



Protecting Wood Buffalo National Park World Heritage Site

Volume 3, Issue 1, May 2019



Part of the Whooping Crane nesting area in Wood Buffalo National Park World Heritage Site.



Lunch and learning at Dog Camp, Peace-Athabasca Delta (EFH Working Group field trip, August 1, 2018).

WBNP'S WORLD HERITAGE VALUES

Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP) has special natural features that are important on a global scale.

These key features are known as the park's world heritage values, or its "Outstanding Universal Value" (OUV). These are the values that led to the park being listed as a World Heritage Site in 1983:

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

This Action Plan responds to a World Heritage Committee decision (2017) requesting that measures be developed to protect these world heritage values. Therefore, the Action Plan is focused specifically on these natural features. Overall management of the park continues to be guided by the park management plan, which will incorporate related aspects of the Action Plan.

A Sustained Team Effort Shaped the Action Plan – Thank You!

Since the spring of 2018, Parks Canada and its federal, provincial and territorial (FPT) government partners have worked with Indigenous communities and stakeholders to develop an Action Plan that supports the protection of the park's world heritage values. The Action Plan (consisting of over 140 actions across 7 themes) was submitted to the World Heritage Centre on February 1, 2019.

Work on the Action Plan took place in parallel with other significant initiatives related to the protection of WBNP's world heritage values, such as the review of federal environmental assessment legislation, the environmental assessment of the proposed Frontier Oil Sands Mine Project by a Joint Review Panel, completion of the Wood Bison Recovery Strategy, and the formal establishment of new protected areas adjacent to Wood Buffalo National Park by the Government of Alberta, to name a few.

Parks Canada and its federal, provincial and territorial partners would like to thank all the partners and stakeholders who have contributed to these processes and to the development of the Action Plan. A special thanks to the Indigenous communities who made the time to meet and provided direct input into the final Action Plan. Of course this milestone only concludes the development of the Action Plan. Initial commitments to implementation have already been made and now "the real work begins"!

This edition of the newsletter provides partners and stakeholders with a summary of the Action Plan engagement process, sharing key issues that Parks Canada and its federal, provincial and territorial partners heard about from those who commented on the draft Action Plan.

About this newsletter This newsletter series keeps WBNP partners and stakeholders informed as Parks Canada and the Government of Canada, in collaboration with provincial and territorial government partners, Indigenous partners, and in consultation with other Indigenous groups and stakeholders, respond to requests from the World Heritage Committee. For additional information on the Action Plan and related initiatives, please visit the WBNP website at this link: <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/nt/woodbuffalo/info/action>



Figure 1: Action Plan themes, with jurisdictional leads and number of actions identified by theme. Jurisdictional leads engage other levels of government, Indigenous communities and other partners and stakeholders on development and implementation of theme-specific actions (AB = Government of Alberta; CEAA = Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency; ECCC = Environment and Climate Change Canada; NT = Government of the Northwest Territories; PCA = Parks Canada Agency).

Navigating the route across Mamawi Lake in the Peace-Athabasca Delta (EFH Working Group field trip, August 1, 2018)



Focus on Water

Water in the Peace-Athabasca Delta has been a key focus throughout the Action Plan process. The importance of water and the complexity of water flows and management issues in the delta is reflected in the final Action Plan. Over half of the 142 actions fall under the Environmental Flows and Hydrology (EFH) theme. Because there was no existing process to tackle this theme, a multi-jurisdictional working group was established and convened by Environment and Climate Change Canada.

This EFH Working Group included representatives from the 11 WBNP Indigenous partners, Alberta, BC, and NWT governments, BC Hydro, Parks Canada and Environment and Climate Change Canada. Together, through a series of workshops and meetings throughout 2018 in Edmonton and on the land in Fort Chipewyan, this working group developed the 75 EFH Actions intended to advance three major desired outcomes for the Peace-Athabasca Delta System:

1. Ecological and Hydrological Integrity;
2. Exercise of Aboriginal and treaty rights; and
3. Informed decision-making.

These actions include:

- establishing effective partnerships between provincial, federal, territorial, and Indigenous governments to guide and inform management actions toward these desired outcomes;
- improving communication with transparent and accessible knowledge and data sharing;
- identifying clear and measurable objectives for important areas in the PAD and the broader park;
- developing clear protocols for communication and monitoring to ensure that actions are achieving their intended outcomes; and,
- working towards taking concrete, early on the ground action.

Going forward, the EFH Working Group is developing a process to coordinate and guide these actions, and is supporting early implementation of many of the actions.



Wood Bison at Sweetgrass Station.

WORKING GROUPS

The 11 Indigenous communities that regularly work with WBNP have participated on theme-specific working groups that helped develop the Action Plan. Two themes of key interest have been “Indigenous Partnerships with WBNP” and “Environmental Flows and Hydrology”.

Collaborative efforts on Indigenous partnerships occurred through WBNP’s Cooperative Management Committee, as well as through bilateral meetings. While working toward improved cooperative management of the park, these meetings identified some ongoing challenges as well as some shared priorities, which are reflected in the Action Plan.

Inter-jurisdictional efforts to address the complex hydrological issues in the PAD are being coordinated through the Environmental Flows and Hydrology working group convened by Environment and Climate Change Canada. Implementation of actions identified by this working group has already begun to support the ecological integrity of the delta while supporting Indigenous communities that depend on the delta for maintaining their ways of life.

The need for a working group focused on the “Monitoring and Science” theme has also been identified and will be advanced in 2019 with the goal of producing an integrated research and monitoring program for the delta.

In addition to working groups and other meetings specific to development of the Action Plan, WBNP’s world heritage values have been considered in related initiatives, including the environmental assessment process for the proposed Frontier oil sands mine, implementation of wood bison recovery actions, and the Oil Sands Monitoring Program.

Indigenous and Public Review of the Action Plan – “What We Heard”

In fall 2018, Parks Canada and the Government of Alberta undertook extensive Indigenous engagement and public review to solicit comments on the draft Action Plan. The final Action Plan incorporates and addresses the valuable feedback received from this engagement process and, as a result, better reflects Indigenous, stakeholder and public perspectives.

Indigenous Review of the early draft Action Plan

In October 2018, Parks Canada met with Indigenous partners to review an early draft of the Action Plan. The following “top 5” areas of feedback emerged from these face-to-face discussions, and directly influenced the final plan and its ongoing implementation:

- Existing environmental management frameworks in the Lower Athabasca region (which were not originally designed to address WBNP’s world heritage values) may not be sufficient to meet the requests from the World Heritage Committee, and need to better include Indigenous representation in governance, implementation and monitoring;
- A greater emphasis needs to be placed on Indigenous ways of life and reconciliation;
- The importance of actions related to community involvement, data sharing and improved communications needs to be elevated;
- The Action Plan should be written and implemented in the context of the whole park, to make it clear that management issues related to other species and other areas of WBNP remain a priority; and,
- The Action Plan would benefit from a more holistic view, always demonstrating the linkages between different themes.

Indigenous partners suggested that re-establishing a more natural seasonal flow regime should be a priority over managing water in the PAD by building more water control devices in the delta (although both may be necessary). Indigenous partners stressed that the emphasis should be placed on achieving a natural pattern of water flows, because if high water comes back to the PAD, some of the other actions may not be necessary.

It was also pointed out that processes related to creating new protected areas need to involve Indigenous communities, respect Indigenous knowledge, and assess impacts on Indigenous ways of life.

Feedback received during the public comment period

A final draft Action Plan, incorporating the input from Indigenous groups, was produced for a three-week public comment period from November 19th to December 10th, 2018.

Throughout the public consultation, Parks Canada heard that the management of Wood Buffalo National Park is important and that the ecological integrity of the park is a key priority. The Action Plan, which is focused on the park’s world heritage values, recognizes the importance of the park’s ecological integrity as well as the cultural significance of lands and resources within the park to the Indigenous peoples in the region. The park’s management plan, which will be renewed in the coming years, continues to define the overall direction for park management.

Additionally, Parks Canada heard from Indigenous partners and stakeholders about the importance of ensuring that the world heritage values of the park are protected through actions that support enhanced connectivity of ecosystems and species - particularly on the southern boundary of Wood Buffalo National Park where development pressures are greatest. All stakeholders mentioned the need for strong collaborative relationships with Indigenous partners, other levels of government and other stakeholders to support implementation of the actions in the Action Plan. Many Indigenous partners and stakeholders raised issues related to the environmental impact assessment processes, including the previous environmental assessment of the Site C project.

Following the public review period, Alberta held engagement sessions to work directly with First Nations and Métis communities in the Lower Athabasca region on refining Alberta’s contributions to the Action Plan. The revised content from Alberta better aligns new and existing commitments regarding its environmental management frameworks within the Action Plan, including commitments related to the establishment and cooperative management of new conservation areas adjacent to Wood Buffalo National Park.

Wood Buffalo National Park regional context.

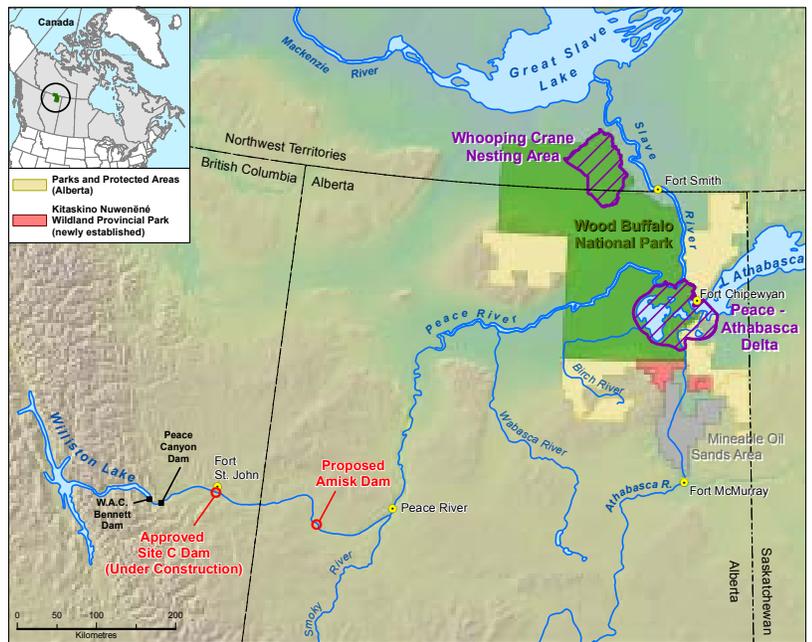
Inter-jurisdictional Cooperation

As federal, provincial and territorial government partners began collaborating on the Action Plan, they agreed to make the best use of existing management processes to address Action Plan needs, while recognizing that new processes or working groups were required to address specific areas (e.g. Environmental Flows and Hydrology). Examples of existing processes include WBNP's Cooperative Management Committee; recovery planning for species at risk (whooping crane and wood bison); and, the land-use management initiatives of the Province of Alberta and the Northwest Territories.

Given that the majority of WBNP is located within Alberta, management processes and frameworks led by the Government of Alberta play a significant role in the Action Plan. Through ongoing engagement with First Nation and Métis communities in the Lower Athabasca region, the Government of Alberta has made significant commitments that support protection of WBNP's world heritage values. Alberta's contributions to the Action Plan include new actions related to tailings ponds management and risk assessment, ecological flow assessments and water quantity management, monitoring and science,

and protection and management of the Ronald Lake wood bison herd.

In addition, the governments of Alberta and the Northwest Territories have processes underway related to the establishment of protected areas adjacent to Wood Buffalo National Park. During the development of the Action Plan, Alberta announced several new protected areas that will act as a buffer zone to help protect the world heritage values of WBNP. Several adjacent Provincial Wildland Parks were established within the Lower Athabasca region in May 2018. The Kitaskino Nuwenëné Wildland Provincial Park directly south of Wood Buffalo National Park was established in March 2019 through close collaboration with industry and Indigenous groups. More information on Alberta's protected areas is available on their website at www.albertaparks.ca.



What Happens Next?

The Action Plan was submitted to the World Heritage Centre on February 1, 2019. The plan will be considered by the World Heritage Committee at its next annual meeting in Baku, Azerbaijan from June 30 to July 10, 2019. At this meeting, the World Heritage Committee is expected to adopt a decision on the State of Conservation for Wood Buffalo National Park.

The Government of Canada will continue to work with partners to support the early and on-going implementation of the actions identified in the Action Plan.

The Action Plan will be regularly updated and reviewed to respond to new information, changing circumstances, and emerging issues. An initial review of Action Plan implementation will occur in 2021, and will be led by Parks Canada in collaboration with its partners. As Action Plan implementation will inform overall park management, it is expected that subsequent Action Plan review periods will be aligned to support the Wood Buffalo National Park Management Plan reviews which are expected to occur every five years.



The Peace River in Wood Buffalo National Park World Heritage Site.

Contact Us

Wood Buffalo National Park
149 McDougal Road
Box 750
Fort Smith, NT

Phone: 867-872-7960
Fax: 867-872-3910
Email:
cam.zimmer@canada.ca

Visit our website:

<http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/nt/woodbuffalo>

