

*Canadian*

# WILDERNESS

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Protecting the  
**ecosystems**  
that sustain all life

# The contemporary context of parks and protected areas

Conservation in the time of the climate change emergency

MIKE ROBINSON

If you are a member of the Baby Boomer generation, you likely heard about conservation in the context of protecting wilderness values, the need for national and provincial parks and protected areas to preserve species populations in an age of increasing urbanization, and the gradual decline of rural life as the root of Canadian prosperity and identity. Underpinning this context was a vast body of literature by authors like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, which idealized wilderness for its own sake. Arguably, Thoreau and Muir recognized human patterns of use (ranging from Indigenous hunting and gathering to back country travel for holiday recreation) as a mere component of a much larger natural ecosystem of uses, much of it devoid of any human presence.



Desolation Sound covered in fire smoke Aug 2018 – a globally famous BC cruising area experiences climate change directly. Photo courtesy Mike Robinson

However, hand-in-hand with the urbanizing national trend came the growing production of carbon dioxide, as gasoline and oil and internal combustion motors fueled the growing manufacture and transport of goods and services. Increasingly, parks became shrines for landscapes that were under attack as roads, resources and urban values began to dictate the recreational desires of Canadians. Today, one can look back over the post-World War 2 era and see the

evolution of human park and protected area use from canoeing, hiking, camping and trail riding to mountain biking, technical ice climbing, and trail running. An MA thesis I supervised in the 1990s reported that less than 1% of all visitors to Banff National Park went more than 100 meters down a trail from a parking lot. Those that did were pursuing increasingly personal agendas related to fitness and physical achievement rather than simply being in wilderness.

Now, park and protected area purpose and usage are evolving again. In the era of climate change, with growing student and millennial angst about the challenges it is posing, parks and protected areas are becoming an acknowledged tool in the global campaign to sequester carbon in natural landscapes and to protect biodiversity. In Canada's parks and protected areas, low impact human use should be permitted, but the paving of trail systems posing as bike paths and bus shuttle routes and the expansion of ski resorts and luxury hotel accommodations should not. It is almost as if the contemporary vision of parks and protected areas is a throwback – more akin to Thoreau and Muir's thinking that wilderness should be protected for wilderness' sake. Except that we know, now, that we need wilderness to protect us from the climate change emergency that we humans have created since the industrial revolution.

*Mike Robinson, President, National Board of Trustees*



CPAWS is Canada's voice for wilderness. Since 1963, we've played a lead role in creating over two-thirds of Canada's protected areas.

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# Protecting the **ecosystems** that sustain all life

## IN THIS ISSUE

### FEATURES

#### Let's fight for Sable Island • 4

Sable Island National Park Reserve threatened by oil and gas exploration  
*by Chris Miller*

#### Spiritual stewardship • 6

Indigenous Protected Areas in Canada *by Mira Oberman*

#### National Gems of the Natural World • 8

Canada's World Heritage Sites are our responsibility to the world  
and a conservation litmus test for the rest of the planet *by Alison Ronson and Karen Turner*

Gros Morne National Park • 9

Wood Buffalo National Park • 10

#### Protected Areas by the Numbers • 12

### DEPARTMENTS

#### 2 • PRESIDENT'S DESK

The contemporary context  
of parks and protected areas

#### 14 • CONTACT US, SURVEY, AGM NOTICE

*COVER: Vermillion Lake, Banff, Alberta.  
Photo by Kevin Noble/Unsplash  
ABOVE: Mosses, Seal River Watershed.  
Photo by Joshua Pearlman*



# LET'S FIGHT FOR SABLE

Sable Island National Park Reserve threatened by oil and gas exploration

BY CHRIS MILLER

Sable Island is a remarkable place; an island of sand located nearly two hundred kilometres offshore from Nova Scotia in the rough North Atlantic Ocean. It's also a national park.

In December, Parks Canada had just wrapped up the first phase of public consultations to develop the very first management plan for Sable Island National Park. They even gave these consultations a name – *Let's Talk Sable Island* – and created a website to encourage members of the public to

make submissions and to fill out the online survey.

People debated all sorts of issues, such as how many people should be allowed to visit the island each year; how best to avoid impacts on sensitive ecosystems; should overnight camping be allowed; what to do about climate change and rising sea levels.

Smart people, with lots of first-hand experience, tackled these questions and provided advice and recommendations to Parks Canada on how best to proceed.



The Canadian-Nova Scotia Off-Shore Petroleum Board is seeking bids for drilling that will affect Sable Island, above, if the plan is launched. Photo: Parks Canada; In 1960 full protection was given to the wild horse population that lives on the island. Photo: Sable Island Green Horse Society

not even labeled on the maps. Reading through the document, one could be forgiven for not realizing that a national park occurs here at all.

So, why is this allowed? National parks are supposed to be places that are off-limits to industrial activities like oil and gas development. How could this happen?

The problem is the legislation that existed prior to the creation of the national park. More specifically, the *Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Petroleum Resources Accord Implementation Act*, both at the federal and the provincial level, created the CNSOPB and also gave it a lot of power to make decisions that otherwise would be the responsibility of government.

Where normally Parks Canada would have the final say over matters pertaining to the ecological integrity of a national park, in the situation for Sable Island, they do not. That authority rests with CNSOPB.

It's entirely possible that, in the coming

months, Parks Canada could conclude that allowing oil and gas exploration within Sable Island National Park Reserve might be too risky for the ecological integrity of the island – a reasonable conclusion to reach – but it will be CNSOPB that will be making the final decision over what happens in the park.

Let that sink in.

The final say about what happens in the national park rests not with Parks Canada, but with the Petroleum Board.

That puts Parks Canada in a very uncomfortable position of having the responsibility to manage the national park for ecological integrity, but not having the full authority to do so. It certainly makes me uncomfortable.

Canada's national parks are special places that belong to all Canadians. They should not be subjected to industrial disturbances of this nature. There is no place for oil and gas exploration in any of Canada's national parks.

# ISLAND

And then, one day later, and entirely disconnected from the Parks Canada process, the Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Petroleum Board (CNSOPB) put out their call-for-bids across a huge swath of the Nova Scotia offshore area, including Sable Island National Park. They are trying to entice oil and gas companies to come here and to undertake exploration work.

The official call-for-bids document prepared by CNSOPB doesn't even use the term "national park". Not once. It's

# SPIRITUAL STEWARDSHIP

Indigenous Protected Areas in Canada

BY MIRA OBERMAN

Indigenous Protected Areas conserve ecosystems and biodiversity while supporting sustainable and culturally appropriate human uses. In these areas, the Indigenous government is the primary decision-maker when it comes to the management of the protected area.

The federal government has pledged to support the development of “many” Indigenous Protected Areas as it strives to help Canada advance reconciliation, fight climate change and meet its commitments to protect 17 percent of our lands and fresh waters by 2020.

## EDÉHZHÍE INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREA

At more than twice the size of Banff National Park, Edézhíe Indigenous Protected Area is a stunning mix of boreal forest and wetlands in the Northwest Territories. At 14,218 km<sup>2</sup>, this newly protected area provides critical habitat for threatened woodland caribou, bison, vast flocks of migratory birds and other wildlife. The Dehcho Dene rely on its lands, waters, and wildlife as an integral part of its culture, language, and way of life.

“Our people know Edézhíe as a special and spiritual place,” Jonas Antoine, Elder of the Dehcho First Nations, said in an October 2018 statement announcing Canada’s latest Indigenous Protected Area.

“We are taking steps with Canada to renew our nation-to-nation relationship and ensure that the lands, water, and Dehcho way of life are maintained in Edézhíe for present and future generations,” Antoine said.



One of the many waterways in the beautiful Edézhíe Protected Area. Photo: J. Larivière Stock



## SEAL RIVER WATERSHED

Three First Nations are hoping to make Manitoba’s incredibly beautiful Seal River Watershed – one of the largest ecologically intact watersheds in the world – an Indigenous Protected Area that is 7.5 times the size of Banff National Park.

“We have no permanent roads. No factories. No mines,” said Ernie Bussidor, who is leading the initiative for Sayisi Dene First Nation.

“Nearly 400,000 caribou spend their winters here. About 3,000 beluga whales give birth in our estuary. Polar bears await the winter ice on our shores. And the river — the Seal is a whitewater rafter’s dream.”

CPAWS Manitoba is working with Sayisi Dene First Nation, Northlands Denesuline First Nation and Barren Lands First Nation to protect the entire watershed from industrial development.

At over 50,000 square kilometers — an area the size of Costa Rica — the Seal River watershed accounts for eight percent of Manitoba and 0.5 percent of Canada’s landmass.

“Our vision is to ensure our grandchildren’s grandchildren have the opportunity to engage in traditional practices such as hunting, fishing and serving as stewards of the land and animals within a healthy watershed,” Bussidor said.

Find out more about CPAWS Manitoba’s work in the Seal and how you can support their efforts at: [sealriverwatershed.ca](http://sealriverwatershed.ca).



Top: The Seal River Watershed is one of the largest ecologically-intact watershed in the world. Photo: Josh Pearlman; Above left and right: The Seal is a whitewater rafter's dream. Photos (both): Ernie Bussidor. Facing page: Nearly 400,000 caribou spend their winters here. Photo: Josh Pearlman

# NATIONAL GEMS OF THE NATURAL WORLD

Canada's World Heritage Sites are our responsibility to the world  
and a conservation litmus test for the rest of the planet



Gros Morne National Park needs continued support and  
protection against development and industrial activity.  
Photo: Michael Burzynski

**W**orld Heritage Sites are places so spectacular and significant to humanity that countries around the globe have collectively pledged to protect them. The agreement created in 1972 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) safeguards close to 1,100 places endowed with “outstanding universal values,” marking the best of cultural triumphs and the greatest of natural wonders.

Canada is among the world’s top five steward nations—along with Australia, China, Russia and the United States—of natural World Heritage Sites by number of sites. As the second largest country by area, as well as one of the wildest, our leadership is no surprise: almost a quarter of Earth’s last intact forests are found here, along with a fifth of fresh water, a quarter of all wetlands and almost a third of global coastlines.

Our nation’s World Heritage Sites are internationally prized, and they’re our responsibility to the world. They are also a litmus test for conservation: if we

can save our most iconic and precious spaces — many of them among the planet’s most ecologically intact landscapes — perhaps hope exists for the rest of the world’s magnificent wilderness.

Parks Canada is fully or jointly responsible for seven of the nation’s 19 sites. But the agency’s frequently slow response to problems and its questionable decision-making has been repeatedly cited by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

In the last decade, Canada has seen its reputation as a conservation and natural-heritage champion slip. Multi-million-dollar federal cuts effected our capacity to protect and run our national parks or to conduct necessary research. Over the years, World Heritage reports warning of risks from poor management and planning were issued for several of the Canada’s natural World Heritage Sites.

Last year, the Federal Government pledged \$1.3 billion over five years to

expand and improve protected areas and to save wildlife while encouraging reconciliation with Indigenous peoples across the country. But will that be enough?

For 56 years, CPAWS has been working to ensure Canada’s parks and protected areas preserve the nature they contain. We view threats and degradation affecting natural World Heritage Sites as not only bad for these spectacular places but also as worrying omens of wider problems for the ecological integrity of protected areas across the country.

That’s why protecting Canada’s rich share of the planet’s natural heritage must continue to be a priority. Our governments have an obligation to the many Canadians who take pride in our stewardship of these globally renowned places. We have an international promise to keep: our wilderness gems have outstanding universal value, they are, in fact, natural treasures, belonging to the world.

—Alison Ronson and Karen Turner

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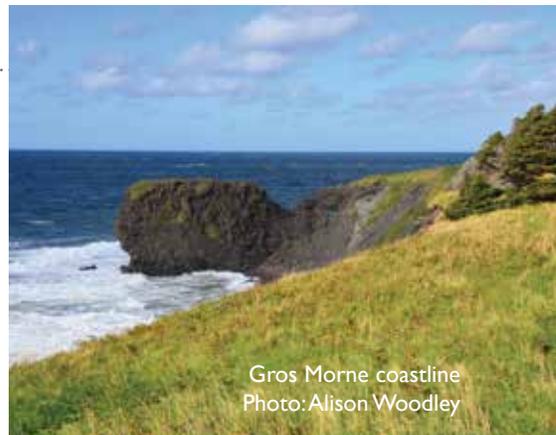
## GROS MORNE NATIONAL PARK

Gros Morne National Park protects 1,805 square kilometres of western Newfoundland’s coastal lowlands and towering Long Range Mountains, and is one of Canada’s most treasured National Parks. Its unique geological features and spectacular natural beauty has earned Gros Morne the designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Despite its high profile, the Park has encountered challenges along the way.

In 2013, a proposal to drill and frack for oil, metres from the boundary of Gros Morne National Park, raised serious public concern. Not only would the National Park and World Heritage status be at risk, but also the local tourism and fishing economies. In response to concerns raised by CPAWS, local citizens

and businesses, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee recommended that Canada create a permanent protective buffer zone around Gros Morne National Park to prevent harm from future industrial activities. Although the threat from fracking was paused, the creation of a buffer zone has still not been realized.

In 2017, Parks Canada began the first stages of a \$3 million project to update facilities at Western Brook Pond in the Park. The iconic boardwalk trail, that once wound its way through berry-filled blanket bogs, was removed and replaced with a 4.8 m wide hardened road. What was cited as a simple rehabilitation of the trail resulted in a significant increase in the development footprint, and irreparable changes to the character



Gros Morne coastline  
Photo: Alison Woodley

of the site and one of the park’s most sought-after experiences.

Decisions behind these changes were made without responsible consultation, and are not in keeping with Parks Canada’s mandate to protect the natural and cultural heritage of our special places. CPAWS continues to fight for a buffer zone and against further development work on the trail, which is planned to occur during winter 2019.

## WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK

Wood Buffalo National Park is the largest national park in Canada, and the fifth largest in the world. Covering almost 45,000 km<sup>2</sup>, the Park is nearly one and a half times the size of Vancouver Island and is comprised of salt plains, wetlands, grasslands and boreal forests. This amazing place is home to one of the last free-roaming herds of Wood Bison, and the nesting habitat of the world's only breeding population of the endangered Whooping Crane. Annual spring flooding has historically replenished a vast collection of shallow lakes within the Peace-Athabasca Delta. A complex matrix of lowland wetlands has sustained migratory waterfowl and many other species for millennia.

What could possibly impact such an isolated location far from industrial activities and big cities? The reality is that we have stood idly by while decades of prolonged dry periods have driven the degradation of the Peace-Athabasca Delta, starving the landscape and impeding traditional use by Indigenous communities. It is a forgotten ecosystem.

### HIDDEN THREATS

The conservation of Wood Buffalo National Park is challenging because threats arise from far outside its boundaries. The Park captures the convergence of many major rivers that run through British Columbia, Alberta, and the Northwest Territories, meaning every upstream manipulation ultimately affects the delta. Consider the laundry list of upstream industrial developments: hydroelectric dams on the Peace, oil sands development on the Athabasca, and even old uranium mines on Lake Athabasca. The extent of impacts on the Delta are not well understood, but we know these activities alter natural hydrological regimes and load the water with environmental contaminants.

These insidious impacts are dangerous because they are additive; interacting to exacerbate each other. In the case of climate change—one of the key threats to the Park—any further reduction in freshwater availability will compound the existing impacts from human activities and further risk the ecological integrity of the Park. These threats have landed the park on a watchlist of World Heritage Sites that could be labeled as “In Danger” by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

### SCALING UP MANAGEMENT

For Wood Buffalo, park management plans need to match the scale of the threats. Saving Wood Buffalo National Park means addressing Canada's biggest environmental challenges head on. The impacts by all industrial projects must be scrutinized from a cumulative perspective, with the impacts of each new proposed project amplified. Tackling climate change impacts will require rebooted monitoring that can underpin smart policy and strong governance inside—and outside—the Park. It is time for big management action to match the country's largest national park.

—Gillian Chow-Fraser

## TIMELINE FOR WORLD HERITAGE STATUS

DECEMBER 2014: Mikisew Cree First Nation petition to the World Heritage Committee requesting inclusion of Wood Buffalo National Park on the list of World Heritage Sites “in Danger”.

JULY 2015: The World Heritage Committee makes several requests of Canada, including inviting an IUCN Reactive Monitoring Mission (RMM) to review and evaluate the impacts of developments on the Park, and requesting the undertaking of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

MARCH 2017: The RMM report is released detailing 17 recommendations for improving management of the Park.

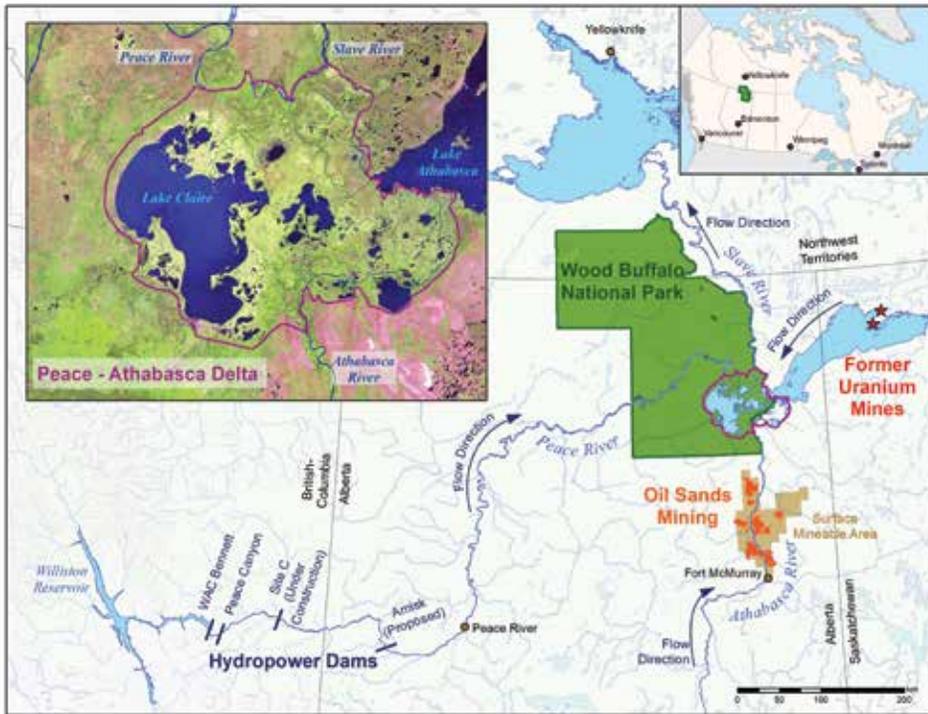
JULY 2017: The World Heritage Committee additionally requests that Canada submits a progress report, an updated State of Conservation report, and an Action Plan.

MAY 2018: Canada releases the SEA report, assessing the cumulative impacts that threaten the Park.

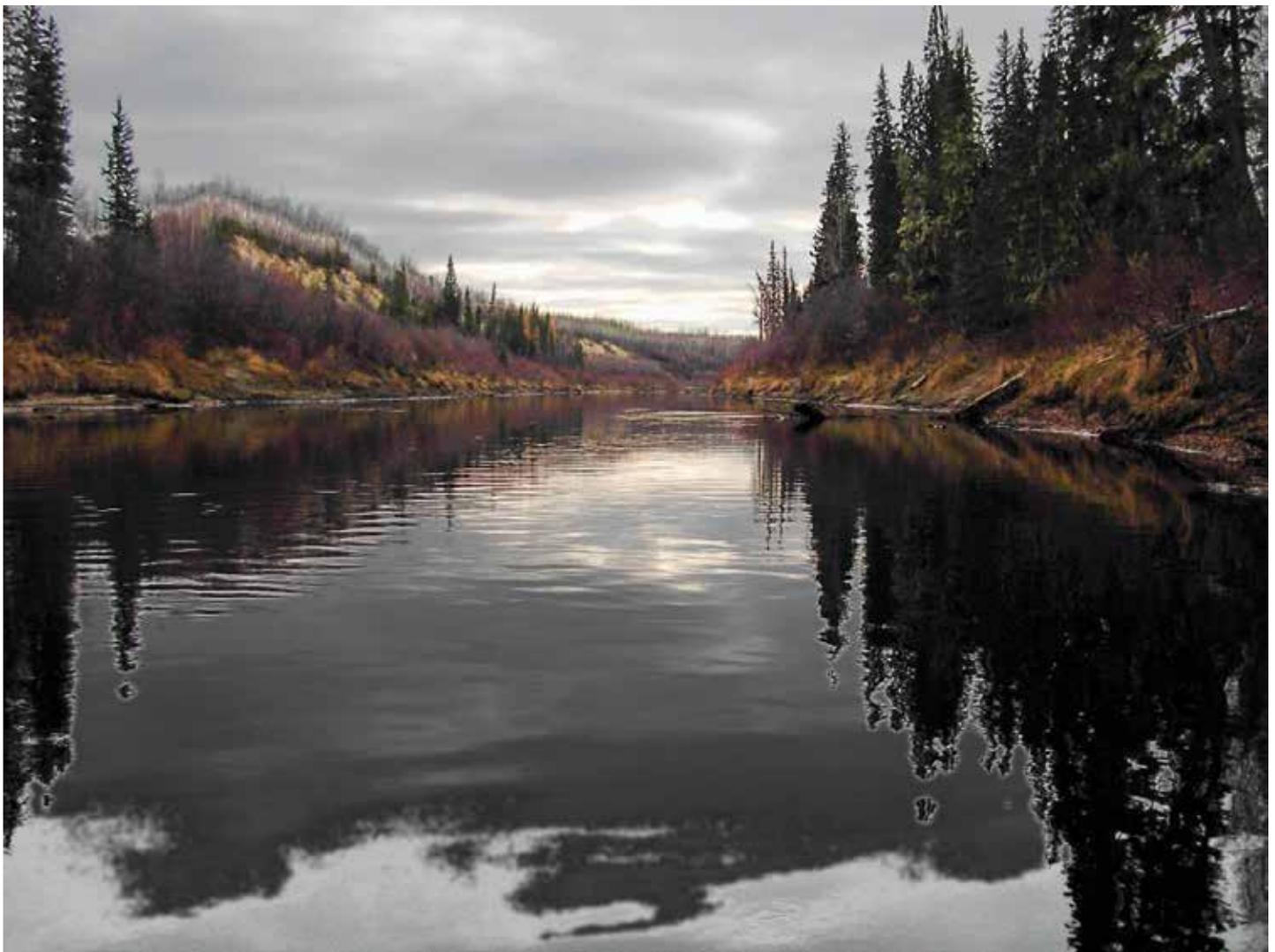
FEBRUARY 2018: Canada submits a Progress Report on implementing RMM report recommendations.

FEBRUARY 2019: Canada releases an Action Plan for Wood Buffalo National Park describing 142 actions that aim to reflect results from the SEA and RMM.

JULY 2019: The World Heritage Committee will meet this summer for its 43rd session to decide if the Wood Buffalo National Park should be listed as a World Heritage Site in Danger.



Left: At almost 45,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Wood Buffalo National Park is home to one of the last free-roaming herds of Wood Bison. Big management action is needed to match the country's biggest park. Map: CPAWS Northern Alberta. Below: Lake Clare; Bottom: Birch River Photos: Al Chomica (both)



# What do Canadians think about protected areas?

The Canadian Space for Nature Survey polled over 2,000 Canadians across the country about their perspectives on park and protected areas. Those polled were from a broad range of ages, educations, and incomes, with different geographical locations, genders, and household compositions.

Data collection - Ipsos Group S.A. Survey development - Zoological Society of London (ZSL)  
For more information: <http://cpaws.org/news/spacefornature>

## Protection by the numbers\*



93%

Percentage of Canadians that strongly agree/agree that PROTECTED AREAS ARE NECESSARY



92%

Percentage of Canadians that think PROTECTING WILDLIFE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT REASON to have protected areas.



90%

Percentage of Canada's land that is HELD AND MANAGED FOR CANADIANS by federal, provincial, territorial and indigenous governments

# Did you know...?

*For every dollar governments spend on our national, provincial and territorial parks, more than six dollars are generated for the Canadian economy. Canada's parks also support over 64,000 jobs across the country.*

Based on data from the Canadian Parks Council report  
*The Economic Impact of Canada's National, Provincial & Territorial Parks in 2009*



Proportion of Canada's land and sea that Canadians think SHOULD BE PROTECTED



17%

Percentage of land that Canada promised to protect by 2020



10.6%

Percentage of land that is CURRENTLY protected in Canada



10%

Percentage of oceans that Canada PROMISED to protect by 2020



8.27%

Percentage of ocean that is CURRENTLY protected in Canada

\*CPAWS & University of Northern British Columbia, Canadian Space for Nature Survey, June 2018

## CONTACT US

CPAWS National Office  
506-250 City Centre Avenue  
Ottawa, ON K1R 6K7  
613-569-7226 or 1-800-333-WILD  
info@cpaws.org; www.cpaws.org

CPAWS British Columbia  
604-685-7445  
www.cpawsbc.org

CPAWS Southern Alberta  
403-232-6686  
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**1.**

What do you like most about our magazine  
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**2.**

Is there anything you would like to see improved?

**3.**

Is there anything you would like to see  
more of in the magazine?

**4.**

Why do you love nature?  
Share your story and we may feature you  
in an upcoming publication.



Seal River. Photo courtesy Know the North

## 2019 AGM NOTICE

The CPAWS Annual General Meeting will be held by conference call on Monday, September 30, at 8:00 p.m. Eastern.

For more information, please contact us at info@cpaws.org or 1-800-333-9453





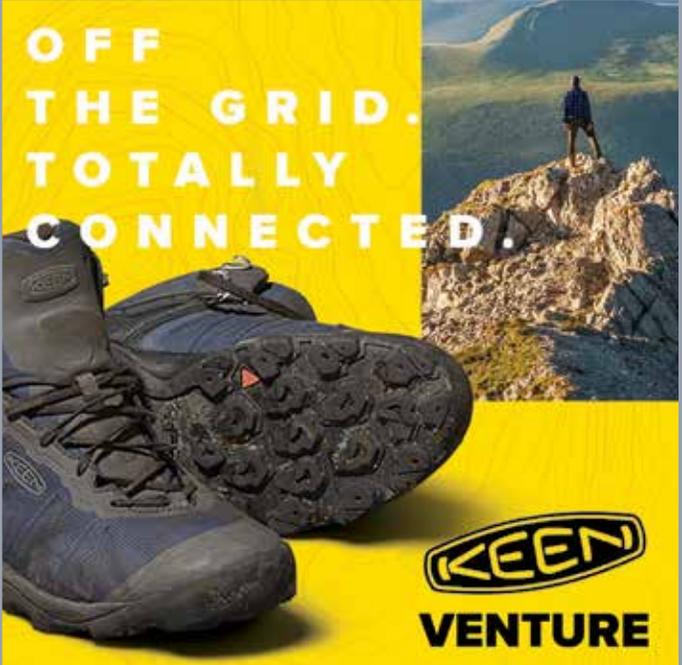
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