



**Speaking notes for CPAWS presentation to House of Commons
Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development,**

November 24, 2005

Presented by Alison Woodley, CPAWS Northern Conservation Specialist

Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee, first of all I would like to thank you for allowing CPAWS the opportunity to provide our thoughts on these important conservation initiatives. The expansion of Waterton Lakes National Park and Nahanni National Park Reserve are both important priorities for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.

M. le président, Membres du comité, je veux premièrement vous remercier sincèrement pour nous avoir donné la chance de vous présenter nos pensées sur ces opportunités important pour la conservation de la nature. L'expansion des parcs nationaux Nahanni et Lacs - Waterton sont des priorités extrêmement important pour la Société pour la nature et les parcs du Canada.

This afternoon I will focus my comments primarily on the Nahanni expansion. I won't talk about Waterton Lakes National Park, except to say that Canada has an extraordinary opportunity to fill in the missing piece of the world's first international peace park. CPAWS is deeply committed to this expansion initiative, and my colleague, Harvey Locke, who is in London today, will be happy to answer questions about this initiative. I will focus my comments on the Nahanni.

CPAWS' vision for the Nahanni supports the vision of the local Dehcho First Nations, that the national park reserve should be expanded to protect the entire watershed of the South Nahanni River, including the Nahanni karstlands. This area is also the area of interest identified in the Dehcho--Parks Canada agreement to work towards park expansion. The policy framework, the position of local First Nations, and the position of CPAWS, a national conservation organization, are remarkably compatible, and therein lies a great opportunity for a good news story on conservation.

CPAWS has been involved in working to protect the Nahanni since the late 1960s when we led a public outcry about a proposal to dam Virginia Falls for hydro electric development. Instead we advocated for the Nahanni to be protected as a national park. In 1972, after a visit to the area by Pierre Trudeau, Nahanni National Park Reserve was established, protecting a narrow corridor along the South Nahanni River.

In 1978, the United Nations recognized the global significance of the Nahanni and included it on the first ever list of World Heritage Sites, along with such renowned places as Yellowstone and the Galapagos Islands.

En 1978 le parc national Nahanni était reconnu par les Nations Unies, sur la première liste de Sites du patrimoine mondiale jamais désignée au monde.

As a signatory to the World Heritage Convention, Canada has promised to do «all it can» to protect this World Heritage Site for future generations of the entire global community.

The timing is particularly good for strong Canadian leadership on World Heritage, since Canada, just last month, was elected as one of 21 states on the World Heritage Committee that oversees the application of the convention. Taking strong steps to protect our own World Heritage is a starting point for Canada to play a leadership role on the Committee and to lead through concrete example.

One of CPAWS' great strengths as an organization is our work to engage the public in protecting Canada's wilderness. Right now, we are traveling to 17 cities across the country with our "Nahanni Forever" event tour.

Grand Chief Norwegian and my colleague Harvey Locke are in London today as part of this tour. They will be speaking at the University of Western Ontario tonight. Across the country we have been joined by such well-known Canadians as Justin Trudeau, Cathy Jones, Sarah Harmer, Dr. David Schindler, and many others.

You can see some of the media response to our tour to date in the briefing packages I sent you.

But to me, the most rewarding part of this outreach has been the response of individual Canadians who are inspired by the Nahanni. The phones have been ringing steadily since the tour began. Canadians asking what they can do to help protect this special place. People phoning to tell us how a trip down the Nahanni changed their life. Lawyers, teachers, artists, photographers, scientists – all wanting to get involved. Yesterday I got a call from a Boy Scout leader who wanted images of the Nahanni so that he could use this as a case study for his scouts as they earned their conservation badges.

The Nahanni is a place that touches the hearts of Canadians.

There have been very positive steps taken by Parks Canada towards expanding Nahanni National Park Reserve. The question that remains, and this is a question that requires a decision by the Government of Canada as a whole, is what will the boundaries be for the park expansion?

In 1972, the boundaries that were drawn were not based on ecological principles. They protected Virginia Falls and the downstream canyons, but only included about 15% of the watershed. They left out most of the habitat of wide ranging species of wildlife.

Woodland caribou only winter in the park. Most of them migrate up towards the headwaters of the Nahanni to calve and breed outside of the park.

Grizzly bears travel far outside the park. A single male grizzly in the Nahanni may have a home range of 1000 sq km and travel 50 km outside the park. Mountain goat habitat is primarily outside the park, as is much of the range of the Dall's sheep.

The current boundaries don't work for wide ranging species of wildlife and the park clearly needs to be expanded to protect these species.

The second priority for the expansion is the need to protect clean water. As long as lands upstream of Nahanni National Park Reserve are open to industrial development, and in particular mining which has a history of significant impacts on water quality, we can't ensure clean water in the Nahanni for future generations. Protecting the entire watershed on the other hand, would secure clean water.

Another area that was omitted from the original park boundaries is the amazing Nahanni karstlands, which are an area of globally significant limestone features. The karstlands are made up of a fascinating mosaic of caves, sinkholes, labyrinths, underground rivers and streams. These features are considered by experts to be among the best examples of karst found anywhere in the world. Much of the area's water drains into the South Nahanni River through a system of underground channels. So protecting this area is also important for protecting water quality, as well as the globally unique features themselves.

These are the key values that need better protection in the Nahanni.

So what are the obstacles to achieving full watershed protection.

Mining development is the main obstacle. And we are particularly concerned about the Prairie Creek mine proposal. We don't believe this mine should be allowed to go ahead in the heart of the Nahanni watershed. It is located just 32 km upstream from the current national park. It sits right beside Prairie Creek, as you can see in the photographs in your package.

There is a very good detailed description of the Prairie Creek project in the package I sent last week in an article published last month in the Edmonton Journal. I would encourage you to read it.

CPAWS views the Prairie Creek mine as a significant threat to the ecological integrity of the current park, and the park expansion. We have serious concerns about the impact of the mine on water quality, given its location. There are 40 tonnes of cyanide, along

with other chemicals, that have been stored a few hundred metres from the creek for 20 years.

For the mine to go ahead a mine haul road is needed. That road would pass right through the heart of the sensitive Nahanni karstlands -- an area that is vulnerable to groundwater contamination.

Adding to the risk of this mine, and, in fact mining in general in the Nahanni is the natural instability of the region. Two of the largest earthquakes in recent Canadian history occurred in the Nahanni region in 1985--6.5 and 6.9 on the Richter scale.

Flash floods have also occurred on neighbouring creeks that run parallel to Prairie Creek.

This kind of natural instability of the landscape means that any human infrastructure like a mine is vulnerable. It elevates the risk of a catastrophe.

We believe strongly that this mine should not be allowed to proceed because it poses too high a risk to a place that Canada has promised the world we will protect. And it stands in the way of a visionary conservation opportunity to protect the entire watershed.

So what is needed from the Canadian government? Well, Canada has a decision to make. Allowing mining to go ahead would degrade the world class natural values of the South Nahanni watershed. Protecting the entire watershed would protect them and the Dehcho culture. As members of the Standing Committee on Environment, we ask that you join us in supporting full watershed protection in the Nahanni National Park Reserve expansion.

If I may, I would like to now introduce Grand Chief Herb Norwegian of the Dehcho First Nations from the Northwest Territories. Nahanni National Park Reserve and most of the South Nahanni Watershed lie within the traditional territory of the Dehcho First Nations. We at CPAWS have been honoured to work closely with the Grand Chief in our efforts to protect the Nahanni.

Grand Chief Norwegian was elected by the Dehcho people as recommended by the elders in 2003, and represents 13 communities comprising 6500 people in the Dehcho. Grand Chief Norwegian is in London, Ontario today and has been speaking on the Nahanni Forever tour organized by CPAWS.