivalled opportunity to protect the world's largest intact freshwater ecosystem and the responsibility to enact sound conservation and sustainable development policy to safeguard the boreal forest. The longer we wait to act, the fewer the conservation options that will continue to be available. Without prompt action, Canada may miss the opportunity to protect this global treasure.

Signed,

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