



Media Release

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2014

ADD WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK TO ENDANGERED WORLD HERITAGE SITES LIST: MIKISEW CREE FIRST NATION PETITIONS UNESCO

EDMONTON – The Mikisew Cree First Nation is asking UNESCO to place Wood Buffalo National Park on its List of World Heritage Sites in Danger due to growing threats from hydro-electric developments and oil and gas activities. The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) and other concerned groups are supporting the petition.

Wood Buffalo National Park was placed on UNESCO's Natural World Heritage List in 1983 because it contains the largest freshwater boreal delta in the world – the Peace-Athabasca. However, hydro-electric damming along the Peace River in British Columbia and oil sands activities along the Athabasca River in Alberta have significantly reduced the flow of water to the delta, affecting migratory bird populations in the delta and the health of fish populations in the Lake Athabasca area.

“We are already deeply concerned about the impact of industrial activity on our traditional lands within the Peace-Athabasca Delta in Wood Buffalo National Park. Those threats are growing with the proposed Site C dam and oil sands expansion. We are using every possible means before it is too late to save the land that has supported our people for millennia,” says Mikisew Chief Steve Courtoreille.

Scientists say climate change is also contributing to changes to the Peace-Athabasca water flows and levels. The Mikisew Cree and others are concerned that two proposed projects, the Site C Dam in B.C. and the Frontier Oil Sands Mine near Wood Buffalo National Park in Alberta, would further exacerbate these problems.

UNESCO's List of World Heritage Sites in Danger alerts the international community to conditions that threaten the characteristics of a site that justified its placement on the World Heritage List, and is designed to encourage corrective action.

Alison Ronson, Executive Director of CPAWS' Northern Alberta Chapter, says that petitioning UNESCO should encourage all levels of government to provide greater protection to Wood Buffalo National Park.

“The Government of Alberta and the federal government need to create a buffer area of protection around the park. It should be informed by scientific studies that assess the impact of industrial activity and climate change on the park and its wildlife,” says Ronson.

Including a site on the List of World Heritage in Danger requires the World Heritage Committee to develop and adopt, in consultation with the State Party concerned, a programme for corrective measures and ongoing monitoring of the site.

The Mikisew Cree First Nation hope that this petition will improve the prospects for Wood Buffalo National Park – Canada's largest park and the only place on earth where the predator-prey relationship between wolves and wood bison has continued unbroken over time.

Photos for media use



Wood Buffalo National Park,
Aerial View
Credit: John McKinnon, Parks
Canada



World's Largest Beaver Dam in
Wood Buffalo National Park
Credit: S. Anderson, Parks
Canada



Aerial view of Wood Buffalo
National Park
Credit: The Firelight Group

All photos can be downloaded at:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/yp8ennshwo1edjn/AACIGxkq2BUDoa_PVXmXOQbFa?dl=0

For more information, please contact

Chief Steve Courtoreille | Mikisew Cree First Nation
780-838-0893
chief@mikisewcree.ca

Melody Lepine, Director | Mikisew Cree First Nation Industry and Government Relations
780-792-8736
melody.lepine@mcfngir.ca

Alison Ronson, Executive Director | CPAWS Northern Alberta
780-221-5041
aronson@cpaws.org

BACKGROUNDER

Wood Buffalo National Park

Established in 1922, Wood Buffalo National Park (“WBNP”), straddling the northern border of Alberta and the southern border of the Northwest Territories, is Canada's largest national park and one of the largest national parks in the world.

WBNP was designated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (“UNESCO”) World Heritage Site in 1983 due to its outstanding ecological value. WBNP is home to the largest free-roaming herd of wood bison, provides nesting grounds to endangered whooping cranes, and contains the largest boreal inland delta in the world, the Peace-Athabasca Delta (“PAD”). WBNP is the most ecologically complete and largest example of the entire Great Plains-Boreal grassland ecosystem of North America, the only place where the predator-prey relationship between wolves and wood bison has continued, unbroken, over time.

In 1982, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (“IUCN”) recognized that WBNP protects two wetlands of international significance – the PAD and whooping crane nesting areas. These wetlands were subsequently designated as “ramsar sites,” identifying them as critical habitat for migratory bird populations (under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance).

The Threats to Wood Buffalo National Park

WBNP and the PAD now face threats to their ecological integrity primarily from hydro-electric projects on the Peace River, and oil and gas developments in Alberta's oil sands region. The hydro-electric projects and regulation of the Peace River are impacting the PAD by disturbing the natural water recharge in the delta, leading to a drying of the delta. Some basins in the PAD that were aquatic have changed to terrestrial ecosystems, and non-native vegetative species are moving in. Activities in the oil sands upstream along the Athabasca River lead to deterioration of the PAD through many impacts, including tailings pond seepage and airborne contaminants, threats to migratory bird populations noted, and the effects of water withdrawals from the Athabasca River and the progressive loss of wetlands in and around tributaries flowing into the WBNP.

UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger

According to UNESCO, the List of World Heritage in Danger is designed to inform the international community of conditions which threaten the very characteristics for which a property was inscribed on the World Heritage List, and to encourage corrective action.

Inscribing a site on the List of World Heritage in Danger allows the World Heritage Committee to allocate immediate assistance from the World Heritage Fund to the endangered property. It also alerts the international community to these situations in the hope that it can join efforts to save these endangered sites. The listing of a site as World Heritage in Danger allows the conservation community to respond to specific preservation needs in an efficient manner.

Inscription of a site on the List of World Heritage in Danger requires the World Heritage Committee to develop and adopt, in consultation with the State Party concerned, a programme for corrective measures, and subsequently to monitor the situation of the site. All efforts must be made to restore the site's values in order to enable its removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger as soon as possible.

For More Information:

UNESCO Wood Buffalo National Park Site: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/256/>

UNESCO World Heritage in Danger Site: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/158/>

Parks Canada: <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/nt/woodbuffalo/index.aspx>