

# Protecting Wood Buffalo National Park World Heritage Site

Volume 1, Issue 1, August 2017

## The WHC/IUCN Reactive Monitoring Mission

In December 2014, the Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN) petitioned the UNESCO World Heritage Centre (WHC) to have WBNP WHS added to the list of World Heritage in Danger, due to their concerns that the impacts of existing and planned hydroelectric and oil sands projects, climate change, inadequacies in management frameworks and changes in environmental legislation were compromising WBNP's World Heritage values. In response, the WHC asked Canada to invite a joint UNESCO WHC/International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Reactive Monitoring Mission (RMM) to visit the site and investigate.

Such missions, which are carried out at world heritage sites on a regular basis, are a valuable tool to assist in efforts to conserve these internationally important treasures.

The RMM visited WBNP WHS from September 25 to October 4, 2016 and met with MCFN, other Indigenous groups, government, industry and NGOs. The resulting report includes 17 recommendations and concluded that Canada should immediately develop an Action Plan to respond to the recommendations. The RMM report can be found here:

<http://whc.unesco.org/document/156893>

## Wood Buffalo: a protected area of global importance

For over 30 years, Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP) has been recognized as a World Heritage Site.

World Heritage Sites (WHS) are designated to protect those parts of our cultural and natural heritage that are of outstanding interest globally and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole.

The presence of world heritage values (see below) led to the park's designation as a WHS.

In addition to its status as a WHS, WBNP is the only national park with two wetland areas (the Peace-Athabasca Delta and the whooping crane nesting area) designated as internationally important under the Ramsar Convention.

WBNP has these specific qualities that make the park im-



Bison in the Peace-Athabasca Delta in WBNP.

portant at an international level. The purpose of the recommendations from the UN mission, including a Strategic Environmental Assessment and an Action Plan, is to highlight that decision makers in Canada need to take these international values into account. The recommendations from the mission also highlight that Parks Cana-

da and other decision makers need to improve partnerships with Indigenous communities. These values are only some of the issues that Indigenous communities are interested in. Parks and Indigenous communities continue to work on shared interests through the Cooperative Management Committee and other channels.

## WBNP's World Heritage Site Values

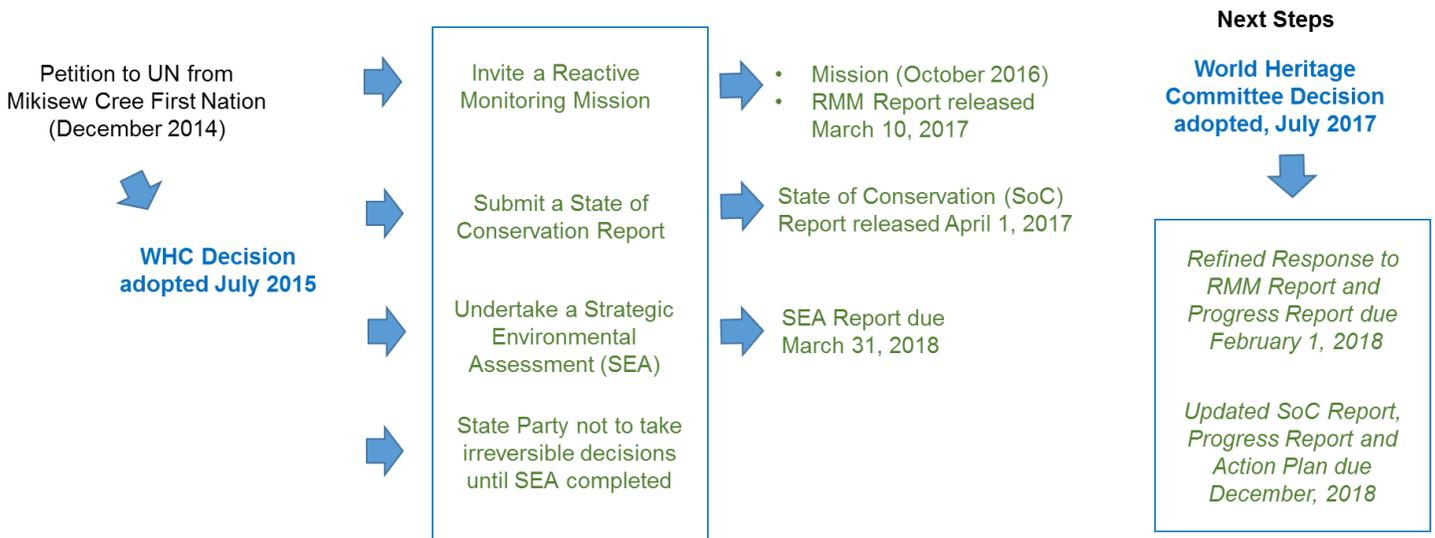
Wood Buffalo National Park's biological and geographical uniqueness led to its being designated as a World Heritage Site based on three criteria:

- great concentrations of wildlife of global importance and rare and superlative natural phenomena including a large inland delta, salt plains and gypsum karst
- WBNP is the most ecologically complete example of the entire Great Plains-Boreal grassland ecosystem of North America.
- WBNP contains the only breeding habitat in the world for the whooping crane. The park's size, complete ecosystems and protection are essential for the in-situ conservation of the cranes.

**About this newsletter**—This newsletter is intended to keep WBNP stakeholders informed as Parks Canada and the Government of Canada, in consultation with Indigenous groups and other government partners, respond to the RMM. This first issue is largely focussed on the Strategic Environmental Assessment. Future issues will highlight progress related to the development of the Action Plan and other important elements in the ongoing response to the RMM. Questions about the contents of this newsletter can be directed to Parks Canada through the contact information on the back page.

## World Heritage Committee decisions regarding WBNP WHS

The World Heritage Committee has adopted 2 decisions containing requests for Canada to action - the first in July 2015 in response to the MCFN petition, and the second in July 2017 in response to the RMM report and State of Conservation Report.



## The Strategic Environmental Assessment: what will it look like?

The WHC requested Canada undertake a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to assess the potential cumulative impacts of all developments on the World Heritage Values of the park, including hydroelectric dams, oil sands development, mining, and the effects of climate change. In response, Parks Canada contracted a team of experts led by Independent Environmental Consultants (IEC) to undertake the SEA. The information brought together by the mission and the SEA will provide direction for future work on an Action Plan, park management planning, environmental assessments, regional assessments, and monitoring.

### What will the assessment do?

The SEA provides an oppor-



The Peace-Athabasca Delta.

tunity to get independent, expert opinion on the cumulative impact of development and climate change to the world heritage values of the park.

The SEA process, including consultation with Indigenous groups and the general public, will bring together a range of perspectives and improve shared understanding of key values, threats and indicators.

The SEA report will provide a common foundation for all parties to work from in the development of an Action Plan and other processes.

The goal of the SEA is that a common understanding of values, threats and indicators will improve the ability to assess potential impacts to the World Heritage Values of the park and have them fully considered in other processes by other jurisdictions.

### How is the assessment being done?

The SEA is being prepared by independent consultants, working with Parks Canada, and in consultation with all eleven of the Indigenous communities that work with WBNP. Other interested parties will also have the opportunity to influence the SEA during on-line comment periods.

### What's going on now with the SEA?

The first step of the SEA process is to finalize a scoping report that will define and communicate the purpose and focus of the SEA.

A draft scoping report is scheduled to be available for review and comment by late summer of 2017, and for finalization in September, 2017.

## Reflecting Indigenous Perspectives in the SEA and Action Plan

The Wood Buffalo National Park local Indigenous community consists of 11 First Nations and Metis organizations that have a role in the ongoing co-operative management of the park.

Indigenous groups have been invited to discuss the SEA with Parks Canada and the consultant in order to ensure all relevant local issues and perspectives are heard. Given that the scope of the SEA is focussed on threats to the World Heritage criteria, some issues raised during the discussions may not be included in the scope of the SEA. However all items raised will be duly noted, and where feasible, addressed by other means such as the action plan, park management planning, or cooperative management. The SEA and Action Plan create an important opportunity to help people understand how Indigenous practices and livelihoods are connected to the land. It is important that the SEA is informed by the traditional knowledge and insights of the Indigenous groups that are connected to the park's World Heritage values.

The SEA provides an opportunity to bring together traditional use studies and Indigenous perspectives that have been developed for other initiatives. The SEA will make use of existing reports and publications and will not involve new studies. Parks Canada and the consultant



Traditional land use in the Peace-Athabasca Delta.

recognize the importance of meeting directly with land users while visiting the site, and look forward to gathering further input from community representatives.

Parks Canada remains open on how to include Indigenous Traditional Knowledge in the SEA, the Action Plan and in ongoing park management.

The consultants (IEC will be communicating with land users to ensure that Indigenous perspectives are represented as the SEA is developed. Parks will continue to reach out to all of the Indigenous groups to clarify the SEA process and to ask for input on defining the important issues for the assessment of the park's

World Heritage Values.

Now is the time to make sure we all understand each other and develop expectations of the SEA process, to set the assessment off on the right foot in the fall. The SEA should be completed by March 2018 and a final report summarizing the results released at that time.

# WHC decisions and WBNP WHS management

Canada respects the World Heritage Committee's decisions regarding recommendations about the state of conservation of WBNP WHS, and is committed to addressing them. Most of the recommendations cannot be addressed by Parks Canada alone and will require collaboration with other federal departments, provincial and territorial governments, Indigenous groups, industry, and other stakeholders. The following recommendations, though, are specifically related to the management of the site and Parks Canada will work collaboratively with local Indigenous groups through the WBNP Co-operative Management Committee to implement them.

- Reach genuine partnership with Indigenous communities in the governance and management (recommendations 1 and 13),
- Raise park staffing and capacity to respond to increasing pressures to protect Ecological Integrity (recommendations 2 and 12), and
- Ensure government staff have appropriate skills and preparation for working with Indigenous partners (recommendation 14).

## Meet the Parks Canada team responding to the RMM

*Parks Canada has made some staffing changes to support the responses to the World Heritage Committee, including adding some new capacity. Meet the core team responsible for responding to the Reactive Monitoring Mission report.*



**Cam Zimmer, A/** Superintendent of WBNP, is the point person from the management team of WBNP and will continue working closely with the Field Unit Superintendent, Jonah Mitchell.



**Stuart Macmillan** has taken a 2-year assignment as Project Manager for the development of the Action Plan, reporting to Laurie Wein, A/Manager of Intergovernmental and International Affairs for PCA.



**Steve Oates** in Vancouver is the project manager working with the consultant on the development of the SEA. Steve is part of a network of environmental assessment specialists from across Parks Canada.



**Patrick Yarnell** in Winnipeg has joined the team on an assignment from the Parks Canada Indigenous Affairs Branch to support Steve, Stu and Laurie with a focus on consultations for the SEA and Action Plan.

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