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TRANSCRIPTION: WWF-Canada's first Pandacast

Featuring:

- Megan Leslie, WWF-Canada CEO
 - James Snider, WWF-Canada Vice-president, science, research & innovation
 - Jessica Currie, Specialist, science, research & innovation
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Megan Leslie: (00:00)

Picture of the Okanagan. In your mind, what do you see? Natural and beautiful vistas while valley at the base of rolling foothills leading into the rocky mountains, clean lakes and rivers, teeming with fish, providing food to both wildlife and people. British Columbia's southern Interior is home to unique wildlife like the Pallid Bat and the Desert Night Snake, which are species that thrive in hot, dry summers and mild winters. This region's mix of grasslands, forest desert-like areas and rich freshwater ecosystems provide a variety of habitats for wildlife. But here's the problem: These essential habitats are not well protected and as a result, many of the species that call them home are at risk. Growing populations of people and the related road and housing infrastructure and agricultural development, have added pressure to the land and water that wildlife need. Well, how did we get here? We're a place that's so uniquely important for wildlife, has virtually no formal protections.

Megan Leslie: (01:03)

How can we expect to recover at-risk species that live in the Okanagan if we don't protect their home? This isn't just a BC problem or a Canadian problem. Getting protections in the right place for nature and wildlife is an international problem, one that we must address urgently. By no, most have heard the news about global wildlife loss. One million species are at risk of extinction. In fact, half of Canadian wildlife are in decline. And what's the number one threat to Canadian species? Habitat loss. Just as people need a home, wildlife need habitat, a place to hunt, to mate to have their offspring, and the continuing loss or degradation of these spaces is making it harder and harder for species to thrive or even recover from past losses. That's why protected areas are so important, and there's good news! Canada's taking action right now to protect 17 per cent of the country's land and fresh water in order to safeguard the spaces wildlife need.

Megan Leslie: (02:03)

But here's the thing, and protected area is only as good as the ecosystem it protects. There's no point in saying 'this place is protected from development' if nothing lives there, it might seem obvious, but the lack of protections and the Okanagan shows us. We haven't done a great job at protecting the areas that at risk species need most. Yikes. It's a question worth asking. Are Canada's ecosystems and habitats

well protected and where do we need to do better? That's what WWF-Canada's recently released Wildlife Protection Assessment set out to understand and the results are well shocking. Stick around.

Megan Leslie: (03:00)

Welcome to the WWF-Canada's Pandacast our brand new podcast, explores some of the most important conservation issues facing Canadian wildlife. I'm your host, Megan Leslie, the president and CEO of WWF-Canada. On today's episode, we're asking one important question: What exactly are Canada's protected areas protecting? As I mentioned, today's podcast grew from the findings of WWF-Canada's Wildlife Protection Assessment. This research not only looked at how well our parks and other protected areas are protecting wildlife habitat in Canada, but it also identified priority areas for protection by comparing the gaps in our protected areas network with the habitats that are either home to a high number of at-risk species or have carbon rich features — forests, soils, and peat bogs — that keep carbon out of the atmosphere in the face of continuing wildlife declines, especially among species at risk and our failure to meet current climate targets. We have a clear opportunity, or perhaps even an obligation, to do a better job in protecting the areas that need it most. Joining me today to talk about how we can transform our approach to Canada's protected areas to reverse wildlife declines and balance climate change is James Snider, VP of science research and innovation at WWF-Canada and Jessica Currie research specialist at WWF-Canada. Thanks for joining me.

Jessica and James together:
Thanks for having us.

Megan Leslie:

Let's start off talking about protected areas. James, can you tell us why are protected areas important?

James Snider: (04:31)

Well, protected areas have been the cornerstone of modern conservation, for the better part of the last decade. The idea of being that we have this tool, this mechanism to really protect the core habitat of important wildlife important species and prevent a conversion of those places. That's the theory. But in practice things have actually been very different, and we haven't actually used this tool to the best possible advantage as we can to really reduce those threats to begin to protect the important habitats for ecosystems, for wildlife and especially our at-risk species.

Megan Leslie: (05:04)

So before we talk about the best places to protect, can you tell us, is there such a thing as a wrong place to protect?

James Snider: (05:10)

I don't think that's a wrong place to protect, but really it's about maximizing our investment, knowing that we only have so much land or ocean to protect, that we're getting the most out of that investment. And I think increasingly now knowing that we have these kinds of dual crises unfolding on a global stage, climate change and biodiversity loss, the ramp and loss of wildlife that we've seen around the world, we need to be getting it right? We need to be getting more out appropriate protected areas. We need to be ensuring that the places that we are in fact protecting have real true value, the maximum values possible.

Megan Leslie: (05:43)

Well, we do need to get them right, but there are finite resources and let's be honest, finite political will. So Jessica, can you tell us what makes protection good?

Jessica Currie:

When we think of protected areas in Canada, we often get caught up in this quantitative target of protecting 17 per cent of our terrestrial and inland waters by 2020. However, there's also this component of quality, which is also critically important. So we want to protect the areas that encompass these key biodiversity zones that are important ecosystems and ecosystem services. And we want these areas to be conserved through well-managed and ecologically representative and well connected networks. So there are a couple of different things we can look at to ensure that protections are good. We want to ensure that these areas are large and have great coverage and are well connected. We want to ensure that our human footprint is really reduced in these areas, so we don't want to be carving them up with roads or mines or other natural resource use. And really we want to speak to this ecological representation components. So essentially we want all of the protected areas in Canada, or all of the habitats, I suppose, to be represented within our protected areas network.

Jessica Currie:

So we don't want to just be protecting the mountaintops everywhere we are. We want to protect these other habitats, so wetlands for amphibians and reptiles.

Megan Leslie:

Well is it all about habitats and ecosystems or are there protected areas that serve other purposes?

Jessica Currie:

There's definitely protected areas that serve other purposes. While the primary purpose right now for protected areas is to conserve biodiversity, they can also serve other purposes and incorporate additional goals. So these could be cultural and historical preservation. We could have aesthetic value, education, scientific research, and they can even contribute to local economies. I personally love protected areas because of the recreational values. So every time I get a chance to get out of the city, I really like to go for a hike or kayaking, in a national or provincial park.

Megan Leslie:

So what does this mean for protected areas that are for recreation? How, how are we squaring that circle with wanting to protect ecosystems?

Jessica Currie:

Not all protected areas are created equal. Some are strictly set aside to conserve wildlife and this would really restrict what we can do as a human in the area. So no natural resource use, no extraction, and it really reduces visitation. However, there are other protected areas that we can visit and that we can promote sustainable natural resource use. So there's really this gradient in our protected areas network. And it's not to say that one's good and one's bad, but if we're talking about conserving wildlife there, there really is one that could be better in terms of strict protections for wildlife.

Megan Leslie:

Okay. So if we, let's say we get it right, we've picked an area and it's good ecological representation. There's species there that need a habitat. So we, we get, we tick a lot of the boxes and we get it right. Can there still be problems with that?

Jessica Currie:

Absolutely. So unfortunately, even if we are ticking all of these boxes, it doesn't mean it's going to be a well-managed area in itself. We could still ensure that all of the at-risk species are in the area. We could ensure that that area itself is really carbon rich. But if we're just putting this boundary around the area and we're not managing it well and we're allowing natural resource use, then is it really going to protect the wildlife in that area?

Megan Leslie:

Good question. Uh, changing gears a little bit here. This study talked about how protected areas can store carbon. James, how to protect it, areas help us fight climate change.

James Snider:

Well, this is really a new kind of framing in terms of the use of protected areas. Historically, we haven't at all really thought of them in this way. But increasingly now the science is so clear and the urgency of action on climate changes is so apparent, that we need to be looking at how we use our land, how we can actually protect the conversion of important areas that hold this massive amount of carbon as a real mechanism, a way that we can actively be preventing more carbon going into the atmosphere, those important GHG emissions that are driving climate change.

James Snider: (10:07)

And so there's this massive amount of carbon that's stored in wetlands and peatlands in our forests. And so we can now use protected areas as a way to actually prevent that conversion into the future and actually ensure that not more GHGs those carbon emissions as other greenhouse gases are not going into the atmosphere.

Megan Leslie:

This is a completely new way of looking at protection, it seems.

James Snider:

It's not something we've had to do in the past, right? Like the climate changes now[is] so front and center for us that we have to recognize that every kind of investment that we make in the use of land and the use of wetlands and the use of agricultural areas or forests that we're doing. So in a way that's mindful of what those emissions could be from that land. And so it really is a new approach.

Megan Leslie: (10:53)

So you, you talked about peat bogs and you talked about forests. So what's in need of protection? Is it a particular landscape? Is it particular geographic regions?

James Snider:

We've just completed this assessment, the Wildlife Protection Assessment that has brought together some mapping right across the country of really two kind of key things. One, which is we call soil carbon. So like the below-ground carbon that's found in our soils, in our wetlands, in our peat bogs, but also above-ground carbon. So what's found primarily in our forests, and that's something that's been mapped across the country, but it hasn't really been put together in this way previously and determined what is the extent that those areas have actually been protected? And it allows us to begin to identify

some priority regions where protected areas really truly could have an important role to play in reducing future climate change.

Megan Leslie:

Well, human's reach is pretty far and it seems that we're disrupting nature and we're disrupting habitat at an unprecedented rate. So what are we supposed to do if there's no area left to protect?

James Snider: (11:57)

Canada fortunately does have vast areas that can be protected. We're almost unique in many ways internationally in that we have this huge country amongst the largest countries in the world. And that a large amount of our land, our oceans and our inland waters are yet to be protected. And we have this goal that we've referenced of 17 per cent. And so Canada is actually behind in terms of achieving that goal. And that's, a comparatively small area of our country. So there's a huge opportunity for us as Canada to be really moving into this space to be protecting our areas, these important habitats for carbon and wildlife and really optimizing our investment in the protected areas network. There's a real chance for us here now in Canada to be leaders to show that we can in fact protect the right places, not just any places.

Megan Leslie: (12:51)

I'd like to ask you about the study itself. Why did you want to do this study? Was there a particular problem or issue that you wanted to understand?

James Snider: (13:01)

Well, there's been a lot of talk about these, the conventional biological diversity, the 17 per cent goal. I think increasingly Canadians are mindful that we've made these commitments on a global stage. But we didn't know until this study how representative the protected areas network is meaning some areas matter more than others, including for wild species. And we hadn't really determined that to the extent that our protected areas is really performing as an effective way for protection of at-risk species and wildlife more generally. So that's why we brought this forward, as a kind of an introduction of some important ideas into this more common conversation in terms of how we as Canada can invest in our protected areas network.

Megan Leslie: (13:48)

Well, the results are— this study is no small feat! So how exactly did you do this study?

Speaker 3: (13:55)

It's a really a mapping exercise. So our team has been working — Jessica and our team here at WWF-Canada — has been working over the last year to identify where our existing protected areas ... where do they occur across the country. And we have a suite of criteria that really begins to tell us: How well are we doing? What's the status of our existing protected areas and network? Or perhaps more importantly, where are those priority regions that haven't yet been protected, that have real importance for wildlife in Canada that have real importance for carbon? And you know, where can we begin to really drive forward in our future protected areas planning.

Megan Leslie: (14:33)

Jessica, you were really involved with this mapping. Can you tell us what the trends are for species at risk and carbon storage?

Jessica Currie:

There are a couple of different components that we looked at. So we did have species at risk climate refuges, and carbon storage both in the form of soil carbon and above ground forest biomass. So species at risk in Canada —if we could look at a map in front of us, they're essentially all concentrated in southern Canada. And this is an area that really overlaps with our human footprint. So it's where all the people live essentially. And in terms of our analysis, we found that 84 per cent of habitats with high concentrations of at-risk species were actually inadequately or simply not at all protected. And if we kind of shift focus to forest biomass, this really follows the pattern, follows the boreal forest. So from B.C. to Newfoundland and essentially the highest densities of forest biomass are quite predominant in British Columbia.

Jessica Currie:

So if we look at our analysis, again, 74% per cent of habitats with these high densities of forest biomass, again, were inadequately or simply not at all protected. And lastly, if we look at soil carbon, which unfortunately doesn't really follow a beautiful pattern across Canada, we have some high concentrations in northern Ontario, some in Quebec and Labrador. But these areas, there were 77 per cent of habitats with high densities of soil carbon that were inadequately or simply not at all protected. So although we are protecting areas in Canada, we're not really protecting the right ones. We're not protecting the ones where the most species live and we're not protecting our important carbon stores. So these means that these areas are actually open to development either now or in the future.

Megan Leslie: (16:23)

Well, habitats don't respect borders, but human beings pay a lot of attention to them. So did this mapping show which jurisdictions are doing the best and which ones are doing the worst?

Jessica Currie: (16:33)

It certainly did, and unfortunately, the Maritimes — so particularly PEI and New Brunswick — are actually faring the worst across the country. So we did do a provincial and territorial analysis just to see where everyone kind of fell in terms of this analysis. I'm from New Brunswick, so I was really disheartened to see that that New Brunswick fared so poorly and only 1 per cent of the habitats in the province actually achieved an adequate score representation. So that's really concerning for me because what I remember most about the province is going out onto the rivers or kayaking or hiking. So it just doesn't seem intuitive to me that none of this area is protected and that any point it could be open to development.

Megan Leslie: (17:21)

James, what were some of the most surprising gaps that you saw?

James Snider:

In all honesty, it was so difficult to see the drastic difference in what we had hoped our protected areas might achieve for species versus the reality. And I think Canadians, you know, people right across the country do have this great sense of pride in our stewardship of wild places and wild species. And there's tremendous support for protected areas. We know that. The polling shows that Canadians are really supportive of protected areas, but there's a fundamental disconnect between where our protected areas are today versus where they need to be if they truly are going to be a way to reverse the decline of wildlife in Canada. And, and now increasingly in terms of capturing this stored carbon, we need to

be doing things differently on protected areas. We need to be ensuring that protected areas are in the right place and that they are truly delivering their meaning for ecological protection. We have to do so now's the time for us to be using these tools as best as we can. If we are going to be reaching at a 1.5 degrees Celsius future, if we are going to put a stop to the decline of wildlife that we're seeing in Canada around the world.

Megan Leslie: (18:36)

So obviously we have to do things differently, but what? Give us some examples. What needs to be done, what do we have to do?

James Snider: (18:43)

Well, for one, we know as we begin to look at the expansion of our protected areas and you know, in the coming year we're not going to have to get to 70 per cent right across the country and knowing that most, if not all of our jurisdictions are not even close to that objective. And that second question is, well, 70 per cent — that's been a pretty arbitrary number that we're shooting towards. Is that even close to what nature needs? And I think the science is increasingly clear. We needed to be doing a lot more. Over the next decade, let's say we take an important action in this place... that we are realizing that when we do protect places, that they are the places that matter and that they are important ecosystems where these wild species live. And that we're doing so in a way that really is preventing in some ways that conversion of these important habitats that also store a huge amount of carbon.

James Snider: (19:39)

So I think now more than ever is, is a moment for us to sort of step back and say, if we are going to invest in a protected areas network, then let's really truly maximize their importance is part of something more than protecting beautiful places. I understand that matters. Like it really truly does. And Canadians are out there and there's a huge support in terms of getting in our national parks and I think we all want to be part of that. But I think we also need to harness that amazing support of our wild places to ensure that some of these really important ecological areas are also protected.

Megan Leslie: (20:13)

Well, you said we have to protect places that matter. So let's, let's do it. Let's do a deep dive here. When you look at the map, you can see priority places where there's high numbers of species at risk, where there's potential for climate refuges, and where there's carbon storage. So let's focus on those priority places. I know that the map shows us quite a few. Jessica, what is it about the Territories? When I see that circle on the map saying this is a priority place, what's going on there?

Jessica Currie:

While we've named the Territories generally, as a priority region for WWF, it's really this border between the Yukon and the Northwest Territories that's a focus for us. And these are areas of importance because of its high densities of soil carbon, it has high concentrations of at-risk species and it has these really important climate refuges — particularly at high elevations. And for these reasons, the Territories specifically this particular zone is of importance for us.

Megan Leslie:

James, the prairie grasslands are also noted as a priority area. What's happening there?

Speaker 3: (21:16)

So grassland ecosystems are amongst the most imperiled in North America. These systems have actually been converted over as much as 80 per cent in Canada since the turn of the 20th century. So we've seen this drastic decline in our grasslands, something that arguably is of global significance. We have a huge number of actually at-risk species within this region and we've seen some pretty drastic gaps in our protected areas network. There are some — I would say a nationally significant species, grassland birds — we saw in our Living Planet Report 2017 that grassland birds in the prairie provinces have declined by 55 per cent. These are Bobolink [birds], these are the Sprague's Pipit this is the iconic burrowing owl. These are species that Canadians pride ourselves in having here in Canada and where if we begin to protect more of these grassland ecosystems from conversion for our own human uses that we're more likely to be able to see those species continue to occur into the future.

Megan Leslie: (22:19)

I see southern Ontario and Quebec on there too, and we're recording this in southern Ontario. I'm looking out the window and I don't see any wildlife. I only see skyscrapers. So I think I know what the answer is to the problems in southern Ontario and Quebec. But why don't you fill us in on that?

James Snider: (22:34)

Southern Ontario and Quebec also have a huge number of at-risk species. We know that in southern Ontario, I think there's more than 200 at-risk species. It's one of the greatest hotspots. I think there's more than a third of our designated species across the country [that] are found in that place. Yet the protected areas network here is, I'd say, fragmented. Most of the protected areas are small and so there's a lot more to be done. Of course, I think our approach here needs to be sort of a combination of those formal protected areas, those ecological reserves, and this kind of broader connected landscape. And in places like southern Ontario and southern Quebec, we're going to have to increasingly look at the role of a private land in terms of how do we conserve and protect private land alongside sort of Crown land and weave together that network of connected protected areas. That connection is so important in these changing landscapes, knowing that through a changing climate that species are going to be moving. And so connectivity is a critical issue, one that allows species to migrate, to move, to disperse in response to that change in climate. So if we're going to design our protected areas to be "climate smart", they need to be connected. And so southern Ontario, southern Quebec, we really need to be able to sort of weave together that patchwork, if you will, of protected places.

Megan Leslie: (23:56)

And Jessica, to go back to your home province, Saint John River watershed is on the map. What's, what's happening there?

Jessica Currie:

Yeah, it is on the map, unfortunately. And I grew up on one of the tributaries of the watershed, so I know it well. I think what's so surprising is that this area actually has all four of these key considerations that we've been talking about. So it has the at-risk species, it has the soil carbon stores, and the forest biomass and these climate refuges. And yet it's nearly entirely unprotected. The entire St. John River watershed. And this just means that it really is open to development at some point in the future. And, that's obviously a concerns for me and for anyone living in that province who really appreciates the value of the Saint John River watershed itself.

Megan Leslie: And if we picture the Okanagan, those beautiful vistas... Back to where we started, the Okanagan is a priority area on the map. What's happening there?

Jessica Currie: (24:52)

I suppose your audience already has an understanding of the Okanagan from your intro. But essentially the main point to take away from this is that this area is just so diverse in the ecosystems that it has. It's really interesting with all of the different wildlife in that area, but it's essentially largely unprotected despite having arguably nationally recognized hotspots of biodiversity. And on top of that, there's also high levels of forest biomass and these important climate refuges and all of these different aspects. So it's very odd and concerning that it's not well protected despite all of these important considerations and things we've actually known for a really long time.

Megan Leslie:

Well, the findings of the Wildlife Protection Assessment are really going to help us make decisions in conservation and protection. And I think we can see some pretty incredible opportunities with it. James, what are some of the opportunities before us right now?

James Snider: (25:50)

Well, there's really two things. The first and the media term is knowing that Canada is working towards our 70 per cent goal and that's by 2020. So in the coming months, in the next year or so, we have a unique opportunity almost in terms of investing our protected or his network to get to 17 per cent. And so we need to make sure that those protected areas that we do advance in this time, really truly do have value. That they are in the right places, that they have importance for wildlife, they have importance for at-risk species, and they have the importance for carbon. We're asking a lot of protected areas now, right? We truly are, but we have to get it right. And so I think there is an important moment for us here in terms of ensuring that we do so. The second is what of a longer term thing.

James Snider: (26:34)

Knowing that, you know, right now there are international conversations about what will be our next commitment in terms of the Convention of Biological Diversity. And everyone's looking ahead to 2030. In some ways we have the comparison to what the IPCC, the International Panel on Climate Change has said in terms of the GHG reductions that we need to make globally. Right. And that's by 2030 and those numbers are pretty drastic. For us to reverse wildlife decline in that same timeline, our protected areas ambitions are going to have to grow quite substantially. So in the long term, we have to be also looking at what Canada is committing to on a global stage. There are conversations underway right now in terms of what the next commitments will be as part of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

James Snider: (27:21)

We're looking out to 2030. 2030 is kind of that next major super year — that some people are calling it — in large part because of the fact that we know from the climate science, from the International Panel on Climate Change, that we have to make a significant reductions in terms of our GHG emissions. On the other hand, we also know that we have to be taking incredible inroads in terms of what nature needs in terms of protection of wild places to reverse wildlife decline to actually begin to work against these massive biodiversity loss that we're seeing around the world. So building ambition, you know, on a global stage. I think there is a chance for us Canada really now to step forward and say, this is how you get protected areas right.

Megan Leslie: (28:05)

Jessica, how, how do we take this work forward?

Jessica Currie: (28:11)

This assessment wasn't just a scientific assessment that we did and sat behind our computers at a desk and battled over color schemes. This was actually a tool that was created and it wasn't just created for WWF. Yes, it can help us prioritize where we want to be. But it's also a tool for policy makers and for First Nations. It can be a tool for communities, anyone who could use it and who could benefit from it, and create and prioritize these areas in their own local jurisdictions.

James Snider: (28:40)

So I think Jessica made a really, truly important point here, which is to say that Indigenous communities really are taking a leadership role in Canada and around the world in advancing protection of important places. We've seen here in Canada through the Indigenous circle of experts and the Indigenous leadership initiative that there are communities in our north and really from coast to coast to coast that are driving forward and advancing ambitious protection of important places, whether it's in the NWT, in Nunavut, in BC. Right across the country, there are examples where there Indigenous communities that are advancing important places to be protected. In my mind, that's actually one of the greatest areas of optimism and hope in conservation in Canada right now.

Megan Leslie: (29:27)

Well, what about extending that hope to everyday folks who live in communities? If they're not engaged in conservation already or they're not policy makers, how can we make a difference? What can we do?

Speaker 3: (29:39)

We know there's tremendous support for protected areas right across the country from coast to coast to coast. Individuals, right across the country, want advanced protected areas. And so there is a role now for each of us I think to be making our voices heard, for policy makers, for politicians that we want to be doing more for protected areas. When we do invest in protected areas networks, we want to be sure that they're in the right place. And when proposals for protected areas are coming forward, that we're standing up and being supportive of that. There are land-use planning conversations happening in many of our jurisdictions. Where possible, I'd encourage Canadians and individuals to engage and be part of these processes knowing that these important places and will benefit from our voice for their protection.

Megan Leslie: (30:27)

We talked about the where, we talked about the how. Why? Why would we do this? What are the benefits of protected areas?

James Snider:: (30:34)

We know that there's a huge, tremendous value for protected areas for biodiversity when done right, for wild species when done right in the right place with real standards for protection. But we also know that the communities that live near those places also benefit directly. So there's the benefit from our own economic development and growth, our economic livelihood, but the host of ecosystems, goods and services, that kind of parlance that we use, which is really to speak of clean air, clean water, pollinating services for our wildflowers and for our crops. We know that's so important. And if we protect the right places, we will really benefit from all of that host of services that we get from nature.

Megan Leslie:

It's kind of the web of life isn't it?

James Snider:

It's exactly that. In the end we're protecting nature for us and those wild species.

Megan Leslie: (31:22)

Jessica Currie, James Snyder, thank you for joining us and taking us on a deep dive into the Wildlife Protection Assessment.

Jessica Currie:

It's been fun.

James Snider:

Thanks for having us.

Megan Leslie:

If you want to learn more about the Wildlife Protection Assessment and see those maps for yourself, go to wwf.ca/habitatcrisis. Thank you to our supporters made this research possible. If you climb the CN tower, if you did a kids' run for nature, or a shoreline cleanup, thank you for supporting us and doing your part. And if you want to know how to get more involved, go to wwf.ca. And thanks to everyone who joined us for this, the first Pandacast. We're excited to be able to tell our story and the story of Canadian wildlife in this exciting way. My name is Megan Leslie. Thanks so much, and we look forward to talking to you again next time.

Outro music: (32:10)