

A letter from over 50 organizations urging federal and provincial collaboration to protect the Great Lakes through National Marine Conservation Areas.

January 22, 2025

The Honourable Todd McCarthy
Acting Ontario Minister of the
Environment, Conservation and Parks
5th Floor, 777 Bay St. Toronto, ON

The Honourable Steven Guilbeault
Minister of Environment and Climate
Change 200 Sacré-Coeur Blvd
Gatineau, QC

Dear Ministers,

Re: Call to protect the Great Lakes through the creation of National Marine Conservation Areas

The Great Lakes are a national treasure and an ecological gem in North America, upon which thousands of native species, globally rare plants, animals, and natural communities rely. This ecosystem holds 84% of North America's freshwater supply, is home to over 200 species at risk, and is the source of drinking water for millions of people.

The economic, cultural, and ecological values associated with the Great Lakes are therefore indispensable. And yet, the Canadian waters of the Great Lakes remain largely unprotected. There is, however, an emerging opportunity for positive action to ensure the conservation of the Great Lakes with the establishment of new freshwater protected areas, contributing to the nationwide effort to protect 30% of land and freshwater by 2030. In a 2024 poll, 67% of people in the region support the establishment of an NMCA.

We are writing to urge your leadership to ensure collaboration between the federal and provincial governments, to advance the establishment of new National Marine Conservation Areas (NMCAs) in the Great Lakes, starting with Lake Ontario.

The NMCA designation is the ideal conservation tool to ensure the waters of the Great Lakes are permanently protected and able to combat increasingly serious threats to biodiversity like climate change, pollution, development, and invasive species. New NMCAs can build on the success of the Lake Superior NMCA established in 2015.



Local communities have been calling for action to advance NMCA designations in the lower Great Lakes (Ontario and Erie), for years. This is because, despite increasing pressure from urbanization and population density in the region, these lake systems continue to be critical habitats for species at risk and migratory birds and butterflies. As the crises of biodiversity loss and climate change converge on the Great Lakes region, safeguarding these strongholds of biodiversity is of the utmost importance.

Eastern Lake Ontario, for example, has long been recognized for its importance to migratory bird species and is home to several Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs). Prince Edward Point is designated as an International Monarch Butterfly¹ Reserve, and home to a bird observatory to monitor the especially high volume of migratory birds that pass through annually. Across Canada, shorebird populations have declined by 42% since 1970. Shorebirds, waterbirds and aquatic species at risk rely on healthy and protected waters for their habitats and, in the case of species at risk, for their recovery.²

The ecological importance of this region has been recognized already by both the Ontario and Canadian governments as several National Wildlife Areas, provincial parks, and conservation reserves have been established or are being established in this area. We encourage both governments to take the next steps to establish protections for the waters of this region with an NMCA by initiating a feasibility assessment for Lake Ontario by the end of 2025.

As part of the feasibility assessment, it is imperative for your governments to engage in meaningful nation-to-nation consultations with local First Nations. The process to establish NMCAs in the Great Lakes must be consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and respect the inherent and treaty rights of Indigenous Peoples in the region. This is also reflected in Parks Canada's Indigenous Stewardship Policy which aims to maintain Indigenous connections to places and repair relationships where they may be broken.

¹ Found on land and in freshwater and marine environments, KBAs support rare and threatened species and ecosystems, as well as key natural processes. KBAs build on a previous legacy of IBAs (International Bird Areas), but expands the criteria of recognition to other species.

² From the 2024 State of the Birds report: <https://www.birdscanada.org/introducing-the-state-of-canadas-birds>

Our shared hope is that moving an NMCA forward for Lake Ontario can be the first step in a broader protection agenda for the Great Lakes and that NMCAs will be actively pursued for Lake Erie and Lake Huron. The Great Lakes basin is home to hundreds of species at risk and critical habitats in Ontario. For many living in Ontario, the Great Lakes foster a love for nature and it is critical that these ecologically and culturally significant ecosystems are preserved for future generations and to help halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity that threatens our collective future.

There are few opportunities to protect large areas of nearby nature in Southern Ontario, and creating freshwater NMCAs in the Great Lakes is an exciting one that we urge you both to seize, starting with Lake Ontario. We offer our full support to help advance this work, and look forward to seeing NMCA designations established in all the waters of the Great Lakes by 2025. We need your help now because time is running out to protect Lake Ontario's unique treasures.

Sincerely,



SIGNATORIES

A Rocha Canada	Nature London
Anarres Natural Health	Never Collide
Ashbridge's Bay Nature Stewards	Niagra Falls Naure Club
Bee City Canada	North Durham Nature
Bird Friendly Hamilton Burlington	Northumberland Land Trust
Bird Friendly Richmond Hill	Ontario Biodiversity Council
Bird Friendly Toronto	Ontario Headwaters Institute
Bird Friendly Uxbridge	Ontario Nature
Black Environmental Initiative	Pelee Island Bird Observatory
Blocknote Canada o/a Redtail Vineyards	Point to Point PEC Foundation
Blooming Boulevards	Prince Eddy's Brewing Company
Build the Park	Prince Edward County Field Naturalists
BurlingtonGreen Environmental Association	Religious Coalition for the Great Lakes
Destined to Fly	Surfrider Foundadtion of Canada
FLAP Canada	Swim Drink Fish
Folkes Construction Inc	The Kensington Conservancy
Friends of Kingston Inner Harbour	The Land Between
Friends of the Salmon River	TNS Ashbridges Bay Park
Hamilton Naturalists' Club	TNS Cherry Beach
High Park Nature	TNS Humber Bay Park
Kingston Field Naturalists	TNS Lake Promenade
Land Conservancy for Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington	TNS Port Union Waterfront Trail
	TNS Sunnypoint Park

SIGNATORIES

TNS Tommy Thompson

Toronto Field Naturalists

Toronto Nature Stewards

W Booth School of Engineering Practice
and Technology at McMaster University

Water Watchers

West Lake Community Association

Wild Birds Unlimited Belleville

Wild Birds Unlimited Belleville

Willow Beach Field Naturalists

York Region Environmental Alliance

York Simcoe Nature Club

