

Developing a Declaration on Ecosystem Health and Biodiversity as a Priority for All Sectors

A CONVERSATION PRIMER



WATER, LAND AND RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP
VERSION 2.2

CONTENTS

1. PREFACE	3
2. INTRODUCTION	4
3. APPROACH	5
3.1 Phase One - Declaration.....	5
3.2 Phase Two – Working towards implementation.....	5
4. BACKGROUND	6
4.1 Prioritizing ecosystem health and biodiversity.....	6
4.2 Connection with other government initiatives.....	7
4.3 What is a declaration.....	7
4.4 The role of signatories in a declaration.....	8
5. CREATING THE DECLARATION	8
5.1 Vision and purpose.....	8
5.2 Principles.....	10
5.3 Goals and targets.....	11
5.4 Commitments and actions.....	11
5.5 Additional Considerations for the Declaration.....	12

1. PREFACE

Moving forward in a way that supports implementation of the Old Growth Strategic Review (OGSR) and recognizes and respects UNDRIP and its commitment under DRIPA, the Province intends to facilitate conversations with First Nations to support the co-development of an Old Growth Strategic Action Plan and a B.C. Declaration that prioritizes ecosystem health and biodiversity.

This conversation primer aims to build a shared understanding to support dialogue and collaboration on the approach to co-developing a B.C. Declaration that prioritizes ecosystem health and biodiversity.

This primer is written in the context of the following:

- **The Ministries of Forests (FOR) and Water, Land and Resource Stewardship (WLRS) are responsible for supporting the implementation of the recommendations of the Old Growth Strategic Review (referred to as the OGSR) in collaboration with Indigenous Leaders and in consultation with labour, industry, and environmental groups, with FOR leading the overall OGSR implementation (see OGSR process);**
- **While the focus of this primer is on Old Growth Strategic Review Recommendation #2, the Province acknowledges that the OGSR is a package and specifically that implementation of Recommendation #1 is foundational to overall OGSR implementation.**

(OG1) Indigenous Involvement: Engage the full involvement of Indigenous leaders and organizations to review this report and any subsequent policy or strategy development and implementation.

(OG2) Prioritizing Ecosystem Health and Resilience: Declare the conservation and management of ecosystem health and biodiversity of British Columbia's forests as an overarching priority and enact legislation that legally establishes this priority for all sectors.

- The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (2019, SBC, C.14);
- Section 2.6 through 2.9 of the Declaration On The Rights Of Indigenous Peoples Act Action Plan 2022-2027 and the commitment that Ministries across government will continue to work in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous Peoples across the Province to implement actions identified in the Action Plan, reflecting our mutual commitment to work together in partnership; and
- Related strategies, programs and engagement processes including Together for Wildlife, Collaborative Stewardship Framework, Environmental Stewardship Initiative, Cumulative Effects Framework, Modernized Land Use Planning, Watershed Security Strategy and Fund Discussion Paper, etc.

2. INTRODUCTION

The OGSR was shaped by an extensive engagement process and concluded with a set of 14 recommendations for improving forest management within a shifting paradigm towards more holistic and sustainability-focused stewardship.

In recognizing that conservation of long-term ecosystem health and biodiversity is key for protecting the health and wellbeing of communities as well as maintaining vital resources for future generations, the second recommendation of the OGSR calls on the Province to **“declare the conservation and management of ecosystem health and biodiversity of British Columbia’s forests as an overarching priority and enact legislation that legally establishes this priority for all sectors.”**

Several common themes have emerged from conversations that have taken place over the years between government and Indigenous leaders, Indigenous Peoples, stakeholders, the public, local governments, environmental non-governmental organizations, conservation groups, farmers, ranchers, and rural communities on topics related to ecosystem health and biodiversity.

First is the imperative of recognizing Indigenous peoples as long-time stewards of the environment and building a foundation for co-management that is rooted in respect for Indigenous rights and knowledge, in alignment with the B.C. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. Other main points of consensus included respect for regional diversity; more complete, trusted, and accessible data, information, and knowledge; and capacity building and support for consistent meaningful engagement and collaborative action.

These themes, among others, were incorporated to form the OGSR recommendations. However, underpinning the transformation towards a more inclusive, stable, and effective management framework is the condition that ecosystem health and biodiversity be treated as pillars of a sustainable economy (rather than constraints).

A formal B.C. Declaration prioritizing biodiversity conservation and ecosystem health would serve to facilitate the necessary shift in guiding management practices better aligning with goals of protecting species, conserving vital ecosystem resources, and ensuring the health and long-term social and economic wellbeing of communities across the Province. As such, the scope of the Declaration is not limited to forests, but extends to all ecosystem types in British Columbia including terrestrial (e.g., forest, grasslands and desert) and aquatic (e.g., rivers, streams, lakes, wetlands and estuaries) ecosystems.

3. APPROACH

Of the 14 recommendations in the OGSR, a B.C. Declaration and legislative framework that prioritizes ecosystem health is identified as one of the five essential “required conditions for change” that is, being foundational and a core component to facilitate a shift towards integrated and inclusive stewardship of BC’s forests and ecosystems.

Through collaboration, the Province intends to have co-developed a B.C. Declaration on ecosystem health and biodiversity that applies to all sectors and that will guide the Province to legally establishing this priority in partnership with Indigenous Peoples, stakeholders, local communities, and other partners.

The Province’s proposed approach to advancing a B.C. Declaration and legislative framework that prioritizes ecosystem health involves:



3.1 PHASE ONE - DECLARATION

Co-develop with Indigenous leaders, and with input from key stakeholders, a B.C. Declaration on the Priority of Ecosystem Health and Biodiversity that applies to all sectors and sets our path forward to support implementation, aligned with other foundational recommendations (e.g., governance, three-zone management framework, better public information).

Deliverable: Co-developed B.C. Declaration in Spring 2023.

3.2 PHASE TWO – WORKING TOWARDS IMPLEMENTATION

Explore if and how legislation can be developed or updated, along with other system changes, to achieve the vision and intent set out in the B.C. Declaration. A key goal will be to ensure that we are immediately improving the system following the release of the B.C. Declaration, including implementation guidance, changes to existing policy, improved information, and accountability, while also considering longer term changes.

As part of the consideration for legislative requirements, there may be multiple ways to give legal effect to the B.C. Declaration and these can include a combination of the following:

- Use of existing legislative tools, including the exercise of regulatory powers to develop new regulations;
- Potential legislative changes and additions to existing legislation; and
- Development of new legislation.

Deliverable: Implementation of enabling tools, possibly including updates to existing legislation and developing new legislation, policies and guidance, to successfully implement the B.C. Declaration across all sectors.

4. BACKGROUND

4.1 PRIORITIZING ECOSYSTEM HEALTH AND BIODIVERSITY

British Columbia is home to the greatest biodiversity of any province or territory in Canada.

Biodiversity (or 'biological diversity' referring to ecosystems, species, and genetic diversity, and the processes that shape them), is an integral part of the B.C. identity and fundamental for supporting a multitude of economic sectors including forestry, tourism and recreation, hunting and trapping, biological and medical research, and many others. Biodiversity is also a pillar of food and livelihood security within and beyond the province as well as an essential component of ecosystem resilience.

In recent decades, the need to protect biodiversity has become more urgent in response to increasing threats to ecosystems (primarily from human activities), but also as a way of helping to increase our adaptive capacity to global environmental change. The mounting effects of climate change (including catastrophic wildfires, flooding, and mountain pine beetle outbreaks) have compounded the impacts of human-induced habitat fragmentation and loss, threatening the productive capacity and resilience of many ecosystem types. Recognizing these challenges, along with the health, safety, and livelihood risks that they bring to human populations, communities across British Columbia are now advocating for a higher standard of ecosystem stewardship and biodiversity conservation.

A new integrated and inclusive stewardship paradigm that prioritizes biodiversity and ecosystem health is needed to address the emerging environmental challenges as well as achieve true and lasting reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. Focusing on **ecosystem health** as a broad-based goal will serve to guide future development to minimize biodiversity risk and ensure ecosystem health and well-being outcomes for species, habitats, and human communities. As a holistic and dynamic concept, ecosystem health further implies a collaborative and adaptive approach to management, where health is not limited to current conditions, but is essential for long-term resilience and maintaining resources for future generations.

4.2 CONNECTION WITH OTHER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

There are many government initiatives and mandates that point towards moving to a land management system that focuses on maintaining ecosystem health, including:

- measures for species at risk and conserving and enhancing B.C.'s biodiversity;
- developing a co-managed land and resource management regime with Indigenous peoples; and
- continuing to advance Modernized Land Use Planning (for ecosystems, rivers, lakes, forests, lands, and waters), Together for Wildlife Strategy, Watershed Security Strategy, Coastal Marine Strategy, Marine Salmon Strategy and Cumulative Effects Framework.

Implementing a B.C. Declaration that prioritizes ecosystem health offers an opportunity to support a coordinated and cohesive approach to align and strengthen these existing initiatives, as well as support advancing key government priorities.

4.3 WHAT IS A DECLARATION

A declaration is a statement or announcement which can convey a vision, set priorities, outline pathways for future engagement or action, or all these things. It can be a powerful catalyst for a shift in thinking and create a vision and the conditions for change.

Declarations can range from being purely aspirational to more directive in nature, with commitments and actions. It may only apply to the organization issuing the declaration or could have broad application inviting other governments, leaders, and organizations to endorse it.

OGSR implementation advice suggests a B.C. Declaration may provide an overarching vision along with specific principles that will guide the overall shift to this new framework (similar to the DRIPA construct).

EXAMPLES OF DECLARATIONS:

- [Assembly of First Nations \(AFN\) National Water Declaration](#): in recognition of the United Nations World Water Day, the AFN joined other Indigenous peoples around the world calling for attention and action to water issues facing Indigenous peoples.
- [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#): followed by release of the [Draft 10 principles that Guides the Province of B.C.'s Relationship with Indigenous people](#), and given legal effect by the [Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act](#).
- [Leaders' Pledge for Nature – United to Reverse Biodiversity Loss by 2030 for Sustainable Development](#): is a declaration of commitments by political leaders participating the UN Summit on Biodiversity. It invites others to participate in and endorse the pledge, including local governments and businesses.

4.4 THE ROLE OF SIGNATORIES IN A DECLARATION

Signatories of a declaration consist of the party(ies) who are “committing” to the content and intent of the Declaration. While the OGSR advises the Province to make this declaration, there is a potential opportunity to broaden the scope recognizing that everyone (provincial government, Indigenous governments, local governments, businesses, communities, and individuals) has a role to play.

Some options for signatories may include the following:

- The Province alone (e.g., Draft 10 Principles that Guide the Province’s Relationships with Indigenous Peoples);
- The Province and Indigenous Leaders;
- The Province with other leaders choosing to endorse or “sign-on” to the declaration and these leaders may include other levels of government, business associations, etc (e.g., the Leaders Pledge for Nature).

5. CREATING THE DECLARATION

Elements of a declaration may include one or more of the following: a vision statement, principles, goal and targets, commitments, and actions to be agreed by the signatories. Recognizing that there are many ways to draft a declaration, to help prompt discussions, this section offers examples of how each element might be considered or included in a declaration on ecosystem health and biodiversity. The ideas and examples provided are based on:

- The OGSR report, including implementation advice for the declaration, and what we heard report
- Examples from existing declarations related to ecosystem health and biodiversity (i.e., see Module 3 on What is a Declaration)
- Themes from recent previous government engagements (i.e., see Module 4 for a summary of themes heard)

5.1 VISION AND PURPOSE

OGSR advised the Province to make a declaration that provides an overarching vision where ecosystem health and biodiversity are prioritized in the land management framework. This would serve as a catalyst for change from the current approach that manages for sustainable forests (subject to constraints) to managing for ecosystem health, recognizing that resources (e.g., timber) are one of the many benefits that healthy ecosystems provide.

A declaration on ecosystem health and biodiversity would guide land management practices towards better alignment with goals of minimizing species loss (and preventing irreversible loss of biodiversity), maintaining vital ecosystem services, and ensuring the resiliency and long-term cultural, social, and economic wellbeing of communities across the province.

A key theme throughout the OGSR recommendations is that we should not only acknowledge Indigenous peoples as stewards of the environment, but also leaders in guiding how to establish a land management regime that achieves a higher standard of land care. A framework directed toward ecosystem health should be grounded in a Provincial-Indigenous government-to-government approach that is respectful of Indigenous rights and in alignment with the B.C. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

“Shift our thinking from trees and timber to healthy ecosystems that provide many benefits”

(OGSR report)

The advice in the OGSR is consistent with themes heard through previous related government initiatives.

EXAMPLES OF VISIONS:

The following vision statements are some existing examples that could be a starting point for discussion, inclusion or adaptation.

- UN Convention on Biological Diversity 2050 Vision: “Living in Harmony with Nature” where “by 2050, biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored and widely used, maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet and delivering benefits essential for all people”.
- Together for Wildlife Vision: Wildlife and their habitats thrive, are resilient, and support and enrich the lives of all British Columbians.

5.2 PRINCIPLES

Principles are intended to create the environment needed for a declaration to be achieved. They are typically viewed as “rule” type statements that guide actions and decisions and can be used to interpret gaps in laws and guide policies. For example, to support the implementation of the UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), ten principles were developed to address two needs: first, the need for a shared vision of ecosystem restoration, and second, the need for guidance to maximize net gains for biodiversity, ecosystem health and integrity, and human health and well-being from all types of restoration projects, programs and initiatives.

In the case of an ecosystem declaration for B.C., principles can be used to inform the approach, outcomes, or the rules for developing and implementing existing and new enabling tools to implement the declaration (Phase 2 of this work).

OGSR has advised that UNDRIP could be a model for the B.C. declaration. For background information and examples of the use and purpose of principles adopted at the international level, refer to Module 3. This module also includes B.C. specific principles developed and applied for other related initiatives.

EXAMPLES OF PRINCIPLES

The examples of principles provided below are based on the OGSR implementation advice and themes from previous what we heard reports (Module 4 for a summary of themes heard).

- Province-Indigenous government-to-government foundation
- Fairness and cohesion across sectors working towards common standards for achieving ecosystem health goals
- Holistic and integrated approach
- Science-based approach with equal respect for all knowledge systems
- Continuous learning and adaptation
- Inclusive and participatory
- Accountability, particularly to the public
- Responsive and flexible to regional circumstances and ecosystems

Additional Considerations	
1	Thinking about your community, the Nation(s) you work with, or your organization, and if principles are desired, which principles are important to include in the Declaration?
2	What other principles do you feel are important?

5.3 GOALS AND TARGETS

Many declarations include goals and targets that are aligned with the vision which helps set the strategic direction, informs decision-making and may catalyze behavioural change for communities and individuals. In addition to the goal of healthy ecosystems, OGSR contains other foundational goals including improved governance, sustainable practices (e.g., three zone policy) and improved public information. It will be important that the declaration is aligned with these foundational goals.

Some examples of what is meant by an outcome-focused goal:

- Prevent irreversible biodiversity loss, maintain or improve landscape level ecosystem health (e.g., supporting connectivity) and vital ecosystem services.
- Greater co-ordination within and across different sectors working towards ecosystem health.
- Increased public awareness, understanding and support of biodiversity and ecosystem health goals and priorities, and how individuals and communities can manage for ecosystem health.

Additional Considerations	
1	Thinking about your community, the Nation(s) or organization you work with, which goals or outcomes are important to include in the Declaration?
2	Are there any other goals or outcomes that are important to include in the Declaration?

5.4 COMMITMENTS AND ACTIONS

Commitments in a Declaration can be action focused and related to goals and targets. Commitments set an accountability for the Province or others entering the commitment (e.g., signatories). While the declaration does not necessarily need to include commitments and actions, previous engagements on other government related initiatives showed frustration about there being too much talk from government and not enough action. Commitments and actions within the Declaration may help address this frustration.

Examples of different commitments/actions to show variety for scope and specificity

- We commit to implementing all recommendations of the OGSR and will develop a comprehensive action plan to support implementation by end of 2023.

- We commit to collaborating with Indigenous partners on policies and initiatives to advance implementation of the declaration that supports collaborative stewardship of the environment, addresses cumulative effects and respects Indigenous Knowledge.
- We commit to ensuring all-related provincial legislation, strategies and agreements, management systems and processes are consistent with the declaration.
- We commit to setting provincial ecosystem health targets and measures and will then to support all regions in the province to develop their own transition plans to meet their different and unique needs.
- We commit to monitoring progress through public annual reporting
- We commit to providing research support and incentives for innovative work targeted towards achieving ecosystem health goals and supporting sectors make the transition.

Additional Considerations	
1	Do you think that the declaration should be more directive and include commitments and actions?
2	If so, which commitments and actions are important to include in the Declaration?
3	What other commitments/actions are important to you?

5.5 ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE DECLARATION

1. Are there other key themes or priorities that should be included in the Declaration?
2. What does "ecosystem health" and "biodiversity" mean to you? How should these terms be incorporated or conveyed within the Declaration? Is it sufficient to include these as concepts in the Declaration, or is more specificity required?
3. With an understanding of the type of themes you would like to see in the Declaration, now consider what form a declaration could take to best convey the key themes and priorities that you have identified.