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Experts urge Premier to improve species protection

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A group of 35 high-profile environmental scientists, invited by Simon Fraser University biologist Arne Mooers, has written to B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell asking for effective legislation to improve the protection of B.C.

's species at risk.

The scientists are raising an alarm that more than one in three of the nearly 4,000 species assessed by the province is under threat in B.C., which does not have a species protection law.

'These scientists are members of the prestigious Royal Society and holders of relevant Research Chairs at universities province-wide,' says Mooers. 'You might call them extra-credible. If they are concerned, we all should be concerned.'

The letter follows a report (<http://www.dauidsuzuki.org/publications/reports/2010/>) released last week highlighting 'the inadequate patchwork' of laws and policies in B.C. for protecting the 1,900 species at risk of extinction or extirpation.

It also points out that while several neighbouring jurisdictions in the U.S. have strong species protection laws, B.C. stands out as one of only two provinces in Canada without endangered species legislation. The other is Alberta.

The scientists acknowledge the fact that the province has committed both internationally and nationally to protecting biodiversity, and was actively engaged in negotiations for the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

'Canada was the first major industrialized country to ratify the Convention, and is required to develop legal provisions for the protection of threatened species and populations,' notes Mooers. 'The UN has declared 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity. Because much of B.C. is owned by the citizens of the province, B.C. must have effective legislation.'

The scientists commend the government for the recent establishment of new parks and protected areas but don't believe parks provide adequate protection.

'I doubt that we can outright protect a great deal more of the province. What we can do, however, is manage what we have better,' says Royal Society of Canada Fellow John Borden, an SFU professor emeritus and professional forester.

Prof. Sally Otto, Director of the Biodiversity Research Center at UBC and another Royal Society fellow, agrees: 'Islands of protection for endangered species in B.C. will not turn the rising tide of risk. We need to protect endangered wildlife province-wide.'

A task force to investigate what such legislation might look like has been struck by the government. However the senior academics note that the panel is decidedly non-technical in nature, and they emphasize that 'the final legislation must be firmly grounded on sound science in order to achieve the goal of protecting species at risk.'

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'We are lucky to live on one of the world's richest and most beautiful estates,' says Prof. Brad Anholt, Canada Research Chair in Ecology at the University of Victoria. 'We dare not lose this treasure simply because we fell asleep and let the house burn down.'