



## Conserving the Natural Environment with Protected Areas 2020 Value-for-Money Audit

### Why We Did This Audit

- The *Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, 2006* directs the Environment Ministry to establish a network of protected areas (parks and reserves) to conserve biodiversity—the variety of life—and protect the best examples of the natural regions of Ontario.
- The *Far North Act, 2010* directs the Natural Resources Ministry to work with First Nations to protect 22.5 million hectares in Northern Ontario.

### Why It Matters

- The future survival of over 2,200 species of all plants and animals in Ontario that have been studied by scientists is of significant concern. The loss of biodiversity is one of the top five risks to economies over the next decade.
- Protected areas are a safe haven for species and allow nature to function with little or no intervention by people. Some threats to species, such as habitat loss, are eliminated when areas are protected.

### What We Found

- Ontario has no plan or a province-wide target to expand its network of protected areas. As of October 2020, protected areas covered 10.7% of the province, with only 3,007 hectares or 0.003% of the land area being added over the last five years. Biodiversity is most at risk in southern Ontario, where only 0.6% of lands are protected. The lack of dedicated staff tasked with expanding the protected areas network and the decrease in 2012 in the Ministry's land acquisition budget from \$500,000 to only \$1,000 per year have contributed to Ontario's slow progress.
- Only 10.4% of Ontario's Far North is protected—well short of the 50% protection target in the *Far North Act, 2010*. The number of staff at the Natural Resources Ministry working with First Nations communities decreased from 22 in 2018 to 10 at the time of our audit. In addition, the Natural Resources Ministry has not addressed requests by First Nations to create Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas—protected areas that are managed by Indigenous peoples based on Indigenous laws and traditions.
- Only seven of the 254 staff members at Ontario Parks, a branch within the Environment Ministry, are ecologists responsible for leading science-related activities to understand the status of biodiversity in existing protected areas. In addition, only 12 are park planners responsible for developing, reviewing and updating management plans for 630 provincial parks and conservation reserves. Management plans dictate how these protected areas are to be managed, including priorities for protecting the natural features within them.
- Provincial parks and conservation reserves are home to more than three-quarters of Ontario's species at risk, but few management plans contain actions to protect these species. Also, the Environment Ministry does not collect necessary information about species at risk, invasive species that harm biodiversity, and the impact of hunting, fishing and trapping—activities that are permitted in most parks and reserves—on ecological integrity, or the naturalness of an area.
- The Natural Resources Ministry did not protect three wilderness areas from potential logging or claim staking—activities that are prohibited under the *Wilderness Areas Act*.
- Two-thirds of Algonquin Provincial Park does not meet the criteria for a protected area because of commercial logging. Algonquin is the only provincial park in Ontario where commercial logging is still permitted.

### Conclusions

- Insufficient staffing and funding have impacted the ministries' compliance with their legal obligations to conserve the natural environment through protected areas. An effective network of protected areas is necessary to slow or stop the loss of biodiversity—particularly critical in southern Ontario—so that Ontarians can more fully realize the benefits that nature provides, including recreational opportunities.
- The Environment Ministry did not know enough about the state of biodiversity within existing protected areas to demonstrate that it is compliant with its legislative responsibility to conserve biodiversity in these areas.
- The province is missing opportunities to increase the size of its protected areas because it does not work with other parties to manage lands for conservation purposes. One of the biggest opportunities to create new protected areas is in the Far North, but, over the last five years, the Natural Resources Ministry has not made progress on working with First Nations to develop land use plans in the Far North.