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## Canada's plant conservation efforts fall short

Plants comprise the largest percentage of species at risk in Canada, yet conservation biologists and researchers involved in plant-related work say the country needs to do much more to protect these plants.

Dr. Jenny McCune, a University of Lethbridge biology professor with expertise in plant conservation, and a team of researchers from universities across Canada surveyed 243 people who work in plant conservation or do research in plant ecology and evolution to assess the state of plant conservation in Canada. The results have been published in the interdisciplinary journal [FACETS](#).

"Most respondents agreed that Canada is underperforming or merely average when it comes to conserving plants," says McCune. "If we saved all the plants currently on the list of species at risk, we could reduce that list by nearly one-third! By not doing enough to help endangered plants, we're missing a huge opportunity to conserve biodiversity."



Few of the plants listed in Canada's Species at Risk Act (SARA) have improved their status over time. Plant diversity is concentrated in the warmer southern regions, where most people live and most of the land is privately owned. However, most landowners are unaware of plant species at risk growing on their property. SARA doesn't automatically protect these plants, and while provinces may have species-at-risk laws, they may not be enforced on private lands.

"Canada lacks a national strategy for plant conservation even though it is a party to the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation," says McCune. "Such a strategy could bring experts together to share knowledge and unify isolated local and provincial plant conservation efforts."

Responses to the survey resulted in recommendations that include advocating for laws that protect habitat and their enforcement, connecting researchers with knowledge gaps and existing funding opportunities, and providing support for graduate student research in applied plant conservation.

Further, increasing public awareness of rare plants could help conservation efforts, as research has shown that most landowners are willing to help rare species but need guidance in doing so. Alberta's [MULTISAR](#) (Multiple Species at Risk) is an example of a successful program that partners with landowners to protect species at risk, including plants. Also, consulting Indigenous knowledge holders and communities as part of recovery strategies could help improve the success of this work. Connecting researchers with local conservation groups and land stewards could improve the monitoring of rare plant populations and management strategies to recover plant species at risk.

“While Canada has a long way to go to conserve plant diversity effectively, conservation biologists and researchers are eager to contribute,” says McCune. “If Canada is to improve its progress towards the goals of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the federal government must commit to improving the conservation of plants.”

Canada is one of 150 countries to sign on to the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#), which is dedicated to promoting sustainable development.

[Read the online version.](#)

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*Our University's Blackfoot name is Iniskim, meaning Sacred Buffalo Stone. The University is located in traditional Blackfoot Confederacy territory. We honour the Blackfoot people and their traditional ways of knowing in caring for this land, as well as all Indigenous Peoples who have helped shape and continue to strengthen our University community.*