

COMMENT

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Canada's vast boreal forests must be protected

Our forests play a unique role in the global carbon equation

ANDREW WEAVER

Living in times of unprecedented climate change has given way to new uncertainties. Every day, new evidence points to fundamental changes in our natural world. Most recently, there is more news that warming temperatures are killing our forests ("Tree deaths skyrocketing," *Ottawa Citizen*, Jan. 23).

It's tempting to respond with radical new approaches to forestry beyond our base of knowledge.

But a conservative, responsible outlook demands we take a deliberate accounting of what we know and what we can control. And that scientific accounting points decisively toward the most effective

option within our control — increased boreal forest conservation.

Global warming is likely to increase the rate of fires and insect damage in Canada's forests. This will increase the amount of carbon released due to natural events that are beyond our immediate control.

But apart from fire and insects, there are measures that we can readily control. We can reduce forest-related carbon emissions by reducing industrial disturbance in our forests.

Canada's boreal forest plays a unique role in the global carbon equation. Stretching across our north, our boreal forest stores more carbon per hectare than any other ecosystem on Earth

(making it the world's largest terrestrial carbon storehouse.

The more we disturb our boreal forest with increased industrial activity, the more stored carbon is released. To mitigate global warming we should be finding ways to decrease carbon released from industrial disturbance, not increase them as some are suggesting.

In a future affected by global warming, our boreal forests have other important roles to play in addition to storing carbon.

Forest birds and wildlife will need to shift their distributions northward in order to survive.

This necessary migration will be eased by leaving large northern forest ecosystems intact.

Limiting disturbance will help maintain the resiliency of our forests to adapt to global warming.

Last year, I was one of the

1,500 scientists from around the globe who urged Canada's governments to do as much as possible to protect Canada's vast boreal forest. I continue to advise the International Boreal Conservation Campaign, a scientifically driven project of the Pew Charitable Trusts that recommends protection for at least half of Canada's boreal forest.

Scientists worldwide recognize that Canada's boreal forest is one of the largest, most intact old-growth forests left on Earth. Rivalling the Amazon rainforest in size and ecological value, the boreal forest provides globally important, irreplaceable ecosystem services.

These include tremendous carbon sequestration and storage capacity, vast reserves of fresh water, the world's most extensive wetlands, and habitat for enormous,

healthy populations of wildlife, including migratory waterfowl, songbirds and caribou.

There has been much recent progress in parts of Canada to increase protections of the boreal region with commitments to protect tens of millions of acres from industrial disturbance.

For example, the government of Ontario recently promised to permanently protect 55 million acres of boreal forest, one of the biggest land protection commitments in history.

This commitment was largely motivated by the opportunity to protect the forest's enormous stores of carbon.

As we learn more about global warming, we continue to recognize that decreasing industrial emissions of carbon is always the No. 1 priority.

In Canada, we have the

additional opportunity and responsibility to be effective carbon stewards by maintaining large areas of our boreal forest off-limits to industrial disturbance.

Protecting our large carbon stocks and other value in our boreal forest is a crucial tool in our fight against the negative impacts of global warming that is really within our reach.

*Andrew Weaver is a professor and Canada Research Chair in climate modelling and analysis at the University of Victoria. He was a lead author for the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and advises the Pew Charitable Trust's International Boreal Conservation Campaign (interboreal.org). His most recent book is *Keeping our Cool: Canada in a Warming World*.*