

2023

Elk Island

National Park of Canada

Draft Management Plan

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1.0 Introduction

Parks Canada administers one of the finest and most extensive systems of protected natural and historic places in the world. The Agency's mandate is to protect and present these places for the benefit and enjoyment of current and future generations. Future-oriented, strategic management of each national park, national marine conservation area, heritage canal and those national historic sites administered by Parks Canada supports the Agency's vision:

Canada's treasured natural and historic places will be a living legacy, connecting hearts and minds to a stronger, deeper understanding of the very essence of Canada.

The *Canada National Parks Act* and the *Parks Canada Agency Act* require Parks Canada to prepare a management plan for each national park. The *Elk Island National Park of Canada Management Plan*, once approved by the Minister responsible for Parks Canada and tabled in Parliament, will ensure Parks Canada's accountability to Canadians, outlining how park management will achieve measurable results in support of the Agency's mandate.

Indigenous peoples, stakeholders, partners and the Canadian public will be involved in the preparation of the management plan, helping to shape the future direction of the national park. The plan sets clear, strategic direction for the management and operation of Elk Island National Park by articulating a vision, key strategies and objectives. Parks Canada will report annually on progress toward achieving the plan objectives and will review the plan every ten years or sooner if required.

This plan is not an end in and of itself. Parks Canada will maintain an open dialogue on the implementation of the management plan, to ensure that it remains relevant and meaningful. The plan will serve as the focus for ongoing engagement and, where appropriate, consultation, on the management of Elk Island National Park in years to come.

2.0 Significance of Elk Island National Park

Elk Island National Park of Canada (Elk Island) is located 35 kilometers east of Edmonton, Alberta (Map 1: Regional Setting and Map 2: Elk Island National Park). It is the sixth oldest and, with an area of 194 square kilometres, one of the smallest of Canada's forty-seven national parks. Initially created as a wildlife sanctuary for elk in 1906, Elk Island became a national park in 1913. In 1943, the preservation of plains bison was designated as a national historic event, recognizing the park's role in the history of wildlife conservation in Canada.

The park protects a representative portion of the Southern Boreal Plains and Plateaux natural region and is located on the Beaver Hills plateau, known as *Amiskwaciy* (Beaver Hills) to Cree peoples. This plateau rises twenty metres above the surrounding plains and supports wetlands, aspen forest, grasslands and agricultural lands.

The size of park belies its ecological importance. In a transition area between the grasslands to the south and the boreal forest to the north, the aspen parkland of the Beaver Hills has a unique ecology and supports high levels of biodiversity. Aspen parkland is one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world. Globally, less than 10 percent of the original extent remains intact. Under the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Ecosystem Red List program, aspen parkland is considered to be critically endangered. Within this IUCN program, Elk Island is considered one of the core protected areas of the aspen parkland.

In addition to forests and modified grassland habitats, Elk Island contains a rich and highly concentrated system of unique wetlands. Wetlands characteristic of the "knob and kettle" terrain of the Beaver Hills support biodiversity, sequester carbon, filter water, and maintain surface water flow within the North Saskatchewan River watershed. Despite this, wetland habitat within the Beaver Hills has been lost at an alarming rate.

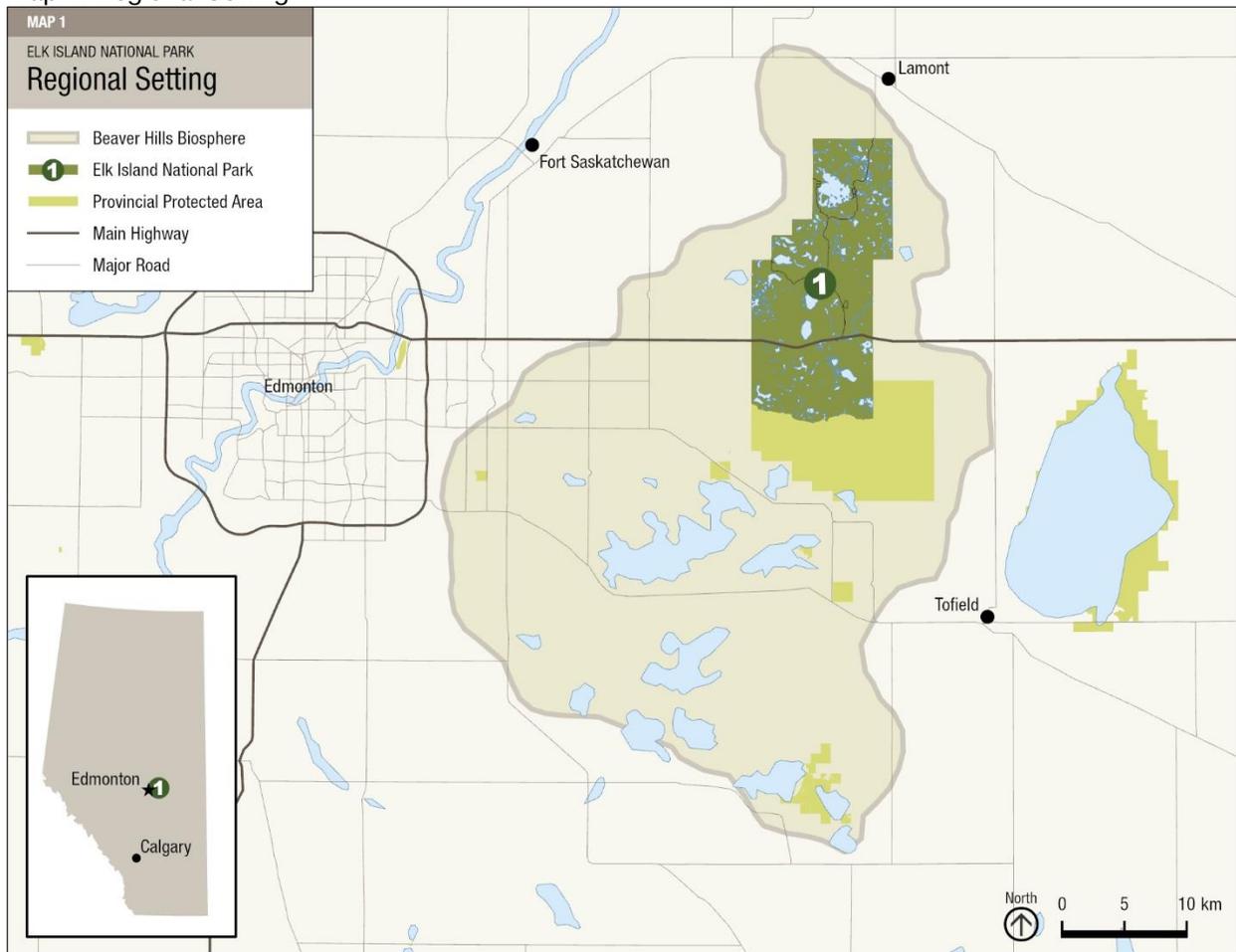
Elk Island is the only national park in Canada that is completely fenced. The fence helps Elk Island maintain the recognized healthy status of the bison herds, but it is also the cause of many of the park's ecological challenges such as overabundant bison, elk, and moose populations. The fence functionally splits the park into two blocks that are largely ecologically independent of each other and the surrounding landscape. The north block contains the park's plains bison herd and is 134 square kilometers, while the south block contains the wood bison herd and is approximately 60 square kilometers. The two blocks are separated by the four-lane Yellowhead Highway. Ungulate populations are isolated within each of the two blocks, and the heavy traffic on the Yellowhead restricts the movement of many other animals.

Elk Island is within Treaty 6 territory and the Métis Nation homeland. At least eight Indigenous communities have direct ties to the park lands. Oral histories also link Treaty 7 and Treaty 8 Nations to the landscape. The area where the park now exists has been a meeting ground for many nations since time immemorial. The area holds importance as a seasonal fishing, hunting, and communal food gathering area. Hundreds of Indigenous archaeological sites dotting the landscape show Indigenous presence in the area dating back over 5000 years. Indigenous cultural and spiritual sites lay within this region, and knowledge related to these sacred places is held within Indigenous communities.

The balance between people and animals shifted in the mid to late nineteenth century as bison were hunted commercially. By 1890, the bison herds of North America had reduced from 30 million to less than 1000 animals. Indigenous peoples who depended on bison were devastated and their lives radically changed. Ongoing European settlement, including the creation of Indian Reserves, the wildlife sanctuary and the national park, further disconnected Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands and practices. In the spirit of reconciliation, Parks Canada is working with Indigenous communities to rebuild connections to the lands within the park. For example, Elk Island has played an active role in the recent translocation of bison—a culturally significant animal—back to the traditional rangeland of several Indigenous communities. The park has also worked with local Indigenous communities to establish an Indigenous cultural area in the park as a place for Elders to pass on knowledge, cultural practices and language to youth. Indigenous communities' reconnection to traditionally used lands is an important part of healing historical trauma and the path toward reconciliation.

Elk Island has cultural resources associated with historic settlement in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as well as park-era built heritage. Examples include former settlement sites within the park near Oster Lake, and old wagon roads that criss-crossed the area that were later incorporated into the service roads and trails of today's park. There are four federal heritage buildings within the park. The superintendent's residence, built in 1907, is one of the oldest buildings of this type still in use within a Canadian national park. The pavilion is an open kitchen shelter which was built in 1934 and has welcomed generations of picnickers for nearly 90 years. The barn at the former Tawayik Warden Station was completed in 1938 and is closely associated with the historic role of park wardens and horses. Lastly, the Ukrainian Pioneer Home is a replica historic building completed in 1951 to honour Ukrainian pioneer settlers in east central Alberta and the Canadian prairies.

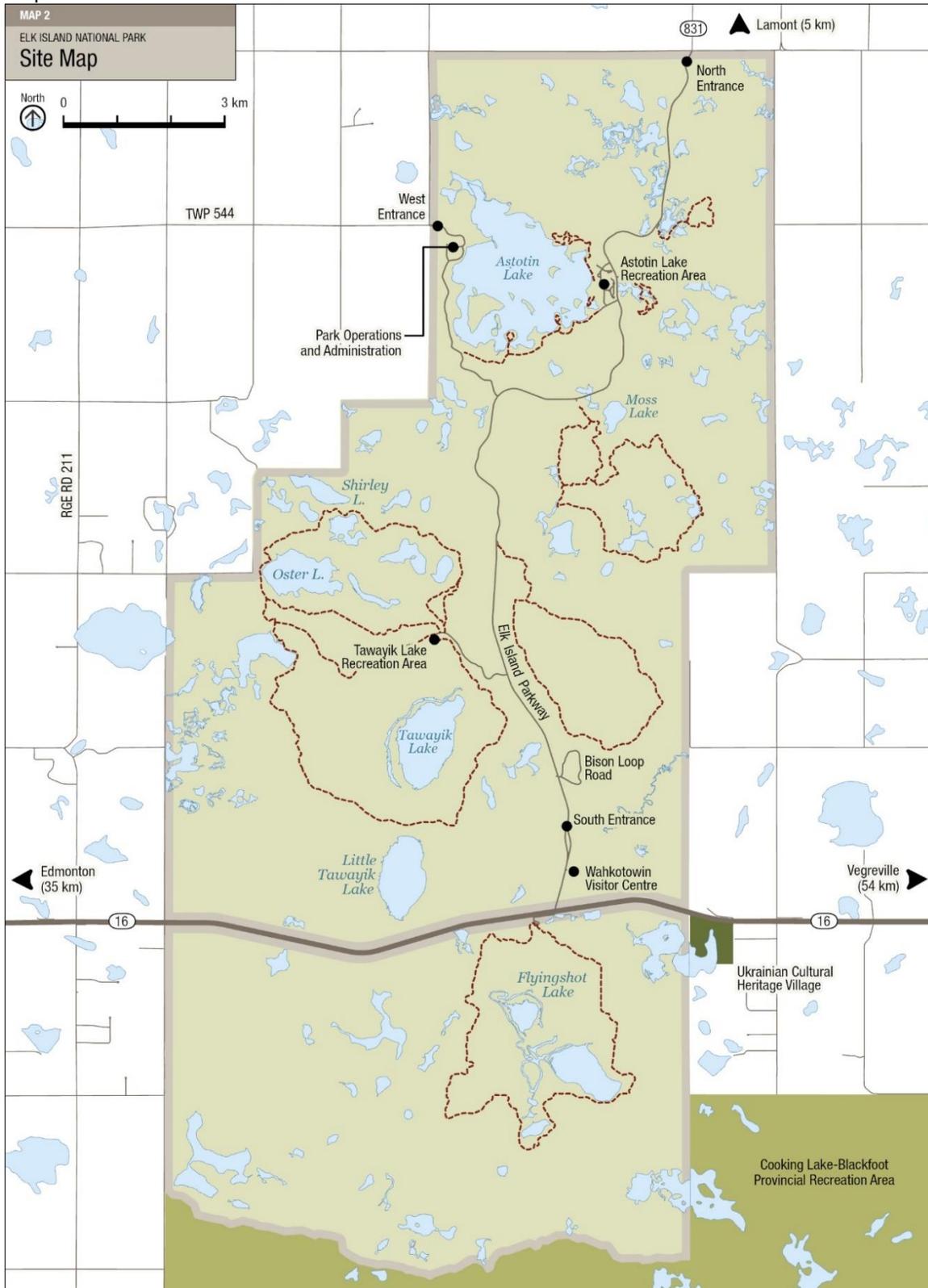
Map 1: Regional Setting



The park's contribution to conservation goes beyond bison and elk. In 1941, beavers were successfully re-introduced into the park after an absence of over 100 years, trumpeter swans were reintroduced in 1987, and fishers in 1990. The park also supports 18 species at risk (species with Endangered, Threatened, or Special Concern status) that regularly occur in the park year-round, for breeding, or on migration. Of these 18 species, 13 are listed under Schedule 1 of the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA), two are assessed by The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) but not listed under SARA, and three are provincially listed in Alberta under Schedule 6 of the *Alberta Wildlife Act Regulations* but are not assessed as at-risk by COSEWIC or listed under SARA. The park also forms a key part of an international migratory bird flyway.

Elk Island is within the Beaver Hills Biosphere, which was designated in 2016 under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere program. This designation provides global recognition of the commitment of Biosphere communities to conservation and sustainable development. Recognizing Elk Island's role as a core protected area within the Beaver Hills Biosphere, Parks Canada works collaboratively with partners to advance conservation and sustainable development in the broader ecosystem. Elk Island is a member of the Beaver Hills Dark Sky Preserve which was established in 2006 and designated by the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. Retaining this designation entails committing to dark-sky lighting standards and providing public education about the night skies.

Map 2: Elk Island National Park



3.0 Planning Context

Elk Island is uniquely situated adjacent to the Greater Edmonton Metropolitan area just 35 minutes from the city of Edmonton (Map 1: Regional Setting). Edmonton is considered the second largest city in Alberta and the fifth largest in Canada with over a million people in the region. The park is easily accessible by car on Highway 16 providing an escape from the bustle of the city with opportunities to explore the park by foot, canoe, bike or car for the day or an overnight camping trip.

Elk Island is a recreational site of longstanding value to regional residents and beyond. It is a four season park and welcomes up to 530,000 visitors annually to experience and enjoy outdoor recreation, the natural environment, and abundant wildlife viewing opportunities. Wildlife viewing is the primary draw for many visitors, most of whom are from nearby Edmonton. Astotin Lake is a focal point of the park. A popular day use recreation area, it supports traditional camping, as well as alternative accommodation in the form of oTENTiks. Elk Island offers a newly upgraded interactive visitor information centre and interpretation theatre. The park also includes a 9-hole golf course which was managed by a third-party operator. Hiking is also a popular activity at Elk Island. During the winter, the park is a popular destination for snowshoeing, wildlife viewing, dark sky experiences, and cross-country skiing. The scenic parkway rounds out the visitor service offer.

Elk Island has been a cornerstone in ungulate conservation programs throughout North America and the world. Two bison handling facilities and one elk handling facility support ungulate health monitoring and translocation efforts. Plains and wood bison from the park have been translocated to establish conservation herds throughout Canada, the United States, and internationally. Elk from the park have been translocated to establish herds in multiple locations in Alberta, and places like Ontario, Saskatchewan, Kentucky and Tennessee. In total over the past century, Elk Island has transferred over 3300 plains and wood bison to sites around the globe. Bison have also been transferred to other national parks and perhaps most significantly, to numerous Indigenous communities. Over the past five years, the park has transferred 212 bison to their traditional homelands to nine Indigenous communities.

Elk Island National Park is also located adjacent to Canada's largest hydrocarbon processing region known as the Industrial Heartland of Alberta. Regulatory review and regional planning processes provide valuable opportunities to address potential transboundary issues from adjacent development in the Industrial Heartland.

Parks Canada at Elk Island has a close relationship with regional tourism partners and a robust outreach program that reaches throughout the capital region of Alberta. Parks Canada collaborates with key partners such as Explore Edmonton and Travel Alberta to promote the park in successful joint tourism campaigns for both summer and winter. The park, along with Jasper National Park, was twinned with Giant Panda National Park of China in 2018, in an effort to promote international tourism.

Parks Canada is exploring the establishment of a National Urban Park in the Edmonton region and there are opportunities for Elk Island to have strong connections to the initiative.

Generally, the park infrastructure is in good condition as a result of recent investments under the Federal Infrastructure Investment Program. In 2016, Elk Island National Park received over \$24 million for improvements to key park infrastructure including extensive road resurfacing and rehabilitation, new washroom and shower facilities in the Astotin recreation area, new Wahkotowin Visitor Information Centre, kitchen shelters, trail improvements, water and waste water infrastructure, kiosk replacements, perimeter park fencing, Astotin Lake theatre and campground office upgrades.

This management plan will replace the *2011 Elk Island National Park of Canada Management Plan* which provided direction for leadership in conservation, enhanced visitor experiences and outreach initiatives, and working with others in support of ecological integrity and sustainability in the region.

Based on the *2019 Elk Island National Park State of the Park Assessment* and input from Indigenous people and stakeholders, the key planning considerations and management priorities are outlined below.

Indigenous relations: There has been significant momentum in relationship building between Parks Canada and Indigenous communities surrounding Elk Island. Parks Canada has successfully collaborated on several initiatives with the Treaty 6 First Nations in Alberta, the Métis Nation of Alberta and beyond. Examples include:

- bison translocation to several Indigenous communities, including communities in Montana;
- bison translocation to the State of Alaska;
- development of the hyperabundant ungulate (e.g. moose, elk) management plan;
- design of the Wahkotowin Visitor Information Centre;
- support for Indigenous products and artistic works in the gift shop;
- development of the Indigenous Cultural Camp;
- medicinal harvesting; and
- the establishment of the Cree Language Circle, which is a visitor program aimed at promoting Cree language.

Improving relations through greater involvement of Indigenous peoples in park management and operations is a key management focus, as is contributing to the Government of Canada priority of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

Growth in visitation: Visitation numbers have grown significantly in the last decade. Between 2011 and 2021, visitation increased by 149 percent (from 212,921 visitors to a peak of 531,055 visitors). Visitation during the winter season (November to April) comprises 30 percent of the Park's yearly visitation. Shoulder season visitation (May-June and September-October) comprises about 40 percent of overall visitation. At peak times, the number and needs of visitors surpassed the capacity of the park's infrastructure, services, programs and staffing complement. With the changes in use levels and patterns, Parks Canada is adjusting the visitor experience to meet the needs of the changing audience. Winter infrastructure and visitor services have been identified as having strong potential to increase visitor enjoyment. The increasing visitor numbers through all seasons has had to be carefully managed to ensure minimal impacts on natural and cultural resources, infrastructure and visitor experience. However, the increase in visitation and being situated next to a major metropolitan region is also a continual opportunity to connect people to Elk Island in meaningful ways especially youth and new Canadians.

Ungulates: The fence surrounding the park and low density of large predators means that moose, elk, and bison are at risk of reaching unsustainably high densities (hyperabundant) if they are not actively removed by park staff. Hyperabundant populations have negative effects on animal health and on the integrity of aquatic, forest and grassland ecosystems. Elk have been managed with moderate success to reduce their hyperabundance, while the moose population in the north block of the park continues to be decimated by liver fluke. Elk and moose populations are currently below target levels in the north block and above target levels in the south block of the park.

Grasslands and forest health: The grasslands and forests in this region are found along the natural limits of aspen parkland and boreal forests, and contain some of the highest levels of biodiversity in the province. Under the most recent assessment of conservation monitoring indicators, the condition of forests is considered "fair" rather than "good" as reported in the 2019 assessment. Grassland ecosystem health and the grassland area have seen declines in recent years. Overgrazing by ungulates, the prevalence of invasive weedy plant species, and the lack of fire are the primary causes. Parks Canada is investing \$2.3 million in a grasslands restoration initiative in Elk Island that will continue through 2024. Improving grassland quality and extent will increase the ability of the park to support healthy ungulate herds and improve the ecological integrity of the grassland ecosystem.

Aquatic ecosystems: Elk Island's aquatic and riparian areas are critical to the park's overall ecosystem integrity and to the well-being of downstream natural and human communities. Significant changes have occurred to the park's aquatic systems over the last 100 years, including draining of wetlands, alterations to the hydrological connectivity with the North Saskatchewan River, and influxes of contaminants and organic pollutants. Wetland habitat within the Beaver Hills has been lost at an alarming rate. As a consequence, the protection of wetlands in the park and the region is a conservation priority.

Invasive species: The introduction, spread, and establishment of invasive species in Elk Island is a challenge for park management. Invasive plants threaten Elk Island’s grassland health. Feral swine have become prevalent in the region, with frequent and increasing sightings in the park; and there has been no systematic monitoring of the prevalence of invasive species in aquatic systems.

Cultural resources: A comprehensive understanding of cultural resources in the park is lacking. Examples of topics include: preparing an inventory of existing resources such as archaeological objects and sites; determining preservation needs of built heritage such as the federal heritage buildings; and understanding cultural landscapes which may exist in the park. Parks Canada recognizes and respects that there are Indigenous cultural and spiritual sites within the park that are known only to local Indigenous peoples.

Climate change: Climate change projections for Elk Island show significant increases in temperature and frost free days, as well as decreases in annual snow depths. These projections include changes in the mix of species and population levels, loss of wetlands, increased prevalence of invasive species, and increased wildfire hazard. For ungulates, impacts include heat stress, decreased forest cover for shelter, the appearance of new diseases, and increased grazing pressure on heat-stressed grassland habitats. Climate change may also affect visitor experience, the lifespan of built assets and the condition of cultural resources.

Beaver Hills Biosphere: The recent UNESCO designation of the Beaver Hills as a biosphere will help regional partners and stakeholders create coordinated messages to promote conservation and influence sustainable development in the region. Parks Canada at Elk Island has the opportunity to play a leadership role in the biosphere and other regional planning processes. Parks Canada and land managers within the biosphere share common goals, including ensuring ecological integrity and landscape-scale ecological connectivity, promoting sustainable development and tourism, and protecting cultural resources.

Supporting plans: Six topic-specific detailed plans guide park management or are in development:

- “Accessibility and Universal Design Audit of Elk Island National Park” (Astotin Lake Area) (2021)
- “Elk Island National Park Visitor Experience Plan” (2019).
- “Elk Island National Park External Relations Strategic Plan 2022-2026” (2022).
- “Hyperabundant Ungulate Management Plan - Elk Island National Park” (2018).
- “Fire Management Plan - Elk Island National Park” (2018).
- “Vegetation Management Plan - Northern Prairies Field Unit” (2015).
- A visitor use management plan is in development. It will identify desired conditions and management approaches for three high use areas in the park.
- A species at risk plan is near completion.

4.0 Development of the Management Plan

This draft management plan was developed by a team of Parks Canada staff who support Elk Island National Park with input from Indigenous people and the park’s stakeholders. As with all national park planning programs, completing a 'state of the park' assessment was one of the first steps. Consideration of many other topics and opportunities shaped the draft plan, including park research, the supporting plans noted above, Parks Canada corporate priorities, and comments from consultation.

An introductory phase of Indigenous and stakeholder consultation was held in spring and fall 2021. The purpose of consultation was threefold: 1) introduce the planning program; 2) identify opportunities to be involved in shaping the management plan, and; 3) begin discussing topics of mutual interest that may help shape the draft plan. The highlights of discussion from this introductory phase are contained in “What We Heard” (2022). All comments were considered in the development of this draft plan.

Representatives from ten Indigenous communities participated in two virtual meetings. The focus of discussions was increasing Indigenous participation in park management, increasing Indigenous cultural content in park information, and exploring Indigenous connections to their traditional lands. Representatives expressed their desire to continue to collaborate with Parks Canada in the development of the management plan. Meetings are ongoing.

Stakeholder groups participated in three virtual meetings. Represented were the Beaver Hills Biosphere, Edmonton-based tourism agencies, one environmental organization, a county and the park cooperating association. The focus of discussions was landscape connectivity, innovation in park and regional management, sustainability, coordination and promotion of tourism, and balancing use and protection. The next step in consultation for these organizations will be review of the draft plan.

Consultation on the draft management plan will take several forms. The Internet will be used to reach people interested in reviewing the draft plan. Meetings will be held with Indigenous people and stakeholder representatives. All comments will be reviewed and considered as the plan is finalized. A final “What We Heard” document will be released to conclude the consultation program.

5.0 Vision

This vision expresses the desired future of Elk Island National Park in 15-20 years, serving as a foundation for this management plan.

Elk Island National Park is recognized as a jewel in the province and a sanctuary of nature and culture. It protects for all time the ecological integrity of the boreal forest and southern plateaux natural region. The critically endangered aspen parkland of this region supports a diverse assemblage of plants, animals and ecosystems, including bison, moose, elk, grasslands, forests and wetlands. The natural processes that are critical to the integrity of these ecosystems such as fire, predation, wildlife movement and grazing, continue. Natural and cultural resources are interwoven parts of the ecosystem, and are managed through this lens.

Indigenous peoples feel welcome and connect with the lands and waters that their ancestors have called home for thousands of years. They continue the tradition of harvesting, gathering, and teaching new generations. They are actively involved in park management through participation in decision making and employment. Respect for Indigenous knowledge systems is woven throughout management activities. Indigenous cultures are acknowledged and celebrated in visitor experiences and park information. Indigenous peoples' presence on the landscape improves the well-being of the park and visitor experiences.

Visitors can readily and safely view the park's wildlife – a powerful way of witnessing the success of the park's century-old conservation legacy. Many visitors are new to Canada and to the national park experience, and are inspired to enjoy more of the outdoors. Many have been coming to the park for years, enjoying the front country bustle of Astotin Lake, or the peace of a backcountry trail. All visitors have a chance to enjoy solitude.

Elk Island is a place where people can discuss and reflect upon important concepts such as wilderness, conservation, culture, and Indigenous stewardship. Park stories respect the diversity that made Canada what it is today. Stories allow Canadians to see themselves, whoever and wherever they are.

Through partnerships, Elk Island is having an impact beyond its boundaries. The park's bison continue to contribute to the re-establishment of herds around the world. Parks Canada's leadership role in the Beaver Hills Biosphere has helped to increase sustainability across the broader regional landscape. More areas are protected in a

natural or near-natural state. Many of these areas are linked to form ecological corridors, which increases the resiliency of ecosystems.

6.0 Key Strategies

As a long-term strategic plan, consistent with the Government of Canada's approach to results-based planning, the management plan focuses on the results that Parks Canada wants to achieve. The purpose of the management plan is not to identify ten years' worth of specific actions, but instead to provide decision-makers and the public with the priorities that will guide decisions.

The components of results-based planning work together as follows:

- Vision – describes desired future, setting the management direction;
- Key Strategies – present major themes, introducing management approaches and commitments;
- Objectives – identify management outcomes, indicating desired results;
- Targets – tie directly to the objective defining the amount of change that will be measured; and,
- Annual Reporting – publicly communicates ongoing implementation, connecting actions to direction set in the management plan.

Parks Canada will make decisions with respect to how to reach the targets identified in this plan, working in collaboration with Indigenous peoples, partners, stakeholders and the public. Over the ten-year time frame, this approach allows flexibility, which accounts for available resources, evolving priorities and emerging opportunities. Informing partners, stakeholders and Canadians about how ongoing decisions, actions or projects fit with the management plan is done through business planning, and annual implementation updates and other communications.

Each key strategy contains objectives and targets to guide park management and decision making over the next ten years. The objectives describe desired outcomes following implementation of program activities. Targets offer tangible ways of measuring progress toward achieving each objective. In some cases, the targets are derived from indicators or thresholds related to Parks Canada monitoring programs. In other cases, the targets may reflect desired activities or outputs of park management activities.

The measurement of targets in this plan is generally in comparison to 2022 levels as reference (benchmarks) from assessments that helped guide the development of this plan. Wherever possible, targets are based on measurable data that are monitored by Parks Canada through Agency-wide programs; other benchmarks and targets may need to be established and measured locally by the park. The Agency's programs and tools that are common sources of measurable targets include:

- Parks Canada monitoring programs (state of park assessments)
- Visitor surveys
- Attendance records
- Permits
- Media tracking
- Partnering arrangements

Specific time frames for reaching certain targets have been provided where possible; where no timeframe has been referenced, the target will be achieved during the ten-year plan period. The next state of park assessment will be scheduled in roughly eight years from the date of approval of this management plan to initiate the next planning cycle.

The key strategies do not sit in isolation from each other nor in order of priority; they should be considered as a whole in order to understand how the plan aims to achieve the vision of the park and Parks Canada's mandate. In many cases, direction for park management activities is integrated into several different key strategies. For the duration of this management plan, five key strategies have been developed to guide the management direction for Elk Island National Park.

Key Strategy 1: Strengthening Relationships with Indigenous Peoples in the Spirit of Reconciliation

This key strategy focuses on building a renewed relationship with Indigenous peoples based on the recognition of rights, respect and partnership. Over the life of this plan, Parks Canada will focus on building strong, respectful relationships with Indigenous partners, the hallmarks of which will be listening, sharing perspectives and working together in the spirit of reconciliation. Increased emphasis on Indigenous cultures will reflect an evolution of thought within Parks Canada in which Indigenous histories were often ignored and are now celebrated.

Parks Canada will continue to collaborate with Indigenous peoples to foster opportunities to improve their connections with Elk Island National Park and increase their participation in park management and operations. A greater presence of Indigenous peoples in the park, which includes Indigenous peoples practising their cultures and sharing their traditions, will serve as a catalyst for mutual learning, respect and understanding.

Parks Canada will work in partnership with Indigenous communities connected to the park to ensure the cultural significance of bison to Indigenous peoples is an important consideration in all bison conservation efforts. Working with Indigenous partners to share information about Indigenous cultures in park information and programs will help to increase visitors' understanding and appreciation of Indigenous peoples' roles in the stewardship of the area. Canadians and Indigenous people will also have opportunities to connect with off-site outreach and programming content created with Indigenous perspectives. Indigenous cultural sites, values, and place names in the park will be identified, protected and communicated where appropriate in collaboration with Indigenous partners. Progress in all these areas will support the journey toward reconciliation and improved relationships with Indigenous peoples.

Objective 1.1: Respectful relationships are strengthened and continue to be built with Indigenous communities connected to the park, honouring their role as traditional stewards of the land and increasing their involvement in park management.

Targets

- An Indigenous Advisory Circle for Elk Island has been established within five years.
- The Indigenous partnerships indicator has improved from fair to good in the next state of park assessment.

Objective 1.2: The contributions, stories and languages of Indigenous partners are incorporated in Elk Island National Park.

Targets

- The indicator ratings for incorporation of traditional knowledge and use of Indigenous languages has improved in the next state of park assessment.
- The number of interpretive programs that support Indigenous story telling and being told by Indigenous persons has increased within three years.
- Indigenous languages have been incorporated into selected programs, signage and place names in the park within five years.

Objective 1.3: Opportunities for socioeconomic benefits for Indigenous peoples at Elk Island have improved.

Targets

- The economic opportunities for Indigenous peoples' indicator has improved in the next state of park assessment.
- Indigenous staff recruitment has increased from a 2022 baseline, particularly from Indigenous partner communities and the Edmonton capital region.
- Contracting, procurement and other business opportunities for Indigenous partners has increased from 2022 levels.

- The Indigenous merchandise and craft program has grown and continues to be supported by Parks Canada.

Objective 1.4: Indigenous partners' connections to the land are maintained leaving an enduring Indigenous presence in the park.

Targets

- Use of the Indigenous Cultural Use Area has increased within three years.
- The Indigenous accessibility indicator rating has improved from fair to good in the next state of park assessment.

Key Strategy 2: Working Towards Ecological Integrity in the Park

This key strategy focuses on maintaining and improving the ecological integrity of park ecosystems and their natural and cultural resources which are core to the park's existence. Elk Island's particular features present inherent challenges. Management efforts will consider the small area of the park, neighbouring development pressures, a fenced boundary that restricts the movement of large animals, and a lack of fires and large predators. The impacts of climate change further add to the challenge of managing for ecological integrity and protecting cultural resources. Objectives related to these challenges focus on the restoration of ecological processes that contribute to the ecological integrity of the aspen parkland and the health of ungulate populations. The roles of grazing, fire, predation, and transboundary wildlife will continue to be important considerations.

The abundance of species at risk, as well as ecologically significant and culturally sensitive species, is high within the Beaver Hills. Over the life of this plan, recommendations from Elk Island's recent species-at-risk planning processes will be implemented and species at risk monitoring programs will continue to evolve. Parks Canada's management efforts will also concentrate on minimizing human-wildlife conflict. Activities to manage human-wildlife conflicts will continue to shift to proactive strategies, particularly for management of beavers, bison and carnivores.

Due to the significant changes that have occurred to the park's aquatic systems over the last 100 years, surveillance of aquatic system health, combined with a restoration strategy for key waterbodies will be a starting point to mitigate some of these impacts.

Preventing the introduction, spread, and establishment of invasive species in Elk Island will continue to be a vital element of park management. Recognizing that eradication of these species will take considerable planning and effort, Parks Canada will continue to build programs that systematically identify, monitor and decrease the prevalence of invasive species. A feral swine management strategy will be developed and implemented, commensurate with national management strategies, that outlines actions and activities to mitigate feral swine presence in Elk Island. In addition, an aquatic invasive species management approach will be developed and implemented to monitor and detect aquatic invasive species and to prevent their introduction to park waterways. Education programs will be developed and delivered to visitors, promoting awareness about their role in reducing overall invasive species presence in the park.

Elk Island will set a priority for the development and implementation of a cultural resources management strategy through identifying the park's cultural resources, understanding and sharing their significance from Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, and protecting and caring for them respectfully. Parks Canada recognizes and respects that there are Indigenous cultural and spiritual sites within the park that are known only to local Indigenous peoples. For this reason, appropriate and respectful management practices will be developed in collaboration with Indigenous partners.

Parks Canada's ecosystem management, conservation and restoration initiatives will be supported by the best available science, Indigenous knowledge, and an adaptive approach that provides for the evolution of management practices based on monitoring and research. Where natural and cultural resources are

negatively affected by human-related impacts (e.g., intense human use), these impacts will be managed to minimize their effects.

Objective 2.1: Terrestrial ecosystems are restored.

Targets

- The areal extent of grasslands has increased to 18-28 % of the terrestrial area of the park.
- The average annual area burned has been maintained at no less than 202.5 hectares per year.
- The condition rating for grasslands has improved from “poor” to “fair” in the next state of the park assessment.
- The condition rating for forests has improved from “fair” to “good” in the next state of the park assessment.

Objective 2.2: Habitats, species, and trophic relationships within the park are protected and preserved.

Targets

- The elk and moose population condition rating has improved from “poor” to “fair” by the next state of the park assessment.
- Monitoring measures for freshwater ecosystems are stable or improving.
- Proactive human-wildlife coexistence strategies result in a reduction of wildlife conflicts from 2022 levels.
- All habitat for species-at-risk are identified and mapped.

Objective 2.3: Elk Island maintains its role as a leader in bison conservation in North America.

Targets:

- The bison population condition rating has improved from “poor” to “fair” by the next state of the park assessment.
- The park continues to contribute to establishing and supplementing populations of plains and wood bison across North America.

Objective 2.4: The prevalence of invasive species is in decline throughout the park.

Targets

- The percent cover of priority invasive plants has decreased by 10% within five years.
- Feral swine have not become established in the park.
- Aquatic invasive species have not become established in the park.

Objective 2.5: Understanding of the park’s cultural resources has improved, informing the management of cultural and natural heritage.

Targets

- Cultural landscapes and features are rated in the next state of the park assessment.
- The condition rating of the federal heritage buildings has improved from “fair” to “good” in the next state of the park assessment.

Key Strategy 3: Working with Others in Support of Ecological Sustainability on the Broader Landscape

This key strategy focuses on an integrated landscape-level approach working with regional partners in support of shared goals for conservation of biodiversity, ecological sustainability, and the support of the tourism economy. Parks Canada will continue to play a key role in working with the Beaver Hills Initiative, to address conservation and sustainability across the working landscape. With the designation of the UNESCO Beaver Hills Biosphere in 2016, there is renewed potential for working toward shared

goals of landscape-scale ecological connectivity, environmental stewardship, protecting cultural resources, and developing respectful and mutually beneficial relationships with Indigenous peoples.

Parks Canada has a leadership role to play in the success of the Biosphere. Parks Canada is well-positioned to provide special expertise to support knowledge gathering, scientific research and data sharing. Parks Canada will continue to play a role in biosphere management topics including human-wildlife conflict, vegetation and aquatic management, wetland restoration, ecological connectivity across the landscape, cultural resource management, and Indigenous connections, and supporting a sustainable, regional tourism economy. There will also be an emphasis in engaging communities in the Beaver Hills region so that they feel connected to the park.

Mitigating impacts of invasive species, including feral swine, within the national park and throughout the biosphere requires regional, partnered strategies.

Through regional planning processes with land trust and provincial partners, Parks Canada will develop and implement a land acquisition strategy to increase the park's land base and will support external regional initiatives that increase the amount of protected area in the Beaver Hills Region. This strategy also aims to strengthen the integration of the park with the regional tourism economy. Parks Canada will participate in regional tourism promotion to promote sustainable, year-round tourism to the area for the Beaver Hills Biosphere, in collaboration with representatives from Government of Alberta, Strathcona County, Lamont County, Beaver County and regional tourism-based associations. Park Canada will also work with these tourism partners to promote sustainable environmental tourism practices.

Parks Canada will create and participate in opportunities to identify and coordinate climate change mitigation and adaptation actions. Parks Canada will also continue to participate in regional impact assessments and regulatory review processes for proposed projects that may have trans-boundary effects on the park's ecological integrity, cultural resources and visitor experience. There will be increased sharing of data and research findings, as well as increased collaboration in regional research and monitoring projects. Parks Canada will continue to work to ensure that Indigenous voices are amplified in the Beaver Hills Biosphere.

Objective 3.1: Regional and environmental challenges have improved in collaboration with Biosphere partners, landowners, local governments and conservation agencies to support ecological integrity and sustainability in the region.

Targets

- Regional programs supported by Parks Canada result in decreased human-wildlife conflicts and increased ecological connectivity over the broader landscape from 2022 levels.
- Through regional collaboration, the prevalence of invasive species, such as feral swine, do not increase significantly within Beaver Hills Biosphere from 2022 levels.
- The transboundary species at risk populations in the Biosphere have increased from 2022 levels.

Objective 3.2: Elk Island National Park expansion has increased overall landscape connectivity, conservation, and ecological stewardship of the Beaver Hills Biosphere.

Targets

- The amount of protected area in the region has increased from 2022 levels.
- Elk Island's land base has expanded from 2022 levels.

Objective 3.3: Relationships between Parks Canada and key partners are broadened and strengthened to promote regional tourism in the Beaver Hills Biosphere.

Targets

- Collaboration among key tourism partners and Parks Canada to promote sustainable year-round tourism in the region is maintained.

Key Strategy 4: Creating Connections and Inspiring People

This key strategy focuses on connecting people to the natural and cultural heritage of Elk Island National Park through high quality visitor experiences and outreach initiatives. Target audience needs and desired experiences will be fundamental to the ongoing improvement and revitalization of experiences offered at the park. The current visitor experience offer will be assessed to meet increasing year round visitation, change in visitor use patterns, and visitation pressures. The assessment will consider many aspects of the existing and desired experiences, including target markets, social and ecological capacities as well as infrastructure. These efforts will support the development and implementation of a renewed visitor experience strategy for the park.

Visitation levels to the park will be actively monitored and managed in order to maintain sustainable visitor use and high visitor satisfaction levels. Parks Canada's focus will be to identify approaches to ensure that visitor opportunities in the park will be informed by a better understanding of visitor-use management approaches, potential cultural and ecological impacts, the finite spatial capacity of the park, condition and characteristics of facilities and infrastructure, and any potential safety issues, to ensure visitor opportunities are sustainable and can accommodate people of different abilities, social identities, backgrounds and interests. These efforts will support the development and implementation of a visitor use management plan for Elk Island. A monitoring program to measure potential impacts of visitation on ecological integrity will provide for increased understanding and adaptive management measures. Visitation in high use areas will be managed to reduce traffic congestion, prioritize public safety and ecological integrity, and to provide quality experiences. Successful implementation of this strategy will require the collaboration and support of stakeholders and partners.

Visitor infrastructure investments will focus on improving accessibility and creating a safe and inclusive environment for visitors and staff. Adaptive design principles will be incorporated into new or refurbished park facilities, in accordance with accessibility best practices and standards and in collaboration with persons with disabilities. In follow up to the Accessibility and Universal Design Audit for the Astotin Lake Area, an accessibility audit will be completed for the remainder of visitor infrastructure and facilities in the park.

With no current operator for the golf course, there is opportunity to assess the golf course service offer and the best use for this area of the park. An option analysis will be completed for the golf course lands to determine its future use.

Over the next ten years, Parks Canada will focus its efforts on increasing regional and national audiences' connection to Elk Island National Park through a comprehensive approach to communications, outreach, promotion and marketing. In addition, a range of innovative personal, non personal and virtual opportunities will be developed for target audiences. This will inspire people to learn about and visit this unique tourism destination and create their own meaningful connections to the park, particularly in the shoulder and winter seasons. Outreach efforts will include promoting and featuring Elk Island in regional and national online platforms, media and film.

Objective 4.1: Visitor appreciation and connection to Elk Island National Park is maintained through a wide range of enjoyable, accessible and inclusive experiences and services.

Targets

- 85 percent of surveyed visitors have reported that the park is meaningful to them.
- 90 percent of surveyed visitors report their emotional well-being, social well-being and physical well-being improved due to their visit to the park.
- The visitor enjoyment indicator has improved with an increasing trend in the next state of the park assessment.

Objective 4.2: Quality visitor experiences are enhanced through effective visitor use management strategies to protect the park's ecosystems.

Targets:

- 90 percent of surveyed visitors are satisfied with their overall visit to the park.
- 75 percent of visitors surveyed considered they had learned about the natural heritage of the park.
- Measures of ecological integrity are showing that visitation is not impairing the park's ecosystem.

Objective 4.3: Accessibility and inclusivity parameters are established for the entire park and show improvement in accordance with the purpose and principles of the *Accessible Canada Act*.

Targets

- Recommendations from the Accessibility and Universal Design Audit for Elk Island National Park (Astotin Day Use Area) have been implemented. Accessible and inclusive options for visitors to experience the park are improved from 2022 levels.

Objective 4.4: Regional and national audiences are aware of the natural and cultural significance of Elk Island National Park.

Targets:

- The range of innovative personal, non personal and virtual opportunities that enables target audiences to learn and create connection to the park is maintained from 2022 levels.
- Exposure in a range of regional and national online platforms, media and film featuring the park is maintained from 2022 levels.

Key Strategy 5: Responding and Adapting to Climate Change

This strategy is focused on responding and adapting to the impacts of climate change on the park's ecosystems, cultural resources, built assets and visitor facilities. Parks Canada is committed to protecting park ecosystems for future generations by demonstrating leadership in sustainable operations and adaptive management in response to climate change.

Parks Canada's efforts will be focused on having a better understanding of climate change impacts within the park and adaptive actions will be taken to mitigate these impacts where possible. The park's ecological integrity monitoring program will be reviewed to identify data gaps and opportunities to increase understanding of the effects of climate change on the park's ecosystem. Based on this review updates will be made to the ecological monitoring program in advance of Elk Island's next state of the park assessment. Cultural resources will also be assessed for vulnerability to climate change impacts integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. An increased understanding of the impacts of climate change will also help to develop effective visitor opportunities and visitor use management approaches that are sustainable.

Over the next ten years, the park will work to reduce its carbon footprint. Operational mitigation measures and actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will be pursued to increase sustainability of park operations. This includes promoting the sustainable design, construction and maintenance of park infrastructure and visitor facilities. Guided by the Government of Canada's commitment to greening government operations, Parks Canada will also make progress in transitioning to low carbon, sustainable and climate resilient real property, fleets, services and operations.

Parks Canada will expand its network and collaborations with institutions and organizations with climate change expertise. This will further contribute to the park's understanding and response to the impacts of climate change. Additionally, Parks Canada will work together with regional groups to collaborate and coordinate on climate change initiatives that are beneficial for the park and the biosphere.

Objective 5.1: Understanding of the impacts of climate change on park ecosystems, cultural resources, built assets and visitor facilities has improved.

Targets

- There has been an increase in the research undertaken by Elk Island to understand the ecological impacts of climate change on the parks ecosystem, relative to 2022 levels.
- Adaptive actions to mitigate the impacts of climate change on ecological and cultural resources are being implemented and have increased.
- The resiliency of park infrastructure to the impacts of climate change has increased relative to 2022 levels.

Objective 5.2: Green and low carbon approaches are incorporated comprehensively in park operations, asset management and services aligning with the *Departmental Sustainable Development Strategy*.

Targets

- Green house gas emission from park operations are declining relative to 2022 levels.

7.0 Zoning

Zoning is an important management tool that supports the vision for Elk Island by directing visitor use to appropriate areas of the park, and ensuring that rare, sensitive ecological or cultural areas are protected.

Parks Canada's national park zoning system is an integrated approach to the classification of land and water areas in a national park and designates where particular activities can occur on land or water based on the ability to support those uses. The zoning system has five categories:

- Zone I - Special Preservation;
- Zone II - Wilderness;
- Zone III - Natural Environment;
- Zone IV - Outdoor Recreation; and
- Zone V - Park Services.

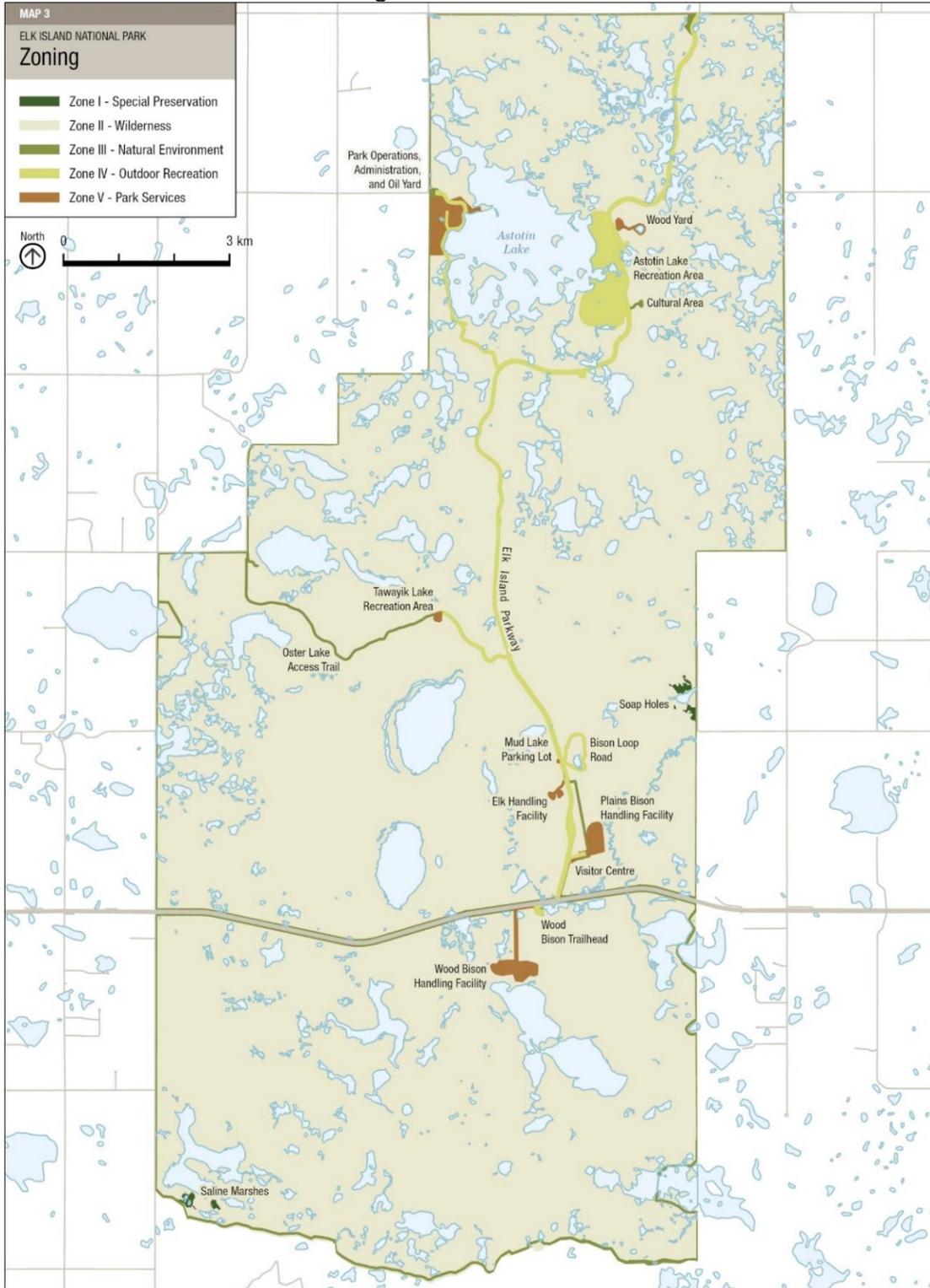
All five of the zoning classifications are applicable in Elk Island.

The zoning (Map 3: Elk Island National Park Zoning) in Elk Island National Park has been amended from the 2011 management plan to reflect new knowledge and visitation pressures.

Proposed Zoning Amendments:

- The level of protection for soap holes and saline marshes has been increased. These are unique and significant natural features in the park that were previously classified as environmentally sensitive areas however upon further analysis it was determined that these natural features require a higher level of protection and are being classified as Zone I within this management plan.

Map 3: Elk Island National Park Zoning



Zone I Special Preservation: Includes specific areas or features which deserve special preservation because they contain or support unique, threatened or endangered natural or cultural features, or are among the best examples of the features that represent a natural region. This zone may also be used to protect areas that are too sensitive to accommodate facility development or large numbers of visitors. Opportunities are provided for visitors to experience and learn about these unique areas in a manner that does not threaten their values. In cases where the fragility of the area precludes any public access, every effort will be made to provide park visitors with appropriate off-site programs and exhibits interpreting the special characteristics of the zone. Within Zone I areas, preservation is the key consideration. Motorized access and circulation will not be permitted.

There are two Zone I areas that encompass less than 1 percent of the park. Public access to these areas will be strictly controlled. The following areas are included in Zone I:

- Soap holes
 - Soap holes are an uncommon hydrogeological formation found on the Canadian prairies, generally formed through the pressure of an artesian well. These poorly drained soils support a unique community of alkali grasses and may be an important source of minerals for ungulates and other animals.
- Saline marshes
 - The saline marshes are the rarest wetlands in the park and support unique ecological communities.

Zone II – Wilderness: Includes areas that are a good representation of a natural region and that will be conserved in a wilderness state. The perpetuation of ecosystems with minimal human interference is encouraged. Opportunities for outdoor recreation activities will be encouraged only when they do not conflict with maintaining the wilderness itself. Motorized access and circulation will not be permitted. In Elk Island, 96 percent of the park is within Zone II, of which 16 percent is aquatic and 84 percent is terrestrial.

Zone III – Natural Environment: Includes areas that are managed as natural environments and provide opportunities for visitors to experience a park's natural and cultural heritage values through outdoor recreation activities requiring minimal services and facilities of a rustic nature. Motorized access, where allowed, is controlled. In Elk Island, less than 2 percent of the park is within Zone III, including:

- 25-metre buffer along the inside of the entire boundary fence
- access trail to the Oster Lake campground
- Indigenous cultural area.

Zone IV - Outdoor Recreation: Includes areas capable of accommodating a broad range of opportunities for understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the park's heritage values and related essential services and facilities, in ways that impact the ecological integrity of the park to the smallest extent possible. Direct access by motorized vehicles is allowed. In Elk Island, 1.5 percent of the park is in Zone IV, including:

- Elk Island Parkway and associated trailhead parking
- Wood Bison Trail access road and trailhead parking at the south side of the Yellowhead Highway
- West Gate Road
- Plains Bison Loop Road
- Astotin Lake area, which includes the golf course.

Zone V - Park Services: Includes a concentration of visitor services and support facilities. Major park operation and administrative functions may also be accommodated in this zone. In Elk Island, less than 1 percent of the park is in Zone V, including:

- park administration building, operations compound, lagoon, oil yard and staff residences west of Astotin Lake

- the Wahkotowin Visitor Information Centre
- three animal handling facilities and their access roads (elk, plains bison and wood bison handling facilities)
- Tawayik Lake Recreation Area
- Mud Lake parking lot.

The Park Superintendent may authorize motorized access in any zone for administrative and operational purposes.

Environmentally and Culturally Sensitive Areas

Parks Canada's policy provides for the designation of environmentally and culturally sensitive areas to complement the zoning system. This designation applies to small areas that contain significant and sensitive resources that require special protection and visitor-access management to protect resources. Recognition as an ecologically or culturally sensitive area ensures that the values for which a site has been designated are protected and respected in any park management decisions or actions.

Six types of features have been designated as environmentally sensitive areas in Elk Island. All these features are located within Zone II however rudimentary services or facilities such as docks, primitive campsites and/or composting toilets are not permitted in these areas. The environmentally sensitive areas in the park include:

- Sand hills
 - Sand hills are rare vegetation communities due to limited extent of sandy soils in the Beaver Hills. Sandy soils are naturally exposed in three areas in the park – southeast of Moss Lake, the southwest corner of the Wood Bison Trail and the west side of Walter Lake.
- Bogs and fens
 - The bogs and fens, also known as needleleaf evergreen and deciduous wetlands, are rare vegetation communities due to the limited extent of necessary hydrologic conditions in the Beaver Hills. These wetlands support unique and ecological communities.
- Old growth mixed wood forest
 - The most representative area of old growth mixed wood forest is found in the northern part of the park. This area supports a unique ecological community characterized by mature white spruce, aspen, and birch.
- White birch communities
 - White birch communities are rare in the Beaver Hills and support a unique ecological community. In the park, they occur in isolated dense closed stands and are most prominent on the west side of Tawayik Lake.
- Natural licks and springs
 - Several springs in the park provide a source of minerals for ungulates. The water chemistry of springs also supports unique vegetation.
- Islands on Astotin Lake
 - The islands in Astotin Lake represent significant nesting and roosting habitat for many of the parks, aquatic bird species.

Culturally sensitive areas are considered in all park management decisions. An inventory has been undertaken and these areas continue to be monitored. Additional management approaches for culturally sensitive areas are outlined in the key strategies section of this plan with a focus on protection, monitoring, and increased understanding of these areas and resources.

8.0 Summary of Strategic Environmental Assessment

All national park management plans are assessed through a strategic environmental assessment to understand the potential for cumulative effects. This understanding contributes to evidence-based decision making that supports ecological integrity being maintained or restored over the life of the plan.

The strategic environmental assessment for the management plan for Elk Island National Park considered the potential impacts of climate change, local and regional activities around the park, expected increase in visitation and proposals within the management plan. The strategic environmental assessment assessed the potential impacts on different aspects of the ecosystem, including forest and grassland ecosystem health, landscape connectivity, freshwater ecosystems, large mammal populations, and species at risk. The small size and fenced nature of the park presents inherent challenges in the maintenance of integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, where the fence limits the habitat supply and movement of three key species, and slows the movement of several other species.

The ecological integrity measures for forest and grassland ecosystem health are ranked as poor to fair in the state of park assessment and could be further impacted by the lack of fire, climate change, grazing impacts, increased visitation, and invasive species. The management plan identifies targets for ungulate population management, fire management on the landscape, and invasive plant management to address concerns related to terrestrial habitats. There is a gap in data with respect to understanding the impacts of intense human activities on the environmental resources of the park; however, the management of some impacts from human use and human-wildlife conflicts will be minimized through tools such as the visitor use management plan and regional initiatives. The monitoring of freshwater ecosystem health will inform management actions that will contribute to the maintenance and restoration of aquatic ecosystems. Climate change vulnerability and risk assessment tools will also be implemented to identify potential impacts and solutions related to park management. The park will be completing species at risk planning, which will be coordinated at a regional level with partner agencies for transboundary species. Species at risk planning will set out direction for Elk Island National Park actions to recover species at risk in the park. The strategic environmental assessment identifies additional mitigations and strategies, including the identification of information gaps that exist that pose challenges in the understanding of human-related impacts terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

Although bounded by a perimeter fence, the park plays a critical role as a core protected area within the UNESCO Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve and is a core protected area within a critically endangered ecosystem. Regional conservation of freshwater ecosystems and improving landscape connectivity between protected areas within the biosphere as well as outside the biosphere is a shared priority for Elk Island National Park and its regional partners. The management plan commits to the exploration of land acquisition opportunities, as well as a strategy for a partnership approach to acquiring lands over the life of the plan. Elk Island's continued leadership role within the Biosphere Reserve will facilitate improvements in addressing regional environmental challenges.

Indigenous partners, stakeholders and the public will be consulted on the draft management plan and the summary of the draft strategic environmental assessment. Feedback will be considered and incorporated into the strategic environmental assessment and management plan as appropriate.

The strategic environmental assessment was conducted in accordance with *The Cabinet Directive on the Environmental Assessment of Policy, Plan and Program Proposals* (2010) and facilitated an evaluation of how the management plan contributed to the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy. Individual projects undertaken to implement management plan objectives at the site will be evaluated to determine if an impact assessment is required under the *Impact Assessment Act*, or successor legislation. The management plan supports the *Federal Sustainable Development Strategy* goals of Greening Government, Pristine Lakes and Rivers, Sustainably Managed Lands and Forests, Healthy Wildlife Populations, Connecting Canadians with Nature, and Safe and Healthy Communities.

Many positive effects are expected from the implementation of the management plan, including improved understanding of the significance and values of cultural resources in the park, facilitation of learning opportunities, contribution to landscape-level conservation, promotion of a sense of place, provisioning and regulating services, and economic benefits. Through the implementation of mechanisms such as project-level impact assessments, research, collaborative work with regional partners to address connectivity, restoration of targeted areas of grassland and parkland habitat, as well as the management of focal species, no significant negative environmental effects are anticipated from the implementation of the management plan.