

Census of Environment: A snapshot of Canada's growing coastal communities and their natural environment

Released at 8:30 a.m. Eastern time in The Daily, Friday, January 26, 2024

Living close to ocean and coastal ecosystems offers many advantages. People enjoy the beaches and beautiful views, the temperature is less variable than inland, and plenty of fresh, locally sourced seafood is available.

In 2021, 14.9% of people in Canada lived within 10 km of the coastline. Of these, over 3.2 million people resided on the Pacific Coast and over 2.2 million were on the Atlantic Coast.

Coastal communities are growing, especially on the Pacific Coast

Canada's coastal population grew by 5.3% from 2016 to 5.5 million people in 2021. Approximately three-quarters of this growth occurred on the Pacific Coast.

An additional 207,820 people lived in the southern coastal area of British Columbia in 2021 (Georgia Depression ecoprovince) compared with five years earlier, the largest increase nationally. The Maritime provinces (Northumberland Lowlands and Fundy Uplands ecoprovinces) accounted for most of the remaining increase (approximately 73,000 people).

From 2016 to 2021, coastal communities in the Newfoundland ecoprovince saw decreases in population (of almost 11,000 people).

Almost half a million Canadians live within less than five metres above sea level

Communities in many coastal areas of the country are at risk from rising sea levels, especially those living in low-lying areas. In 2021, over twice as many people were living within less than five metres above sea level on the Pacific Coast (318,225 people) compared with the Atlantic Coast (142,492). Within 1 km of the coast, however, the population living at this elevation is more evenly split between the Pacific Coast (151,746 people) and the Atlantic Coast (128,006).

Understanding where populations are at risk can help identify nature-based solutions where natural and modified ecosystems could be conserved or restored. Ecosystems such as salt marshes can help protect coastal populations from sea-level rise.

Better mapping to better understand marine ecosystems

The extent account for ocean and coastal ecosystems provides a foundation for ecosystem services assessment, which will enable a better understanding of the value of natural ecosystems. Today's release is based on enhanced mapping of seagrass and salt marsh areas, which are particularly important for protecting coastlines, storing carbon and providing nursery habitat for many fish species.

In 2023, known areas of seagrass meadows extended across 1,651 km² of coastal oceans, while salt marshes covered 3,602 km² of coastal area. In addition, new information is available on substrate and topographic classes where biotic data are lacking or where the ocean floor does not support biotic ecosystems.



One-seventh of Canada's oceans and coastal areas are protected or conserved

Canada has promised to conserve or protect [25% of marine areas by 2025 and 30% by 2030](#). In 2022, 14.6% of Canada's ocean and coastal areas were protected or conserved. The conserved area increased by nearly 44,000 km² from 2021 to 844,059 km², mainly because of the addition of the [Eastern Canyons Conservation Area](#) in the Scotian Shelf bioregion in the Atlantic Ocean. This new marine refuge protects cold-water corals and deep-water marine frontier areas that have a limited history of fishing.

Conserving coastal ecosystems such as seagrass, salt marsh and kelp helps to protect nursery areas for fish stocks and to ensure the continuation of ecosystem services, including coastal protection from flooding and carbon storage. In 2022, 37% of the mapped area of these ecosystems was conserved or protected.

Did you know we have a mobile app?

Get timely access to data right at your fingertips by downloading the [StatsCAN app](#), available for free on the [App Store](#) and on [Google Play](#).

Note to readers

Statistics Canada's new [Census of Environment program](#) reports on ecosystems in Canada, providing information to help Canadians make evidence-based decisions to protect, rehabilitate, enhance and sustain our environment. It follows the internationally accepted environmental-economic standard for producing information on ecosystems' extent, their condition and the services they provide.

Data on the coastal population for 2016 and 2021 are now available in a new table (38-10-0170-01). This table provides information on population and dwellings by distance from the coastline and elevation above sea level.

The ocean and coastal extent account table (38-10-0153-01) has been updated with new data on the substrate, salt marsh, seagrass and topographic classes. Limited extent data are available for some ecosystem types and regions, particularly in the north and for kelp on the Atlantic coast.

The protected and conserved ocean ecosystem extent table (38-10-0157-01) has been fully updated and includes the revisions made to the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database for 2022.

The Ecological Land Classification 2017 provides standard names and codes for Canada's ecological areas, including ecozones, ecoprovinces and ecoregions. [Marine bioregions](#) are ecologically defined bioregions that cover Canada's ocean areas.

Conserved areas include protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures. Protected areas are areas that meet the International Union for Conservation of Nature definition of a protected area. Other effective conservation management areas are areas that do not meet the formal definition of a protected area but are managed in a way that conserves biodiversity over the long term.

For more information, see [Canadian System of Environmental-Economic Accounting – Ecosystem Accounts \(5331\)](#).

Available tables: [38-10-0153-01](#), [38-10-0157-01](#) and [38-10-0170-01](#).

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5331](#).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; infostats@statcan.gc.ca) or Media Relations (statcan.mediahotline-ligneinformedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca).