URBAN STRATEGIES INC.

Protecting Georgian Bay's Coastal Region

Discussion Paper



Discussion Paper Summary

October 2026

Georgian Bay Vision 2050 Project

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Prepared for the Georgian Bay Vision 2050 Project

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Photo Credit to Brady Carpenter (Cover), GBA Vision 2050 Project Team

Lands and Waters Acknowledgement

The Georgian Bay Vision 2050 project study area in the eastern and northern coastal region of Georgian Bay is situated in Anishinaabe traditional lands and waters. Indigenous peoples in the area are of Ojibway, Chippewa, Odawa and Potawatomi lineage; Mohawk people from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy also reside in the area. The project study area is covered by the Robinson-Huron Treaty of 1850 and the Williams Treaties of 1923.

The Georgian Bay Association (GBA) and the Georgian Bay Vision 2050 project recognize the traditional stewardship of the lands and waters in the area by these First Nations: Henvey Inlet First Nation, Magnetawan First Nation, Shawanaga First Nation, Wasauksing First Nation, Moose Deer Point First Nation, Wahta Mohawks, Beausoleil First Nation, Dokis First Nation, Whitefish River First Nation, and Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory.

The Georgian Bay Vision 2050 team hopes to work in partnership with First Nations in developing any form of conservation framework for the region and to move beyond acknowledgement to meaningful action. The GBA will continue to learn from traditional teachings on conserving and restoring these lands and waters as we work together to conserve the region's ecological and cultural health. The GBA recognizes that any form of collaboration must be a decision made by each Nation based on its independent jurisdiction.

A Unique and Globally Significant Ecosystem

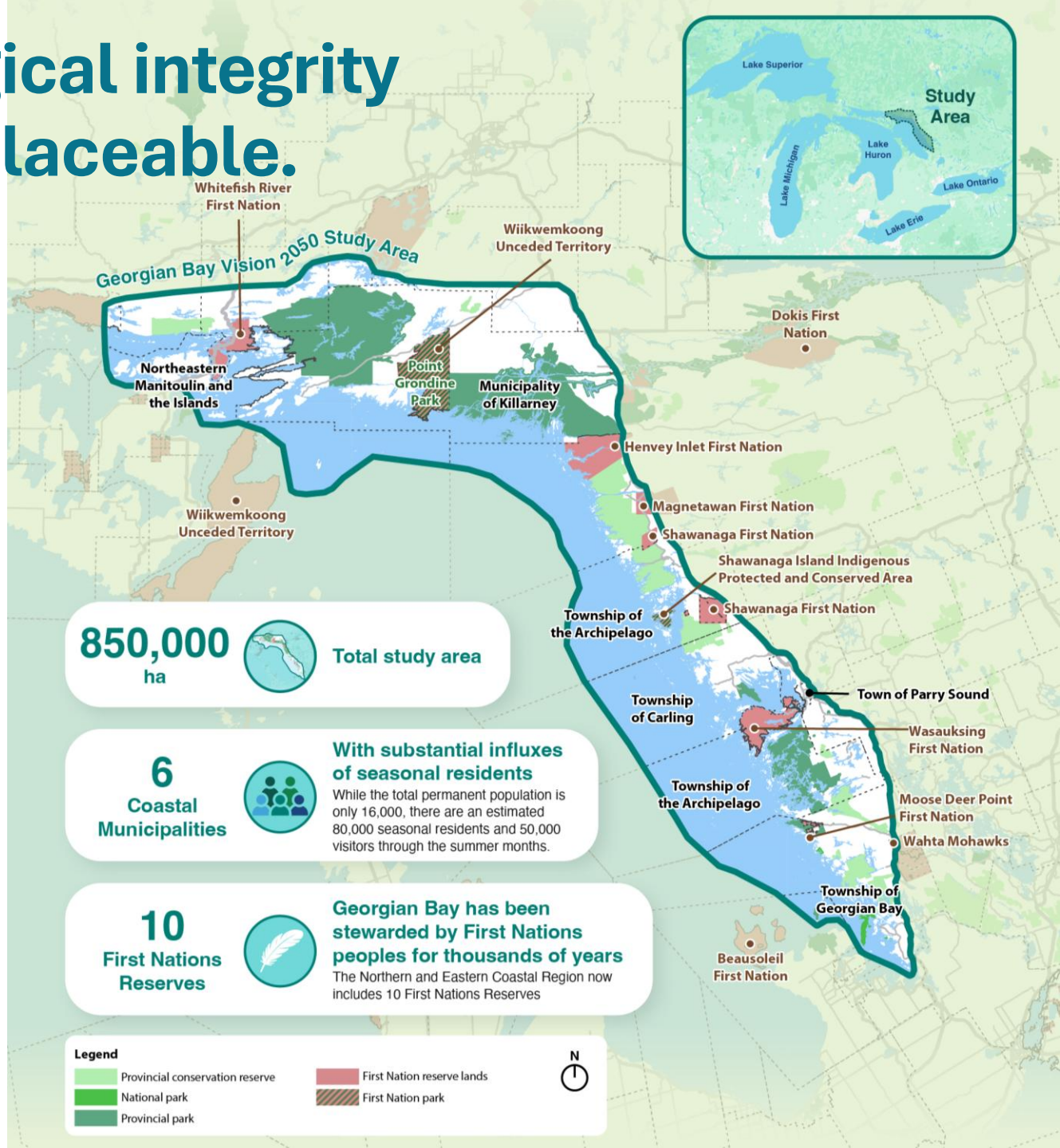


The Coastal Region's ecological integrity is increasingly rare and irreplaceable.

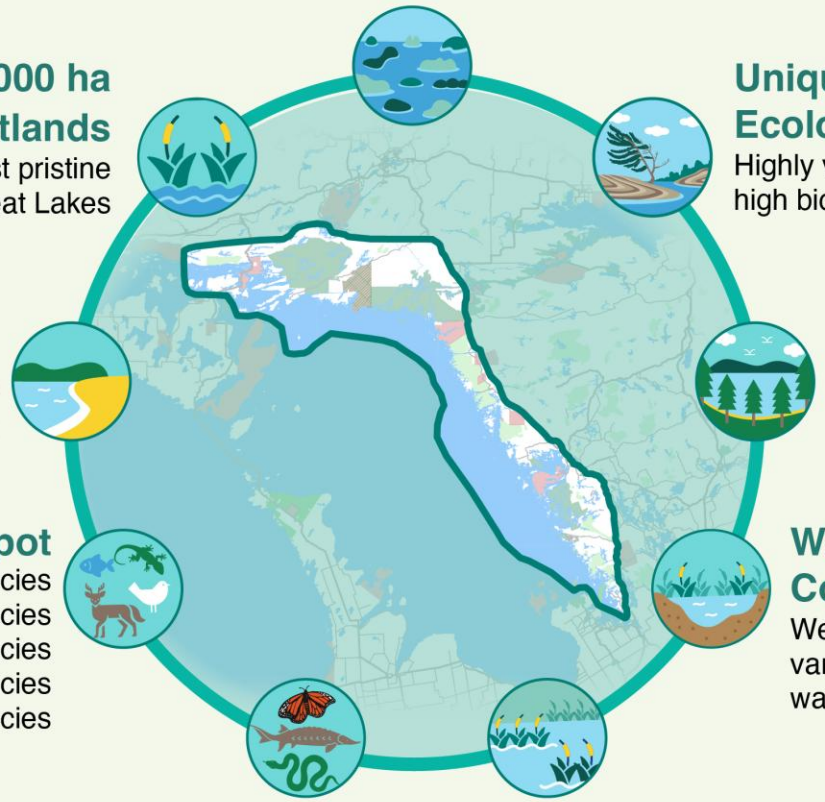
The Coastal Region contains exceptional geological, physical, biological, and chemical features within the globally significant Great Lakes system.

International environmental organizations and Canadian government scientists have recognized the Coastal Region's significance.

Unlike many parts of the Great Lakes system that have already experienced significant ecological degradation, much of the Coastal Region remains in relatively good ecological health.



Unique and Ecologically Important Features of the Coastal Region



>30,000 Islands
World's largest freshwater archipelago

>17,000 ha Coastal Wetlands
With the most pristine wetlands of the Great Lakes

Unique Physical and Ecological Features
Highly varied environment with high biodiversity richness

>9,000 km Coastal and Island Shoreline
More than all of Lake Huron

Substantial Wilderness
Much of the Coastal Region remains undeveloped, with substantial amount of wilderness remaining

Biodiversity Hot Spot
984 Plant species
34 Reptile and amphibian species
44 Mammal species
170 Breeding bird species
60 Fish species

Water Filtration & Flood Control
Wetlands provide extensive and varied habitats, and are crucial for water filtration and flood control

50 Species at Risk
Representing 20% of Species at Risk in Ontario

Relatively Healthy Ecosystems
Some of the least human-disturbed ecosystems remaining in the Great Lakes

Increasing Threats to the Coastal Region



Many threats put the Coastal Region at risk

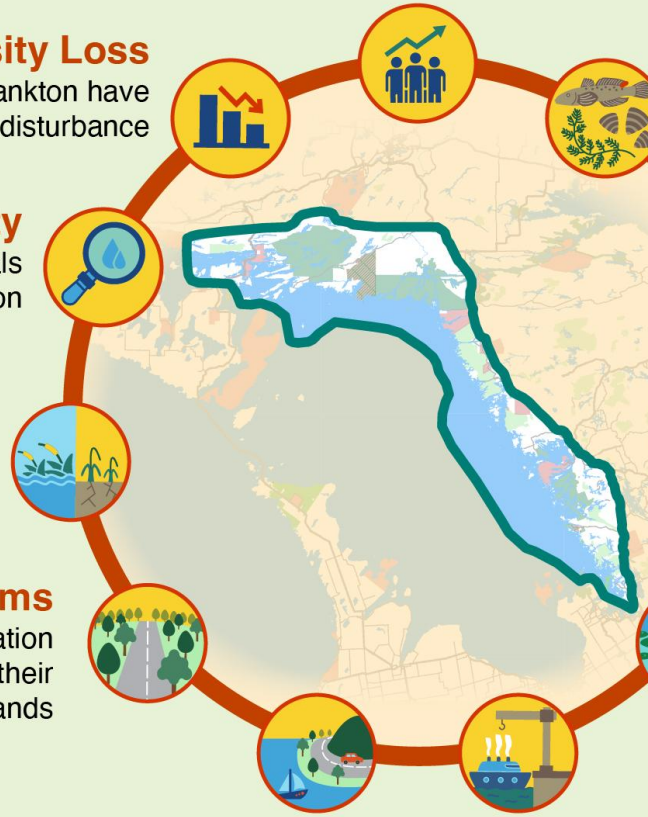
Population Growth
Southern Ontario is expected to grow by 27% by 2051

Biodiversity Loss
Populations of fish and plankton have collapsed from human disturbance

Invasive species
78 harmful invasive species has established within the Great Lakes

Water Quality
Legacy toxic chemicals continue to harm Lake Huron

Unprotected Lands
Approximately 45% of the lands remain unprotected



Climate Change
Extreme water level fluctuations and weather events are become more severe and frequent

Unprotected Waters
Few protected areas include waters, leaving the crucial littoral system unprotected

Fragmented Ecosystems
Human-caused habitat fragmentation prevents migratory species from their required movements across lands

Phosphorus Imbalance
High phosphorus levels in the nearshore waters create risk of toxic algal blooms

Habitat Disturbance from Roads and Boating
Road density is the main source of human disturbance in the Coastal Region's lands. In the waters, boating causes significant negative ecological impacts

Shoreline Modification and Hardening
Shoreline hardening has substantial impacts on ecosystem health. Around Severn Sound, up to a third of shorelines have been hardened

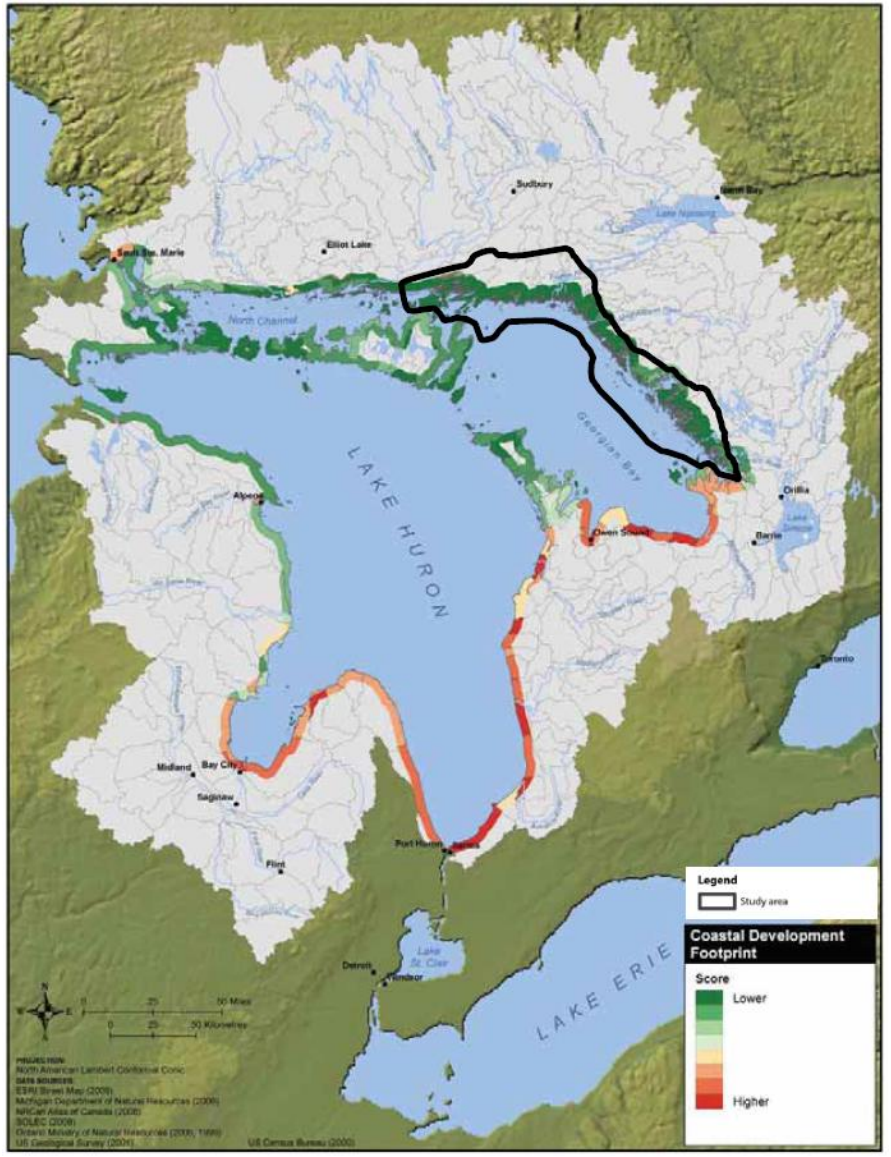
Without stronger protection and conservation, the ecological integrity and natural beauty are at risk.

Growing pressures include increased development, shoreline hardening, invasive species, pollution, and habitat loss.

Cumulative environmental impacts are intensifying with climate change.

Surrounding communities are projected to grow 30% by 2051, with seasonal populations already exceeding permanent residents.

Rising recreational and development pressures place the Coastal Region at a critical threshold between urbanization and wilderness.



The Coastal Region's natural beauty will continue to attract residents and visitors. Without stronger, coordinated protection and conservation, growing development and recreational use could permanently diminish the ecological integrity that defines the region. Decisions related to managing future growth must balance protection and conservation with recreation and community prosperity.



Critical Gaps Persist in Protection and Conservation Initiatives



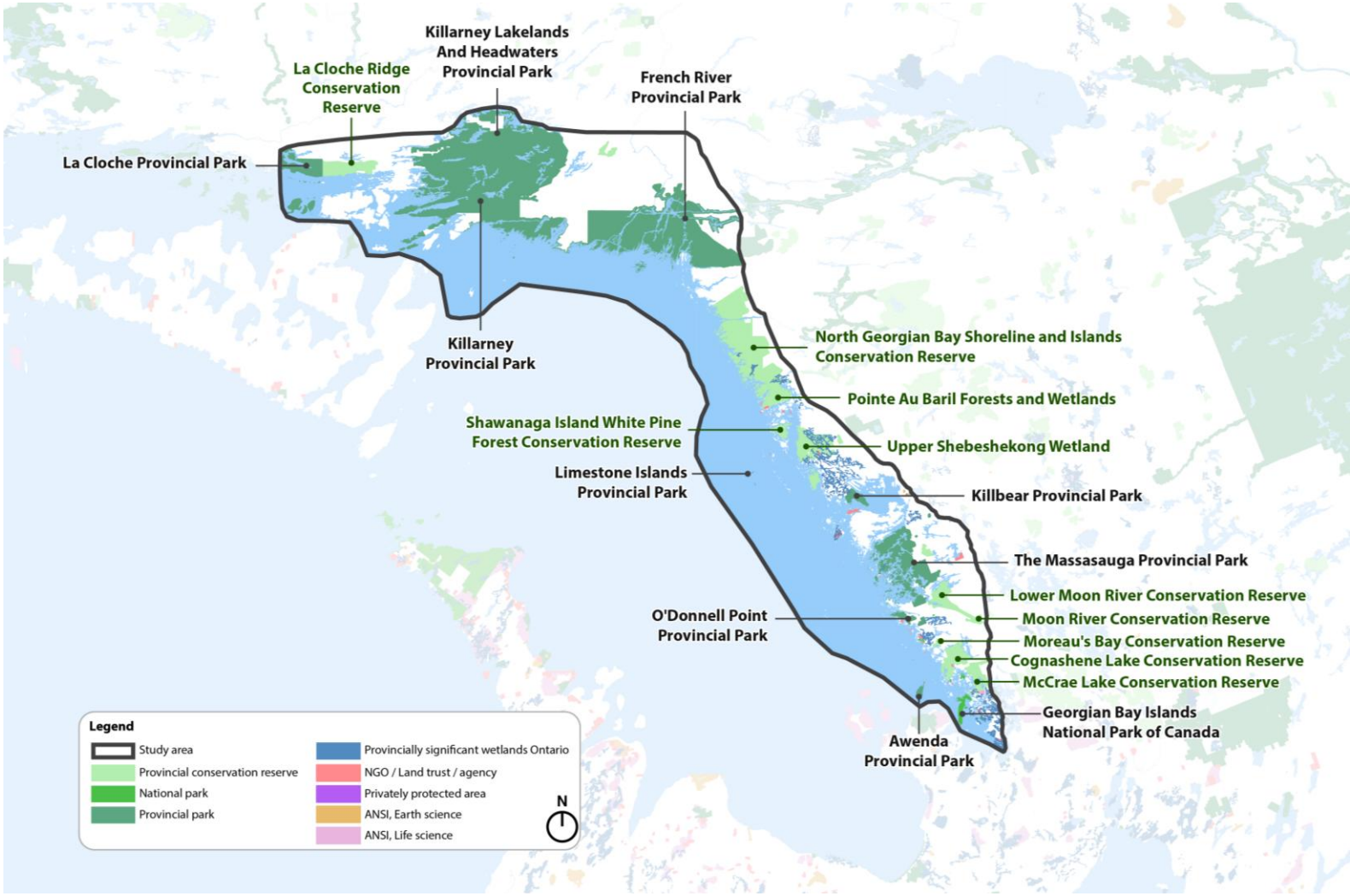
Ongoing Significant Initiatives and Collaboration

The Coastal Region already benefits from:

- Protected and Conserved areas (~ 55% of the Coastal Region's lands);
- Recognitions of ecological significance;
- International, National, and Provincial Government Data Collection and Monitoring Initiatives; and
- Local municipal, non-governmental organization, community-based, and First Nations-led initiatives

Together, these initiatives contribute to stewardship, land protection, education, invasive species management, and species-at-risk protection.

This is a significant foundation, but it is not enough.



Critical Gaps Must Be Addressed Before Irreversible Ecological Loss Occurs

The Coastal Region lacks key components of effective environmental protection.

- No Coastal Region-wide ecosystem-based regime exists for protection, monitoring or management.
- No formal collaboration occurs across governments and organizations involved in protection and conservation initiatives.
- Limited to no protection exists for the Coastal Region of waters, including littoral or aquatic ecosystems.
- Many ecologically important lands remain unprotected.

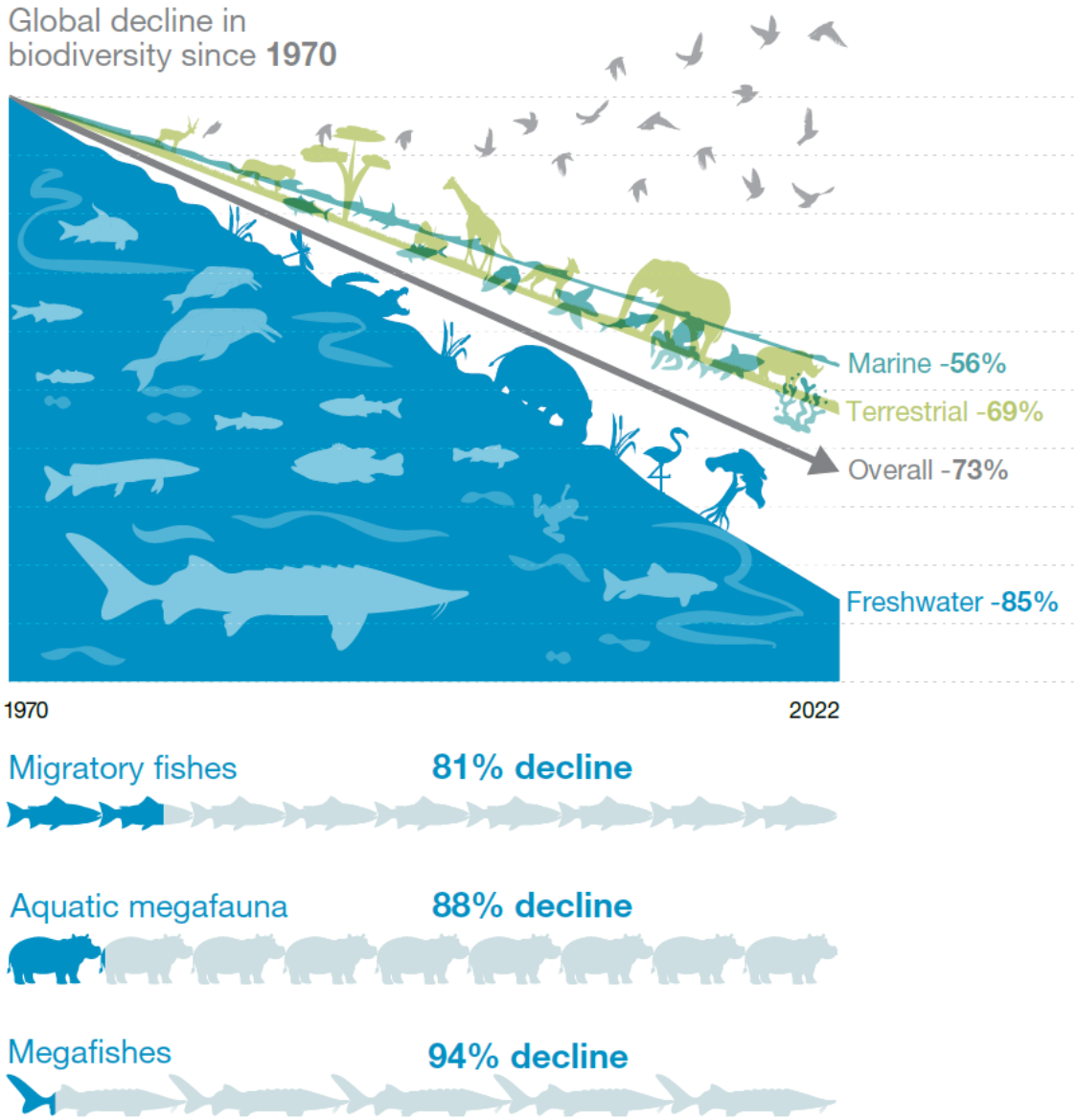
While significant protected areas and conservation programs exist in the Coastal Region, the lack of a cohesive, regional, ecosystem-based protection of the region's lands and waters means that critical gaps exist. Addressing these gaps is critical to sustaining this globally unique ecosystem.

A Timely Opportunity to Respond to the Biodiversity Crisis

The global biodiversity crisis is evidenced by unprecedented losses of species, habitat destruction, and population declines.

International commitments aim to halt the loss of biodiversity, including a target to protect 30% of the planet by 2030 (“30 by 30”).

Canada is a signatory to this target, and Ontario has agreed to collaborate on achieving it.



The Path Forward



A Regional, Collaborative, And Ecosystem-Based Conservation Framework Is Needed For Lands And Waters

The next step must be to develop a **Coastal Region conservation framework** that clearly defines why stronger protection and conservation are required, what the top priorities for protection and conservation are, who should be involved, and how coordinated action and decision-making will occur.

It is time to convene all concerned partners to co-design a coordinated, region-wide protection and conservation framework that safeguards the Coastal Region's ecological integrity before it is lost.



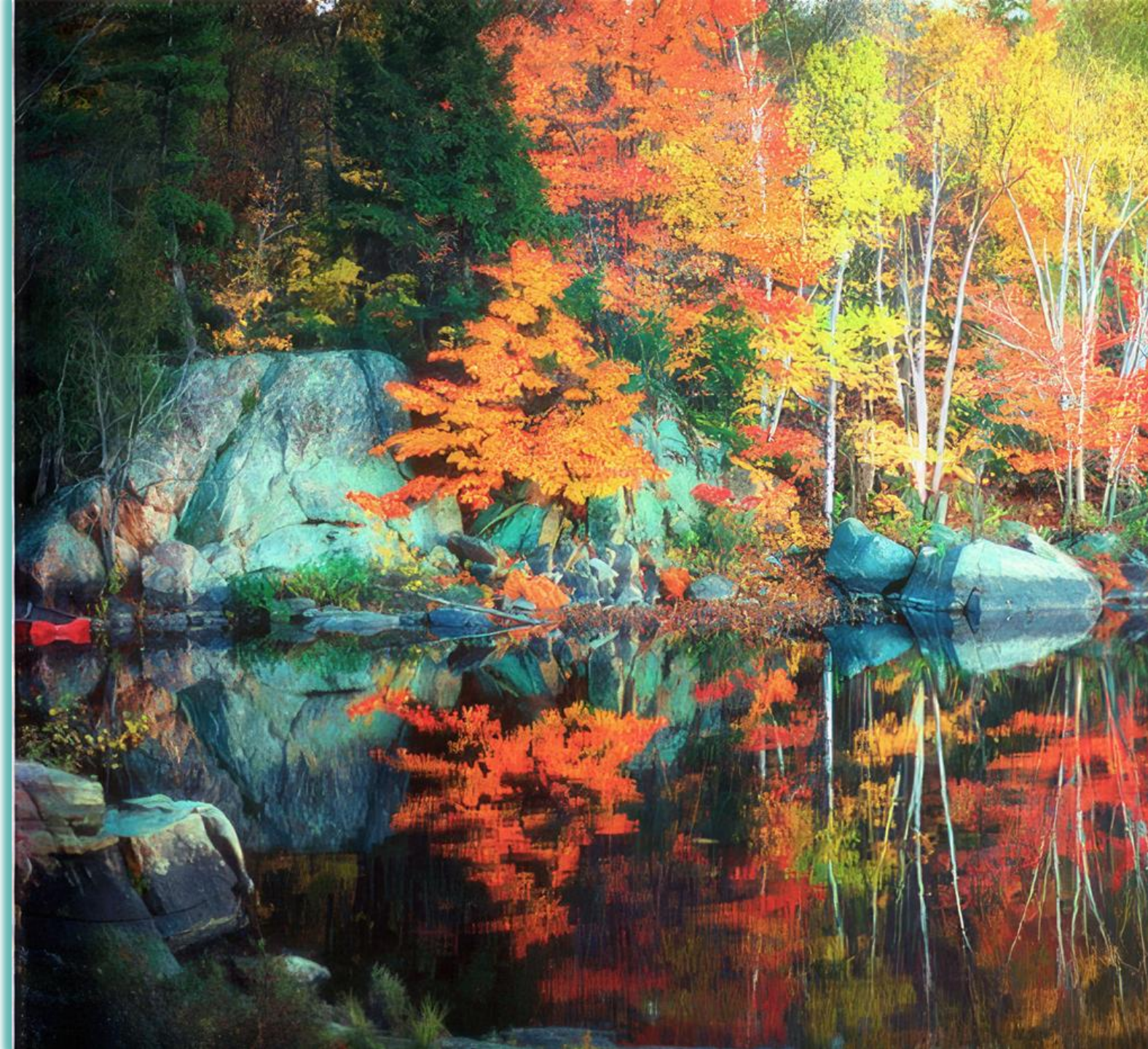
Key Principles

- **Regional, ecosystem-based protection:** spanning lands and waters
- **Inclusive approaches:** collaborative and rights-based
- **Layered conservation mechanisms:** overlapping mechanisms where possible
- **Adaptive management:** ongoing responses to human impacts, climate change, and ecological change
- **Long-term, opportunistic collaboration**: Secure political backing and sustainable financing



Potential Mechanisms

- Identifying additional **protected and conserved areas** (including water)
- Creating a **cohesive network** of existing protected and conserved areas
- Creating an **area-specific land use plan**, such as the Niagara Escarpment Plan or Greenbelt Plan
- Creating a **Conservation Authority** for the Coastal Region's watershed
- Promoting additional **First Nations conservation** and **community-led** conservation **collaboration and actions**



Now is the time to *act*.



The Coastal Region:
It is unique.
It is vulnerable.
It is worth protecting.

It is time to convene all concerned partners to **co-design a coordinated, region-wide protection and conservation framework** that safeguards the Coastal Region's ecological integrity before it is lost.

Nature does not have a seat at the table.
Who will speak and act for it?



Thank you

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