

Global Biodiversity Conservation and COVID-19: Building back better with nature

A recent virtual seminar co-hosted by IEEP and the Mission of Canada to the EU discussed the future of biodiversity conservation in the COVID-19 context.

The seminar was part of a series of events the Mission of Canada to the EU is organizing on shared 'green' policy priorities on the Canada and EU agendas.

While global attention has focused on the immediate needs of addressing the health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic over the past few months, other pressing challenges have not disappeared, and the global biodiversity crisis remains a matter requiring urgent action. In fact, if anything, the pandemic has more clearly revealed the important links between human health and a healthy natural environment and the interactions between health, biodiversity and climate change.

This year remains an important benchmark for global biodiversity policy, with the existing framework and targets reaching their expiry dates at the end of 2020. Despite the ongoing pandemic, the global negotiations on the post-2020 global framework for biodiversity conservation continue, although there have been delays in the process, with the next UN Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) Conference of Parties (COP15) postponed to May 2021.

Nonetheless, panellists highlighted how the EU and Canada have continued to demonstrate their commitment to both maintaining momentum towards an ambitious post-2020 global framework for biodiversity, and pursuing ambitious action on biodiversity conservation at home.

A proposal for the new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 was adopted in June, with new targets that are now waiting to receive the green light from Member States. Canada too has announced a goal of protecting 25% of its land and marine territory by 2025, aiming for 30% by 2030.

Views were also exchanged on how the EU and Canada could work *together*, and with other partners, to achieve a global agreement ambitious enough to match the urgency, while simultaneously looking for ways to ensure that action on biodiversity conservation is part of a resilient and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

[\[Watch the full recording of the event here\]](#)

Insight from the panel

“The last few months have been a real wake-up call that has shown us that, to take care of ourselves, our societies and our economies, we must take care of nature...” – Chris Cooter, Head of Mission -

In his welcome addresses, **Chris Cooter**, Head of Mission of the Mission of Canada to the EU, emphasised that the current COVID-crisis has highlighted the urgency of global action to protect and enhance our ecosystems. He emphasized that, in line with its ambitious domestic objectives, Canada is advocating for a global objective of protecting 30% of land and marine areas by 2030, including by joining efforts such as

the Global Ocean Alliance. His examples from Canada also highlighted how recovery efforts can – and indeed should – be combined with the delivery of environmental objectives, including through nature-based solutions. For example, to help Canada’s ocean sectors, which were significantly impacted by the crisis, Canada has committed to developing a comprehensive blue economy strategy that also advances conservation objectives.

“One third of our economy is dependent on biodiversity – that is huge.” – Basile van Havre, CBD OEWG Co-Chair -

Basile van Havre, Co-Chair of the CBD Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) on the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, remained positive that – despite delays to the COP15 process – political momentum remains to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion. As a silver lining, the postponement of COP15 provides time to design the framework even more carefully, focusing especially on making it easier to implement at the national level.

Looking beyond the negotiations, Mr. van Havre considered that the COVID-19 crisis had increased people’s interest to invest in protecting themselves towards health related risks, providing a real window of opportunity for accelerating the recognition of the value of resilient and well-functioning ecosystems among the wider public. The unprecedented amounts of resources being spent by governments to restart the economy present a real opportunity for biodiversity, provided they are used in a way that delivers (co)benefits to nature. Mr. van Havre reminded participants that there is clear existing evidence that conservation efforts can go hand in hand with job creation, and that engaging people and gaining their buy-in is critical to success.

Mr. van Havre considered the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy a valuable contribution to the global process, in particular because it clearly sets out the EU position. He highlighted the cross-sectoral engagement underpinning the EU strategy, which provides an important example of the whole-of-government approach considered crucial for delivering impacts in practice. With regard to Canada and EU working together, he felt that the EU Biodiversity Strategy – together with the new ‘Farm to Fork Strategy’ for EU agriculture – provide a fruitful basis for joint efforts to promote sustainable agriculture and fisheries.

“People were asking if it was really the right time to launch the Strategy [during the pandemic]...But all the evidence showed that it was now or never to demonstrate the EU is ready take the necessary measures for biodiversity and show the EU’s willingness to lead globally.” – Stefan Leiner, Head of Biodiversity Unit DG ENV –

Stefan Leiner, Head of Unit for Biodiversity at the Directorate General for the Environment (DG ENV), considered that the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy provides a clear basis for integrating biodiversity into recovery, ensuring that the EU recovery package recognises the fundamental role nature plays in societal and economic wellbeing. The strategy also provides for a number of new concrete commitments and measures for supporting biodiversity conservation in the EU and globally including, in particular, presenting in 2021 a legislative proposal to avoid or minimise the placing of products associated with deforestation and forest degradation on the EU market.

Mr. Leiner also remained optimistic about the outcomes of COP15. He highlighted that biodiversity and environment had never been so high on the political agenda in the EU, and that the same is happening in many other countries around the world. However, he also recognised that getting 196 countries to agree on a joint ambitious global framework remains an ‘enormous challenge’. An endorsement by the EU

Member States of the commitments proposed in the EU Biodiversity Strategy would go a long way towards showing the world that the EU is willing to take its role seriously, and hopefully encouraging other to do the same. Mr. Leiner added that the EU welcomes cooperation with like-minded countries, such as Canada, in advocating for an ambitious global framework and appreciates Canada's and the OEWG CBD co-chair's leadership role. He noted the need to strengthen global cooperation and bring more countries on board to help the negotiations forward.

“The pandemic has really brought our relationship with the natural world to light. It has showed that protecting and restoring our natural ecosystems is essential to resilience.” – Ester Asin, Director WWF EPO –

Ester Asin, Director of the Worldwide Fund for Nature's European Policy Office (WWF EPO), started by congratulating the European Commission for the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, which in her view demonstrated a level of ambition that could not have been imagined a few years ago. She considered that the legally binding restoration targets in the Strategy could be a game changer for the EU in the future, with positive impacts not only on biodiversity but also on climate.

For the global biodiversity framework, Ms. Asin said a major diplomatic effort would be needed to ensure COP15 is a success. She noted that the framework must recognize the connections between nature, climate and land use. She also noted the importance of reaching ambitious targets on the conservation of agricultural ecosystems and sustainable food systems – including redirecting and aligning financial flows, with a clearer commitment to the removal of harmful subsidies. She also pointed to a need for greater ambition on implementation, transparency, and accountability on global targets.

Ms. Asin also noted that the implementation of biodiversity objectives, and EU 'nature' directives, at the national level has always been a challenge for the EU. Consequently, securing political will and leadership in the Member States, including for the ongoing global negotiation process, is of key importance. Ms. Asin was also 'a bit disappointed' in the EU recovery package as, in WWF's view, it did not reflect the "green recovery" ambition of the current political discourse or the objectives of the Biodiversity Strategy. For example, while the amount of funding needed to support the implementing of the EU Biodiversity Strategy has been estimated by the Commission to be about €20 billion/year, these figures were absent in the recovery package proposal.

Moving forward

From the local to the global level, biodiversity is higher on the political agenda than perhaps ever before. However, there is still work to do to ensure that this positive rhetoric translates into an ambitious global policy framework for 2030 and that biodiversity will be an integral part of recovery packages around the world. While not shying away from acknowledging the challenges ahead, the message from the panelists remained highly optimistic about the next era for biodiversity conservation.

As captured by Mr. Cooter in his closing remarks: *“We have ambition, hope and targets. We now need to get on with it and go forward.”* Previous global negotiations have shown that cooperation between likeminded countries – such as the EU, its Member States and Canada – can help deliver tangible positive outcomes, including helping other countries raise their ambition and achieve shared global goals.