

NEWS

‘All my relations’: Coastal First Nations back Jane Goodall Act

Sen. Marty Klyne says the legislation is based on both science and Indigenous values.

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Holly Lake



A dead salmon lies behind a Kermode bear, better known as the Spirit Bear, as he fishes in the Riordan River in the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia in September 2013. (Jonathan Hayward/The Canadian Press)

The Coastal First Nations have thrown their support behind the Jane Goodall Act.

Bill S-241, which was reintroduced in the Senate in March, is meant to protect captive great apes, elephants, and other wild animals. It would also ban: elephant captivity in Canada; the import of elephant ivory and rhino horns; and the captive breeding of great apes, elephants, and certain other non-domesticated animals.

It designates more than 800 other species for protection — including big cats, bears, wolves, seals, sea lions, walruses, certain monkeys, and dangerous reptiles like crocodiles and giant pythons — granting some animals limited legal standing in court so the legal system can prioritize their well-being. Through the bill's "Noah Clause," more species can be added to the list in future.

"For far too long, our relatives, bears, wolves, cougars, whales, seals, sea lions, birds, salmon, halibut, herring, and all living creatures have not been recognized by Crown governments and modern society for the individual beings and collective societies they are a part of," said Christine Smith-Martin, CEO of Coastal First Nations.

"We live together and need each other to be healthy in the biosphere that the Creator placed us in," she said in a statement. "Therefore, it is not difficult for our peoples, working through our Nation authorities, to say we support a law that offers protection to the animals we live and interact with."

Coastal First Nations is an alliance of the Council of the Haida Nation, Skidegate Band Council, Old Massett Village Council, Metlakatla Nation, Gitxaala Nation, Gitga'at Nation, Kitasoo Xai'xais Nation, Nuxalk Nation, Heiltsuk Nation, and Wuikinuxv Nation. As members, they work together to protect their coast and improve the quality of life in their communities.

Their traditional unceded territory spans the northern and central coast of British Columbia, including Haida Gwaii, reaching north to the Alaskan border and as far south as Vancouver Island.

"(We) have been champions of the environment and habitat necessary for these animals to thrive in the wild," Smith-Martin said.

The legislation's sponsor, Sen. Marty Klyne, told the Senate in March that, "together with science, the Jane Goodall Act is based (on) Indigenous values." He said the Truth and Reconciliation Commission urged Canadians to reconcile with the Earth through a restoration of reciprocity and mutual respect: "Mi'kmaq and other Indigenous laws stress that humans must journey through life in conversation and negotiation with all creation."

This is the second iteration of the bill. [**The first was introduced in November 2020**](#) by former senator Murray Sinclair before his retirement. Sinclair, who chaired the commission, spoke often of the connection between animals and reconciliation, stressing the necessity of considering the plight of wildlife together with the goals of reconciliation.

“In many Indigenous cultures, we use the phrase ‘all my relations’ to express the interdependency and interconnectedness of all life forms, and our relationship of mutual reliance and shared destiny,” he told his fellow senators in a [speech in November 2020](#).

“When we treat animals well, we act with both self-respect and mutual respect,” he continued, noting that communities only take what they need for their own well-being.

The phrase “all my relations” can be [found in the preamble of the bill](#).

Indigenous traditions teach respect, gratitude, and stewardship — values that could guide practices involving our animal relations, Sinclair said, drawing on a passage from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report.

“Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, from an Aboriginal perspective, also requires reconciliation with the natural world,” it states. “If human beings resolve problems between themselves but continue to destroy the natural world, then reconciliation remains incomplete. This is a perspective that we as Commissioners have repeatedly heard: that reconciliation will never occur unless we are also reconciled with the Earth.”

Earlier this month, [Sen. Peter Harder told the red chamber](#) that the Coastal First Nations are stewards of the Great Bear Rainforest, home of the spirit bear, and that they have a history of protecting “the great bears of the rainforest, the cetaceans of the sea, and all other creatures in the temperate bioregion.” They’re also leaders in developing the largest network of marine-protection areas on Canada’s Pacific Coast, he added.

“We are all connected — not just you and me, but all life forms of creation,” he said. “This understanding imposes responsibilities. We are at a crucial time where the interrelated goals of Indigenous rights, environmental protection, and animal welfare can help to combat cultural loss, climate change, and mass extinction in Canada and beyond. An important alliance is building to achieve these related objectives based on mutual respect and shared determination.”

The natural world is in peril, but he said a moral awakening is increasingly changing social values. As a reflection of that, inherent in the bill is “a spiritual element of respect ... for the kindred spirit of all living things.”

Harder drew on the words of Mahatma Gandhi, who once said the greatness of a nation, and its moral progress, can be judged by the way its animals are treated.

“I think there is some truth in this,” Harder said. “Protecting and respecting animals elevates our humanity. Neglecting them degrades it.”