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From Politics to Transformative Politics of Nature in Canada

Karen F. Beazley, Andrea Olive, and Chance Finegan

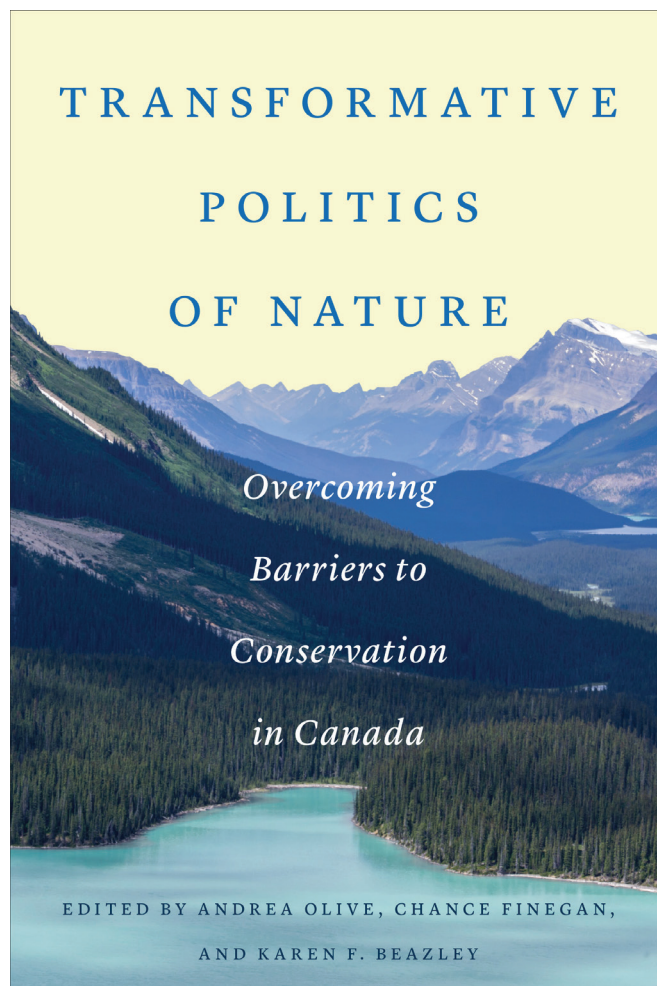
It takes a monarch butterfly less than a month to metamorphose from a larva to a butterfly. Complete transformation. There are few other living things that exemplify transformative change like a butterfly. Given its beauty and its extensive geographic range, the monarch is the symbol of collaborative conservation between Canada, the US, and Mexico. Unfortunately, the migratory *Danaus plexippus* is classified as critically imperilled (Nature Serve n.d.) and listed as a species at risk in Canada. Between 1995 and 2015, their population declined by over 80 per cent and the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada suggests that the probability of extinction in the wild is at least 20 per cent in the next 20 years (Government of Canada n.d.). This iconic species, one of the most recognizable insects in North America, is going extinct in our lifetime.

As we write this amid a global health pandemic (World Health Organization 2020, 2021), we are also experiencing existential biodiversity, climate, and humanitarian crises (Steffen et al. 2015; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES] 2019; Springer et al. 2021). All are consequences of human actions rooted in dominant ideals and political systems grounded in global economic growth models, often with long histories and persistent characteristics of colonialism (United Nations [UN] 2012; Moulton and Machado 2019; Pictou 2019).

According to both Western science and Indigenous ways of knowing, humanity is at a turning point. Either we recognize and embrace our interrelationship and interdependence with the rest of life—and the soils, water, and air—on earth and act in accordance with this reality, or much of life on earth will perish, with devastating consequences for humanity (IPBES 2019; M'sit No'kmaq et al. 2021). To effectively address the crises will require transformative shifts in the way we view ourselves in the world—our ideals, values, and responsibilities to life on earth and each other—and in governance, economic, social and knowledge systems, institutions, policies, and practices (Patterson et al. 2017; Kennedy et al. 2019; IPBES 2019). We need a new way forward that is ecologically and socially just.

Confronted with these truths, we endeavoured to initiate dialogues and conversations towards a transformative politics of nature. As co-editors of this collection emerging from those conversations, we wanted to share the insights and imaginings as to what that transformation might entail,

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and why it is crucial—Where are we coming from, where are we now, and where are we going?—as we know business as usual will not suffice. We editors are three white settler-scholars aware that transformative change will require all of us—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—working together.

Where are we coming from? Canada has a long history of wildlife protection, dating back to the 1880s when an ordinance was passed by the federal government to protect the plains bison from over-hunting (Waiser 2016). As the country grew into a federation and provinces gained power over their lands and wildlife, a patchwork of policies, programs, and laws developed to protect wildlife, nature, and, in some cases, species at risk of extinction (Beazley and Boardman 2001; Olive 2014). In 1992, Canada signed the UN [Convention on Biological Diversity] CBD (1992) and made a global commitment to safeguard the country's biodiversity.

Not long after, in the mid-1990s, the government of Canada created the Canadian Biodiversity Strategy (Environment Canada 1995) as a way to follow through on its global commitments. The five goals in the strategy include sustainable use, enhanced understanding of ecosystems, increased (public) awareness of biodiversity, incentives and legislation, and international diplomacy. As part of this plan, the federal government introduced a national Species at Risk Act (SARA), which eventually passed Parliament in 2002. Unfortunately, the law is limited by constitutional jurisdiction, particularly in regard to habitat protections, since wildlife, provincial crown lands, natural resources, and private property are managed at the provincial level and thus not automatically subject to SARA's provisions (Elgie 2009; Olive 2014; Westwood et al. 2019). Endangered species legislation has been adopted in some provinces and territories in Canada but not in all.

In 2010, Canada agreed to the UN Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 at the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, Japan. The Strategic Plan included Aichi Biodiversity Targets (UN CBD 2010). In total, there were five strategic goals and 20 specific targets with a goal year of 2020. Target 11 generated the most governmental initiatives and scholarly energy (see Lemieux et al. 2019; MacKinnon et al. 2015; Zurba et al. 2019): “By 2020, at least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conser-

vation measures, and integrated into the wider landscapes and seascapes” (UN CBD 2010).

Nationally, as of the end of 2020, Canada had conserved 12.5 per cent of its land and freshwater area (11.7 per cent protected area; 0.8 per cent other effective area-based conservation measure [OECM]), and 13.8 per cent of its marine territory (8.9 per cent protected area; 4.9 per cent OECM) (Environment and Climate Change Canada [ECCC] 2021), though Canada's OECMs are highly contested as emphasizing quantity over quality, with questionable effectiveness (Lemieux et al. 2019, 2022; Lemieux and Gray 2020). Moving beyond the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, Canada is now looking into the future of conservation area goals and governance. Financial investments for nature were tabled in Canada's 2021 budget, totalling nearly \$4.9 billion CA for land, fresh-water and marine protected areas, Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas, Indigenous Guardians programs; species at risk; natural/green infrastructure; and disaster mitigation and adaptation, including small-scale climate adaptation and mitigation projects for natural infrastructure (Government of Canada 2021). Recent area-based commitments aim to conserve 25 per cent of Canada's land and 25 per cent of Canada's oceans by 2025, working towards 30 per cent of each by 2030 (Trudeau 2019; ECCC 2020; Canada (Governor General) 2020; Government of Canada 2021). If achieved, conservation areas would represent the largest and most rapid allocation of land- and marine-use in the history of the country. As such it warrants careful consideration of justice and equity along with ecological imperatives.

There are scientific data and growing political consensus that Canada is no exception in the context of global emergencies. Indeed, in Canada biodiversity is in precipitous decline, exacerbated by climate change, with inequitable distribution of costs across society, disproportionately affecting nature and people, especially Indigenous communities, people of colour, women, and non-heteronormative individuals (Pictou 2019, 2020; Kennedy et al. 2019; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls [MMIWG] 2019). Despite Canada's commitments to conservation and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, biodiversity loss is increasing along with human rights violations (World Wildlife Fund Canada [WWF] 2017, 2020; Mother Earth and Resource Extraction [MERE] 2021). There has been a rise in the reported numbers of human rights and land and water defenders, especially Indigenous and Black women, being criminalized, harassed, and physically targeted by law enforcement and private security personnel and actors linked to natural resource extraction

sectors (MMIWG 2019; MERE 2021; NDN Collective n.d.). Highly intensive and extensive resource extraction on the one hand and “fortress” conservation on the other have dispossessed Indigenous Peoples of their traditional territories (ICE 2018; Pictou 2019, 2020; Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership [CRP] 2021). Gains are being made in some arenas, such as with respect to the government of Canada’s efforts in ethical space of engagement with Indigenous Peoples through Pathway to Canada Target 1 (2018; ICE 2018) and university-Indigenous-government partnerships for conservation through reconciliation (e.g., Zurba et al. 2019; Artelle et al. 2019; CRP 2020). Yet, for the most part, the status quo continues in resource extraction sectors, including oil and gas, renewable energy, mining, and forestry, and through the ongoing tendency to privilege private property and corporate rights over more equitable and reciprocal relations among people, lands, and waters (MMIWG 2019; Kruse and Robinson 2019; MERE 2021).

The United Nation’s IPBES (2019) reported that up to a million species are at risk of extinction on the planet. The 2019–20 annual report by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) listed 810 wildlife species in various risk categories. World Wildlife Fund Canada’s 2020 *Living Planet Report Canada* estimated that populations of Canadian species assessed as at risk by COSEWIC have declined by 59 per cent on average from 1970–2016, an era in which almost every existing species-at-risk policy was created. The United Nations’ flagship report, *Global Biodiversity Outlook*, revealed that at the global level none of the 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets had been fully achieved by 2020 (SCBD 2020).

Building on past strategies, the UN CBD’s (2022) Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, adopted by the 188 Parties to the CBD at [Conference of the Parties] COP-15, will heavily influence international conservation efforts over the next 10 years and beyond. The first draft, released in July 2021, suggested that parties to the CBD, including Canada, will be called on to implement transformational changes, including unprecedented area expansion of well-connected networks of protected areas and OECMs, and the integration of equitable approaches that respect and uphold Indigenous rights, governance, and knowledge systems (UN CBD/WG2020/3/3 2021). Canada joined other countries in a High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, committing to these increases nationally and globally (ECCC 2020), setting itself upon an unprecedented pathway in conservation (Dietz et al. 2021). In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s 2019 Minister of Environment and Climate Change Mandate

Letter urged the minister to “Work with the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard to introduce a new ambitious plan to conserve 25 per cent of Canada’s land and 25 per cent of Canada’s oceans by 2025, working towards 30 per cent of each by 2030. This plan should be grounded in science, Indigenous knowledge, and local perspectives” (Trudeau 2019). As a party to COP-15, Canada has now formally committed to achieving these and other conservation goals and targets nationally and on the international stage by 2030.

Unless transformative changes are made, biodiversity goals will not be achieved, and yet fundamental change will be opposed by those with vested interests in the status quo. According to the IPBES, if obstacles are overcome, multiple sectors may be transformed through a commitment to mutual goals and targets, supportive actions by Indigenous peoples and local communities, new frameworks for investment and innovation, inclusive and adaptive governance approaches and arrangements, cross-sectoral planning, and strategic policy mixes (IPBES 2019). To tackle the underlying drivers, crucial interventions entail incentives and capacity-building; multi-sectoral cooperation; pre-emptive action; decision-making in the context of resilience and uncertainty; and environmental law and implementation (IPBES 2019). Key areas where there are leverage points to initiate transformative change include societal visions of a good life; values and action; equality, justice, and inclusion; and education and knowledge systems (IPBES 2019). Transformational conservation responses will necessitate a “system-wide reorganization of our sense of reality and associated paradigms, goals, and values across economic, social, political, and technological sectors” (Lemieux et al. 2021, 202, citing IPBES 2019).

IS CHANGE POSSIBLE?

Transformational actions are those that cause or are able to cause important and lasting changes (from Latin *transformare*: “change in shape, metamorphose”). In their deliberations, the IPBES brought significant attention to the kinds of actions required and to the most effective “leverage” for transformation. They drew heavily upon Donella Meadows’s (1999) *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*. Leverage points are “places within a complex system ... where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything.... Leverage points are points of power” (Meadows 1999, 1). Meadows listed 12 leverage points that remain relevant today. Those at one end of the spectrum focus on a system’s material-institution-technology components (e.g., subsidies, standards, taxes) and are easier to achieve but less effective; those at the other end are most effective and

are focused on ideation components, such as worldviews (paradigms; mindsets) and the power to transcend them. Such work supports the case for multiple leverage points, and especially for highly effective ones such as transcending paradigms or transforming worldviews.

Often the case is made that the most effective levers, such as transcending paradigms or transforming worldviews, are the most difficult to exploit and require longer time frames to achieve, and thus are considered less feasible. Others make a convincing case that worldviews can shift quickly, as Thomas Homer-Dixon argued in his book *Commanding Hope*: “In a single individual, it can happen in a millisecond” (2020). And social change can also happen quickly, especially in the face of overwhelming evidence and a growing base of support, particularly in today’s context of global uniformity and connectivity (social media; information systems), which can lead to “swift, nonlinear jumps.” Homer-Dixon cites examples related to apartheid, same-sex marriage, and the demise of Soviet communism. New mindsets open up the view of what is possible and what is feasible as a vision of a good life and goals and routes to a future based in “sufficiency” (enough), so as to address otherwise overwhelmingly complex crises in biodiversity, climate, and human rights.

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