



Council of Canadian Academies
Conseil des académies canadiennes

News Release

Expert Panel on Biodiversity Science Calls for a Bold Vision

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Ottawa (November 18th) – Canada needs a bold vision to fully understand its biodiversity resources. This is a central finding of a group of 14 eminent experts brought together by the Council of Canadian Academies to assess the state and trends of taxonomy (the science that discovers, distinguishes, classifies and documents living things) in Canada. Their report, released today, observes that failure to understand Canadian biodiversity could have significant consequences for ecosystems, the economy, innovation potential and society.

“Taxonomy is the foundation for the biodiversity sciences, as advances are built upon the discovery and accurate identification of species,” said Dr. Thomas E. Lovejoy, chair of the Expert Panel. “Canada has a proud history of world class contributions to taxonomic research and although critical gaps do exist within the Canadian system, there is an opportunity for Canada to provide international leadership and move forward with a major initiative in taxonomy.”

The first step is ensuring the expertise is in place to address environmental challenges such as invasive species. In recent years, species such as zebra mussels, and the emerald ash borer, have cost North Americans billions of dollars. Strong taxonomic capacity is essential for intercepting and eradicating these species before they establish themselves. Moreover, taxonomic research contributes to economic development in the renewable resource sector and the emergent field of bioproducts (e.g. biofuels, biofibres).

Today, the evidence suggests that training and job opportunities are limited and research funding has stagnated. As a result, we have seen a decline in Canada’s international contribution to new species descriptions falling from 6th in the 1980s to 14th in the 2000s. The Expert Panel also observed that although Canada has impressive biodiversity collections and a strong digital infrastructure, most information is trapped in cabinets rather than being accessible on the internet. As a result, Canada’s data sharing efforts compare poorly internationally. Approximately 80 per cent of Canada’s online biodiversity information is being held outside Canada.

Within Canada, collections house over 50 million specimens, conservatively valued at over a quarter of a billion dollars. However, inadequate curatorial capacity, aging facilities and the lack of a national strategy or standards, have placed Canada at risk of losing long-term information essential to understanding changes in biodiversity. This information is critical for making informed policy and management decisions.

“The Expert Panel’s report is the most comprehensive and up-to-date assessment of Canada’s taxonomic expertise and biodiversity collections available,” said Elizabeth Dowdeswell, President of the Council of Canadian Academies. “I look forward to a discussion of the findings when we host Dr. Lovejoy in Ottawa on November 29th, for a workshop on the future of

Canadian taxonomy. This event will initiate an important conversation regarding the opportunities and challenges identified in the Panel's report, including a vision for Canada.”

For more information, or to download a free copy of the report in English or French please visit www.scienceadvice.ca/biodiversity.

About the Council of Canadian Academies

The Council of Canadian Academies is an independent, not-for-profit corporation that began operation in 2005. The Council supports evidence-based, expert assessments (studies) to inform public policy development in Canada. Assessments are conducted by independent, multidisciplinary panels of experts from across Canada and abroad. The Council's blue-ribbon panels serve free of charge and many are Fellows of the Council's Member Academies: the RSC: The Academies of Arts, Humanities and Sciences of Canada; the Canadian Academy of Engineering; and the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences. The Council's reports are published and made available to the public free of charge in English and French. For information please visit the Council's website at www.scienceadvice.ca.

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