

# Montreal: Biodiversity COP15 and related mid-term debates

The attempt to co-opt the aboriginal peoples for the benefit of the banks

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“At the front of the gathering, Indigenous delegations from Quebec and Western Canada, but also from South America and Africa, led the way. [...] The march brought together 3,500 people, according to the Collectif COP15, the CBD Alliance and the Global Youth Biodiversity Network, as well as Greenpeace Canada, responsible for the event” [1]. There was present the Coalition “Bloquons la COP15” of which a hundred had demonstrated in the middle of the week leading to a strike of 20,000 students [2]. We would have hoped for much more participation given the importance of the issue of biodiversity, which is just as crucial for the survival of humanity as the climate issue [3]. Especially since the negotiations are stalling, including on the sensitive issue of the 30% limit:

*“Canada’s Federal Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault admitted on Friday that the progress made so far at COP15 in Montreal is not going as fast as he would like. After nearly a week of deliberations, negotiators reached agreement on 3 of 22 objectives, including one of Canada’s key objectives: to ensure that Indigenous peoples are consulted and have a role in new conservation agreements. [...] Although 120 of the more than 190 countries present agreed on goals such as conserving 30% of the planet’s land and water by 2030, an agreement remains uncertain. [...] Canada has four main targets at this COP15. He wants an agreement to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, to protect at least 30% of land and oceans in the same time frame, to fund developing countries adequately, to enable them to achieve the same goals, and to include Aboriginal participation.” [4]*

## **The Aboriginal presence is everywhere except in decision-making bodies**

The indigenous question and presence surround both COP15 and its contestation. “The Indigenous Leadership Initiative and various other organizations will be present at the summit, including through an “Indigenous Village” to be held from December 9 to 11 along the promenade of the Old Port of Montreal. This village will be open to everyone and will offer around ten events, including discussion circles, conferences and traditional ceremonies” [5]. But Indigenous people are not part

of the process leading to crucial decisions:

*“In a statement, three of these [indigenous] leaders insisted that the next global biodiversity framework guarantee their participation in decision-making concerning their territories. ‘The only ethical and ecologically viable way to protect nature is to recognize the rights of the indigenous peoples who live there and who have used their traditional knowledge to protect it for decades’ [...] ‘Representing less than 5% of the world’s population, indigenous peoples manage to protect 80% of existing biodiversity, despite constant violations of their rights and the criminalization of their traditional practices,’ the statement continued. [...] ‘Recognize our rights and our expertise, and we will do what we have always done: continue to protect the forest and the lands where we come from, not only for ourselves, but for all forms of life. on Earth’, concludes for his part Orpha Yoshua, an indigenous person from West Papua in Indonesia.”*

This would be even more important given that Indigenous leadership strongly criticizes the crucial 30%:

“International organizations have already called for an overhaul of the conference’s goals, including the so-called “30x30” goal, which aims to declare 30% of the planet as protected areas by 2030. This goal could ‘devastate the lives of indigenous peoples and have a highly destructive effect on the livelihoods of other land-dependent communities,’ according to a statement released by Amnesty International, Survival International, Minority Rights Group International and Rainforest Foundation UK.

“‘Protected areas, which form the basis of the current conservation model as dictated by Western countries, are the source of many evictions leading to famine, disease and multiple human rights violations, such as murder, rape and acts of torture in Africa and Asia in particular’ as it is explained in the declaration. ‘There is little evidence that existing protected areas have effectively protected ecosystems and should therefore be expanded, and this target is set without an assessment of their social and human impacts,’ the declaration also says. [6]

Anne Larigauderie, the administrative secretary of the IPBES or the “IPCC of biodiversity” goes in the same direction: “Many countries declare on paper that they protect territories, but, afterwards, it there are not enough resources available to enforce the regulations,” says Ms. Larigauderie. It is also necessary, she believes, that the 196 member countries of the Convention on Biological Diversity set guidelines so that protected areas are significant places from an ecological point of view and “not just what remains”. [7]

## **The Art of Co-opting Indigenous Leadership by the Canadian Government**

The Canadian example drives the criticism even further. The Canadian government associates the aboriginal leaderships with its policy of extending protected areas but with its conditions: “Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for his part announced on Wednesday morning the granting of 800 million dollars to finance four conservation projects carried out by Aboriginal people in northern Canada. The announcement covers areas totaling nearly one million square kilometers in northern British Columbia, northern Ontario, Nunavut, as well as the Northwest Territories” [8].

These large areas will therefore be in the north without trees. But this is not the only condition:

*“This does not mean that we could not do mining there, for example, explained the Prime Minister, who was answering a question from a journalist. ‘There is currently an opportunity for Canada to provide the minerals we all need for the transition to a carbon neutral world.’ [...] While all of the*

*projects funded by Ottawa are in the north of the country, what about protection projects in the south of the country? However, the requests are not lacking. In the Montreal region, some are asking that the land around Trudeau airport be protected from any development to protect the milkweed fields that allow the monarch butterfly to reproduce.” [9]*

The same is true for the large industrial wasteland in the center-east of Montreal that the Port of Montreal, under federal jurisdiction, is in the process of monopolizing through intermediaries to the detriment of the neighboring district, which it deafens, warms up and makes ugly. But unfortunately, the citizen organization concerned does not denounce Ottawa, preferring to attack intermediaries to the point of holding a small neighborhood demonstration [10] instead of joining the big demonstration of the Collectif COP15.

As for the wooded North, Ottawa found a small million:

*The federal government is granting financial assistance of \$1 million over four years to the Conseil de la Nation Anishnabe du Lac-Simon, in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, to prepare an application for designation as a protected area for sustainable use with Quebec. [...] The project would therefore make possible access to natural resources and the establishment of family camps. These allow the intergenerational transmission and maintenance of the Anishnabe identity and language. The community also wants to give priority to the development of biodiversity enhancement projects in this territory, through the use, enhancement and sustainable exploitation of non-timber forest products, such as mushrooms, nuts, berries, wild plants as well as microforestry. [...]*

Ronald Brazeau also says he fears that the imminent end of certain moratoriums will threaten the territory covered by the protected area project. According to him, the forest industry wants to carry out harvesting work on the site, citing the threat of the spruce budworm. He also argues that the territory is already the subject of applications for mining titles. [...] We often see everywhere in Quebec, when there is a protected area project, they come, they shave everything and after that, there is nothing left. [11]

## **Banks and big polluters will exploit indigenous know-how**

What will happen when the indigenous managers of these protected areas try, as part of a market society whose alpha and omega is money, to keep logging and mining companies out? Where will they find the funds - the “available resources” as the boss of the IPBES says - to buy the “right” not to ravage nature?

“However, in the minutes of the June meeting of the “global biodiversity framework” working group responsible for preparing this convention, a point worried a certain number of observers. On page 24 of the document, the working group recommends, to increase financial resources linked to the defense of biodiversity, to ‘stimulate innovative schemes such as payments for ecosystem services, green bonds, compensation for biodiversity, carbon credits...’.

“This passage translates a very fashionable vision in certain ecological organizations and often summarized under the term ‘positive economy of nature’. Its starting point is based on two assumptions: the failure of traditional regulations and the existence of rational choices based on financial transactions.

“From then on, the answer becomes obvious: nature should be given a ‘price’ and it will be given a ‘value’. Market mechanisms will regulate the use of nature in a ‘positive’ way since it will be less costly to protect nature than to destroy it, as is currently the case. One of the most advanced

organizations on the subject is the WWF, which published a 'proposal to establish a roadmap towards the positive economy of nature' [12].

We can count on Canadian banks to be at the forefront of this cooptation of Indigenous know-how:

*"Banks know a growth market when they see it, and they're increasingly seeing one in the buying, selling and generating of carbon offsets. [...] [This market is] expected, however, to grow to upwards of \$50 billion by 2030, consultancy firm McKinsey & Co. estimates, while former Bank of Canada governor Mark Carney was only last year talking about the market possibly topping \$100 billion by decade's end."* [13].

This new market of "rights" will frame, if not dominate, indigenous management, allowing exceptions to be imposed for open-pit mines for the new all-electric extractivism. The other side of the coin will consist in rewarding the large polluting companies with cement, steel, hydrocarbons which will never cease to agonize, and the banks financing them with rights to pollute against hard cash to supposedly protect nature. To do this, of course, nature or its "services" must be reduced to a commodity that can be exchanged on the markets. The major Canadian banks are just waiting for the development of this market to move their ever-increasing fossil fuel investments through it at a snail's pace:

*"...the five largest Canadian banks have significantly increased their investments in fossil fuels in 2021. The Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) is said to have even doubled its aid to this industry last year. According to Banking on Climate Chaos, RBC's investments in fossil fuels increased from \$19 billion to \$39 billion between 2020 and 2022, according to the book. [...] Canada's major banks are now among the top 20 financiers of fossil fuels globally."*

*"Recall that between 2019 and 2021, G20 countries and multilateral development banks spent no less than US\$55 billion in public financial support for the fossil fuel sector. This is almost twice as much as the annual support given by these same countries to renewable energies. [...] Canada would be the second-largest G20 country for fossil fuel subsidies."* [14]

## **Neither the numerical targets nor the three prescriptions of the UN Secretary-General will be enough**

However, we must not throw overboard the quantified targets, of which the 30% is not the only one:

*"Among the twenty targets debated in Montreal to arrive at a possible global framework on biodiversity, that of protecting 30% of the territory by 2030 is often a priority. Other quantified targets are also found in the draft agreement: halving the rate of introduction of invasive species, halving the leakage of fertilizers into the environment, reducing by two thirds the use of pesticides, for example. The boss of the IPBES deplors that, in the first days of COP15, some countries have indicated that they 'do not want any figures in the targets'. These positions can still evolve, of course, but such an outcome would be 'dramatic' in the opinion of Ms. Larigauderie. Without quantified targets, 'we have no roadmap, we cannot measure anything. It would be a failure,' she says."* [15]

Then you must follow it up: "The global pact to save nature, which is the subject of negotiations at COP15, will be doomed to failure, whatever its ambitions, if the countries do not agree on real mechanisms for applying and reviewing commitments, environmental activists denounced on Saturday. [...] However, the current text on biodiversity only 'urges' countries to take into account a global assessment scheduled in four years, without committing to a possible national effort if the

trajectory is not maintained" [16].

But would all of this be enough? The Secretary General of the United Nations seems to doubt it:

*"The shocking phrases followed one another in the speech of the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN), Antonio Guterres, at the opening of the Conference of the Parties (COP15) on biodiversity, in Montreal, on Tuesday. "Humanity is a weapon of mass destruction against nature." "Let's forget the daydreams of some billionaires: there is no planet B."*

"Antonio Guterres called for, in fact, three concrete actions. First, on the part of governments, national action plans that encompass all ministries, from finance to food, energy and infrastructure. Second, from companies and investors, he said he expects them to be 'nature's allies, not enemies.' [...] Finally, Antonio Guterres invited the developed countries to provide massive financial support to the countries of the South, which are the guardians of the planet's natural wealth." [17]

Frankly speaking, the Secretary-General's three prescriptions are doubtful. We know the too short scope of the voluntary national climate plans still noted at COP27 and perhaps an irremediable failure. On the part of large private companies, we have previously seen the orientation of banks and we have seen the stranglehold of fossil fuel companies on COP27. As for support for dependent countries, we are still waiting for the \$100 billion a year from the old imperialist countries to support the South to fight the climate crisis and to know the who-how-why of the new loss and damage fund created in the snatch of COP27 to save it from drowning.

### **The Canadian host and his Quebec friend are among the dunces of the bankrupt class**

The Canadian host of COP15, with Quebec not far behind, is a good example of these failures applied to forest management, which is fundamental for the preservation of biodiversity:

*"[The] American National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) gave the worst marks to this trio of dunces. Canada comes in third, after Brazil (shameless destroyer of the Amazonian Forest) and Russia (the Russian forest represents a fifth of the world's forest, but precious hectares are sacrificed there for the benefit of the extraction of gas, oil and gold as well as logging). [...] It is no coincidence that these poor students alone held, in 2020, 65% of the forest area still intact on the planet, with spectacular wealth in biodiversity observed in both boreal and tropical territory. Alas, three times alas! As if this vast territory gave them the impression that they had more to waste, the three accomplices are the ones who have reduced the untouched forest area the most between 2000 and 2020.*

"By announcing this week a biodiversity protection plan on which, frankly, we must not spit, Quebec had a great opportunity to prioritize safeguarding measures for woodland caribou. What the Minister of the Environment Benoit Charette did not do, to everyone's surprise." [18]

It is rather pitiful that Canada is reluctant to meet the demands of the European Union, which is considered the good student in the class, even if everyone failed the exam, among other things, in relation to the status of nuclear power and so-called natural gas, which are considered transition energy:

*"On the sidelines of COP15, the European Parliament and the Member States of the European Union (EU) reached an agreement on Tuesday to ban the marketing on the European market of a series of basic products linked to deforestation in the world. Cocoa, coffee, soy, but also palm oil, wood, beef*



*and rubber are concerned, as well as several associated materials (leather, furniture, printed paper, charcoal, etc.). [...] Canada, which in 2016 concluded a free trade agreement with Europe, opposes the application of these new regulations, which would impose additional costs and burdensome traceability requirements for Canadian companies, according to a diplomatic document obtained by La Presse.” [19]*

## **Science has not capitulated, but it has its socio-political demands which are not trivial**

The fact remains that science has not capitulated on the possibility of humanity getting out of it... subject to certain conditions:

*“...is it possible to stop this great decline in biodiversity? To stop the collapse of life on Earth before 2050? [...] To answer this question, David Leclère relied on his expertise in soil modeling and, as the task was immense and complex, he also teamed up with some sixty researchers, from some forty research teams. [...] David Leclère and his colleagues have evaluated seven scenarios, seven possible futures, developed from the work done for decades to model the climate. [...]*

“The most ambitious scenario also incorporates more sustainable modes, where more is produced on less land. Added to this is a reduction in food waste and a more plant-based diet. ‘We are replacing the consumption of meat and milk with proteins of vegetable origin, with the exception of regions for which we know that there is clearly a deficiency in protein production. Also, we intensify yields in a sustainable way,’ adds David Leclère. [...]

“His article ‘Bending the curve of terrestrial biodiversity needs an integrated strategy’ published in Nature generated enormous enthusiasm and generalized the use of the expression ‘bending the curve’. But this article also added a good dose of realism, because to achieve these objectives, it will be necessary to put in place profound changes. ‘It is absolutely necessary, among other things, to engage in a more global transformation of a food system, from farm to fork’ says David Leclère. [...]

“The models also reveal that if we are content to extend the protected areas, without any other modification in the modes of production, we could face a significant increase in agricultural prices. [...] And to these efforts must be added those for the climate. [...] In short, this work has made ambitious targets more palatable to some governments, because they are now backed by science. The idea of reversing the curve is now infused in the first of the four main objectives of the global biodiversity framework to be negotiated in Montreal.” [20]

## **At the end of the line is the capitalist blockage that an alternative conference has touched on**

The conference “Degrowth: the first milestones to be taken over the next five years” organized on the sidelines of COP15 and attended by Professor Éric Pineault, l’Institut des sciences de l’environnement de l’UQAM and president of its research committee, and Bill McKibben, author, American environmental activist and founder of the 350.org association, which won the Alternative Nobel Prize for this, pleaded the need to change our conception of the economy to integrate notions of degrowth . “Stopping the collapse of life will not happen without reviewing the foundations of our economy [...] To achieve this, we will have to rethink the energy transition, reduce working time, transform agriculture, modify our diet and review our conception property” [21].

How sweetly this last point is said! Yes, we must “go beyond capitalism”, not to say overthrow it, as the left party Québec solidaire says in its program which is gathering dust on some shelf. On the occasion of the Collectif COP15 demonstration, Solidaire spokespersons called for “[a]n immediate temporary moratorium on mining claims in southern Quebec” according to La Presse. Why only in the South. Should we abandon the vast indigenous North to the “free for all” cheap mining? And why temporary? The claim of Climat-Québec, the small party of former Parti québécois minister and former leader of the federal Bloc Québécois Martine Ouellet to protect the 83 areas already planned in the South by communities, and what “La Grande Marche des forêts” had demanded to protect in the summer of 2021, seems more appropriate and consistent.

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## Footnotes

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