

First Nations to have greater role in parks: federal environment minister

'Our national parks must be respectful of traditional knowledge,' said Catherine McKenna

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Federal Environment Minister Catherine McKenna is supporting a greater role for First Nations in creating new protected areas and managing the ones Canada already has.

Speaking Friday at a parks conference in Banff, Alta., McKenna said Indigenous protected areas will be one way Canada meets its international goal of conserving 17 per cent of its land by 2020.

"We will move forward in our commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, including the development of Indigenous protected areas and looking at how we can expand the guardians programs," she said.

- [First Nations call for more say in park system at national conference](#)

Such areas are regions singled out for conservation by local First Nations and identified through self-government agreements or land claims. They would also be managed and monitored by the bands.

The land would be given some form of legal status through legislation. That would allow it to count toward Canada's 2020 goal, a promise it made in 2010 under the international Convention on Biological Diversity.

"We also believe that Indigenous protected areas will be an important approach to meeting our targets [and] also responding to the desire of Indigenous peoples to determine how best to create healthier, more prosperous communities while protecting their land," McKenna said.

Similar programs in Australia

A similar program is used in Australia, where Aboriginal peoples care for more than 1.7 million square kilometres of protected regions.

Guardian programs use Indigenous people to monitor and protect parks, as well as guide visitors. They monitor wildlife, patrol protected areas and work to reduce the impact of climate change.

About 30 such programs already exist in Canada — from Gwaii Haanas on the Pacific coast to Labrador, where the Innu Nation oversees forestry, fishing, mining and wildlife on its land.

Both initiatives have strong support from Indigenous people.

Moves could further reconciliation

First Nations delegates at the conference said such moves could further reconciliation, as well as provide jobs and strengthen Indigenous culture.

A recent report delivered to Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada from the minister's Arctic adviser also supported protected areas.

McKenna added that Indigenous traditional knowledge will play a greater role in managing Canada's national parks as well.

"Our national parks must be respectful of traditional knowledge, especially as we strive towards a renewed nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples and continue to work together in a manner based on the recognition of rights, respect and co-operation."

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