

Ontario warned of 'future without butterflies'
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Polar bears, barn owls, monarch butterflies and other endangered animals and plants are in an alarming state of decline in Ontario, yet outdated provincial legislation is doing little to reverse the trend, according to an environmental study released today.

In fact, the analysis indicates more than three-quarters of species identified as endangered receive no legal protection in the province, while the law barely protects even those that it expressly acknowledges need help.

The report, by a new coalition of environmental groups, calls it a "crisis of extinction."

"What we're looking at is a future without butterflies," said Rick Smith, executive director of Environmental Defence Canada and a coalition member.

"We're consigning the wildlife experiences of our children to feeding grey squirrels and pigeons in the park."

For at-risk species for which trends are known, 76 per cent are either already gone from Ontario or are on their way to disappearing, the analysis concludes.

Critics said the "unprecedented decline" is the result of habitat loss, pollution and climate change.

Among endangered species listed federally but unprotected because Ontario doesn't recognize them are the colourful eastern prairie fringed orchid and the American chestnut.

Also included are woodland caribou, barn owl and the American badger.

While provincial legislation does recognize the eastern loggerhead shrike as endangered, its numbers, like many others listed, are still falling.

Part of the problem is that Ontario's one-page Endangered Species Act, which was leading-edge when first introduced in 1971, doesn't include 147 of the 190 species in the province now listed federally as endangered.

There were fewer than 80 listed 20 years ago.

Sixteen of those are either completely extinct or have vanished from Ontario.

Natural Resources Minister David Ramsay was unavailable to respond to the report today. However, Kevin Wilson, an assistant deputy minister with the Ministry of Natural Resources, said a review of the legislation has been under way for several months.

"It's the government's position that they have decided to move ahead with a review," Wilson said.

The province has also taken steps to protect habitat and species such as the bald eagle and peregrine falcon are recovering, he said.

The coalition is calling for new legislation that includes mandatory protection for endangered species and their habitats.

It also wants a streamlined, science-based process for including animals on the endangered list and programs to both protect at-risk species and help them recover.

Ontario's environmental commissioner and auditor general have repeatedly called on the government to act.

Further information is available online at www.saveontariospecies.ca