





Prepared by

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Located in northern Manitoba, the Seal River holds outstanding natural, cultural and recreation values. Based on the strength of these values, the river was designated to the Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS) in 1992. The CHRS requires that a detailed monitoring report be prepared every ten years from designation to confirm that the natural, cultural, and recreation values for which the river was designated remain in place. Two decadal monitoring reports for the Seal River have previously been prepared, in 2006 and 2014. This Ten-Year Monitoring Report lists activities and events that occurred on or in relation to the Seal River between 2014 and 2024, describes the current conditions of the river's natural heritage, cultural heritage and recreation values, and identifies any changes or threats to those values.

Given the Seal's remote location, a fairly low volume of activities and events has typically occurred within the river corridor on an annual basis. This remained the case in the 2014–2024 period, with no major management activities conducted; however, a variety of wildlife surveys and monitoring projects were undertaken, often on a recurring annual basis. Small numbers of paddlers continued to visit the river in the summer months, with a dip in visitation during the peak years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most notable occurrence between 2014–2024 was the formation of the Seal River Watershed Alliance (SRWA), a partnership of four First Nations working to formally protect the Seal River watershed through the creation of an Indigenous Protected Area. The First Nations, including Sayisi Dene First Nation, Northlands Denesuline First Nation. Barren Lands First Nation

and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation, collectively signed an Agreement in Principle in 2019 to work towards this goal. Following that, in 2024 the SRWA and the Governments of Canada and Manitoba signed a memorandum of understanding to formally work together on a feasibility assessment for an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) and, potentially a national park reserve, in the Seal River Watershed. The pending outcome of this work and the proposal for a formal protected area will have significant implications on the management of the Seal River in the future.

Generally, the Seal River's natural, cultural and recreational values have remained consistent over the past ten years. Research and monitoring activities that have been conducted have contributed increased information in published literature regarding various wildlife species in the river corridor and their habitat use. The report does note existing threats to some species, in particular polar bears and the Qamanirjuaq barren-ground caribou herd, which are tied to broader global issues and not unique to the Seal River corridor.

At the time of the Seal River's designation to the CHRS, the river was described as Manitoba's last great wild river. This characterization remains true today, over thirty years later. This report has determined that the natural heritage, cultural heritage and recreation values of the Seal River remain intact and for the most part unchanged since CHRS designation in 1992. The conclusion of this report is that the Seal River should continue to be designated as a river of national significance within the Canadian Heritage Rivers System.

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The Seal River was designated to the Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS) in 1992, after first being nominated in 1987. The river was included in the CHRS based on its outstanding natural and cultural heritage, and recreational value. Located in northern Manitoba, the Seal River and its surrounding watershed, known as the Nuheh Nene, have been important to Dene and Cree peoples for thousands of years, with the area used for hunting, fishing, travelling and living. This relationship with the river and watershed continues today. The Seal River is also unique in remaining un-damned and generally unaltered by human development.

The CHRS is a national river conservation program established in 1984 by the federal, provincial and territorial governments to help conserve and recognize Canadian rivers with exceptional natural, cultural and recreational heritage values. Rivers designated to the CHRS are the subject of annual reviews, as well as more in-depth monitoring reports conducted every ten years from the year of designation. The decadal reports are intended to review the state of the rivers and any changes or threats to the values for which they were nominated to the CHRS. This is the third ten-year monitoring report written for the Seal River, with the first two prepared in 2006 and 2014.

The objectives of this Seal River Ten-Year Monitoring Report are:

- To describe any significant events or changes that have occurred since the 2014 Twenty-Year Monitoring Report was written.
- To review the natural, cultural and recreational values for which the river was nominated, identify any changes or threats to these values, and determine if the river continues to possess them.
- To review the integrity values of the river, identify any changes or threats to these values, and determine if the river continues to possess them.
- To identify any river conservation, stewardship, economic, cultural or other benefits that have arisen as a result of the Canadian Heritage River designation.
- To review the river management actions recommended in the designation document *Toward a Management Plan for the Seal Heritage River* and assess their level of achievement.



Located in northern Manitoba near the 59th parallel, the Seal River begins its course at Shethanei Lake and runs east 260 kilometres to its estuary on Hudson Bay. The river is within the Treaty 5 (Adhesion) area. Its largest tributaries are the North Seal, South Seal and Wolverine rivers, with its watershed, the fourth largest in Manitoba, draining 46,300 square kilometres. The CHR designation encompasses the entirety of the river, beginning at the west end of Shethanei Lake and including one kilometre on either side.

Indigenous Peoples have a relationship with the Seal River and broader watershed which dates back thousands of years. The closest community is Sayisi Dene First Nation, situated southwest of Shethanei Lake at Tadoule Lake. The Town of Churchill is located 45 kilometres south of the

river's estuary. The majority of visitors to the Seal River are people from Sayisi Dene First Nation and other northern Indigenous communities who travel the river to spend time on the land and practice traditional activities such as hunting and fishing, as well as carry out monitoring projects.

The Seal River is not road accessible. This is a primary reason for why relatively few people visit the river, but this has also helped to protect the river corridor from development over the years. The river is world-renowned for providing an exceptional but very challenging whitewater paddling experience. However, only a small number of paddlers undertake this challenge every year, given both the difficulty in accessing the river corridor as well as the level of skill and experience required to undertake the journey.

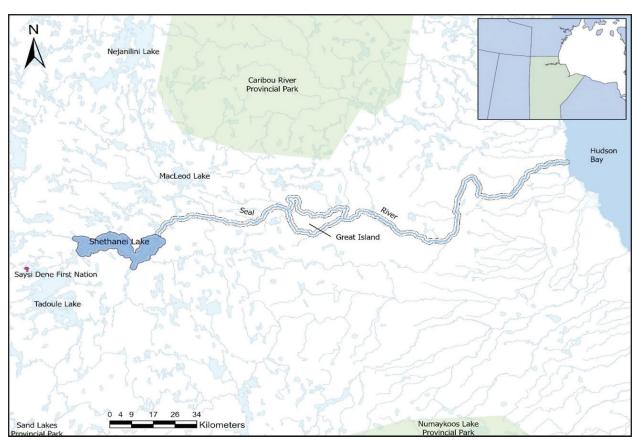


FIGURE 1: Map of the Seal River Corridor.

The Seal River flows through a transition zone between the boreal forest and arctic tundra. The surrounding environment was shaped by prehistoric glaciation processes, leading to the formation of large eskers, drumlin and boulder fields, and other features. The region is home to an abundance of wildlife, including moose, caribou, wolves,

black bears, fox and other smaller mammals, and numerous waterfowl and songbirds. Polar bears are found in the area closer to the river's estuary, which provides important habitat for beluga whales, and harbour seals from Hudson Bay are known to travel up the Seal River as much as 80 kilometres inland from the bay.



Photo credit: Manitoba Important Bird Areas Program



This report was prepared based on:

- Review of the Seal River Annual Monitoring Reports prepared between 2014-2023
- Review of the Seal River nomination documents and 2014 Twenty-Year Monitoring Report
- A literature review of relevant research, studies, articles and reports
- Information shared via email from a variety of individuals and organizations with knowledge of activities in or relating to the Seal River corridor

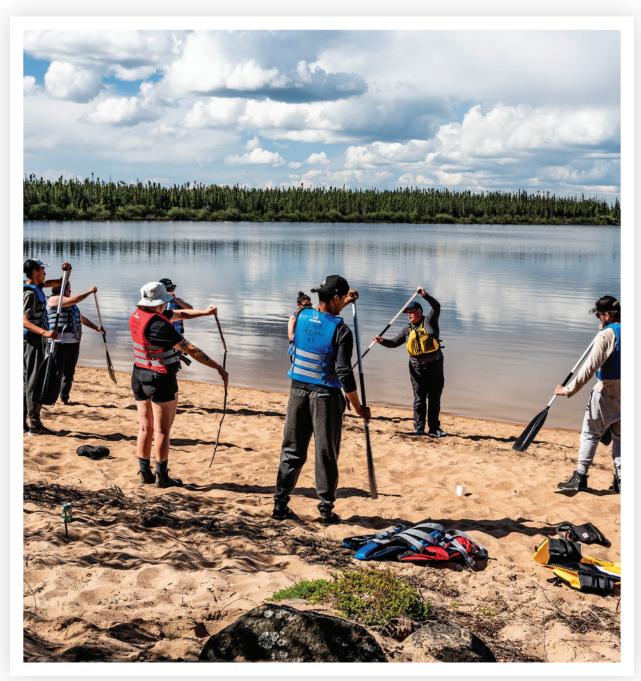


Photo credit: Harv Sawatzky

# CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS, ACTIONS, RESEARCH AND STUDIES

The Seal River is very remote and difficult to access, and as such direct management activities and events are infrequent. However, a number of research projects and studies were carried out in, near or in the air above the river corridor between 2014-2024. These are listed in Table 1, in addition to other events and activities that have taken place.

Notably, during the 2014-2024 period the Seal River Watershed Alliance (SRWA) was formed. This is a partnership of four First Nations working to create an Indigenous Protected Area in northern Manitoba, including Sayisi Dene First Nation, Northlands Denesuline First Nation, Barren Lands

First Nation and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation. The First Nations collectively signed an Agreement in Principle in 2019 to work towards this goal. Following that, on January 18, 2024, the SRWA and the Governments of Canada and Manitoba signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to formally work together on a feasibility assessment for an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) and, potentially a national park reserve, in the Seal River Watershed. The feasibility study involves the gathering of information to facilitate the consideration of different options for potential permanent protection of the area.

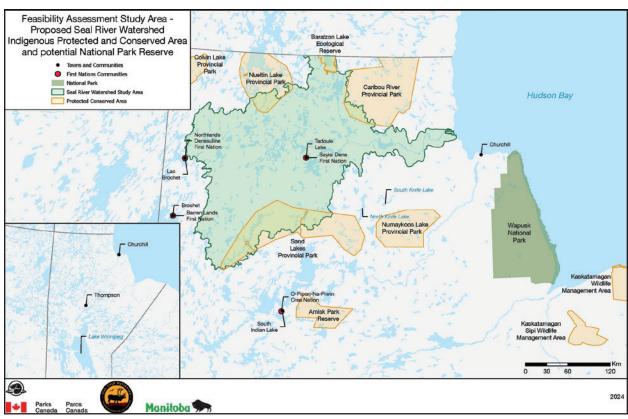


FIGURE 2: Feasibility Assessment Study Area - Proposed Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area.

### TABLE 1: Chronology of Events 2014-2024

### Year Significant events, actions, research or studies: 2014-2024

2014 In July the Minister of Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship (CWS) announced that, over the next three years, consultations would start on the protection of the Seal River ecosystem.

CWS worked with a steering committee of various stakeholders to develop a beluga whale habitat management plan for the Seal, Churchill and Nelson river estuaries. CWS also worked with local residents and held an open house in Churchill in September.

CWS continued work on a Polar Bear Strategy.

The Manitoba Geological Survey continued data compilation and analysis for the Great Island-Seal River area as part of its Far North Geomapping Initiative.

In cooperation with Ducks Unlimited Canada, CWS flew 445 km of survey transects in June to estimate breeding abundance of waterfowl between the Seal and Knife rivers.

225 Canada geese were banded at the mouth of the Seal River in August, as part of the monitoring program for Eastern Prairie Population Canada Geese.

The Seal River area was subjected to an unusually large amount of degradation by spring grubbing of 2015 snow geese. It was believed to be the result of a storm that occurred north of the Seal River during the migration, resulting in a very high density of birds remaining in the area for a short period of time.

CWS drafted a new Canoe Route Survey for the Seal River at the beginning of the summer season. The survey was intended to help CWS understand the use of the Seal River.

About 20 canoeing groups were picked up at the mouth of the Seal over the paddling season.

Manitoba's draft Beluga Habitat Sustainability Plan for Hudson Bay and northern Manitoba rivers was completed. The draft plan included the Seal, Churchill and Nelson estuaries which are heavily used by migratory belugas from the Western Hudson Bay population.

CWS continued work on a Polar Bear Strategy.

The Manitoba Geological Survey continued data compilation and analysis for the Great Island-Seal River area as part of its Far North Geomapping Initiative.

In cooperation with Ducks Unlimited Canada, CWS flew 433 km of survey transects in early August and September to estimate breeding abundance of waterfowl between the Seal River Estuary and adjacent Knife River Delta.

127 Canada geese were banded at the mouth of the Seal River, as part of a larger effort to monitor vital rates of Eastern Prairie Population Canada Geese.

In early January, Manitoba released its draft Beluga Habitat Sustainability Plan for beluga whales in 2016 Hudson Bay and northern Manitoba rivers, including the Seal River estuary, for public consultation.

Breeding Interior Canada Geese surveys continued along the Hudson Bay coast, including the area of the Seal River estuary, in late May/early June using aerial survey techniques; surveys were for density and relative distribution.

The "Know the North" canoe trip took place in July-August. This 47-day journey had the ultimate goal of showcasing the benefits of outdoor exploration, the importance of environmental sustainability, and the wonders of Canada's northern geography and peoples for the next generation of Canadians.

Approximately 20 canoe groups were picked up at the river's mouth for boat transport to Churchill. Reports indicated it was a windy year and the water levels were high, reducing the need to portage as often.

The Seal River Heritage Lodge was singled out by Flight Network as a top destination for nature tourism. 2017

Record snowfalls led to above average flows in the spring which may have caused increased erosion and landscape changes.

Hap Wilson's novel "River of Fire - Conflict and survival on the Seal River", documenting a guided tour turned survival mission in 1994, was released in September.

The Government of Canada identified southwestern Hudson Bay as a potential location for establishment of a National Marine Conservation Area.

### Significant events, actions, research or studies: 2014-2024 Year

2018 Work was conducted toward the development of the CHRS Seal River story map.

The nonprofit organization Oceans North released a report in April ("Western Hudson Bay and Its Beluga Estuaries: Protecting Abundance for a Sustainable Future") calling for a National Marine Conservation Area in the Western Hudson Bay region.

The government of Canada announced amendments to the Marine Mammal Regulations in June intended to provide greater protection for marine mammals. In the Seal River and Churchill River Estuary, all boats and swimmers were now mandated to maintain a 50-metre minimum approach distance.

Canoeists were encouraged to wait for pick up further upstream than in the past due to increasing numbers of polar bears near the river mouth (this was based on an anecdotal report).

The local operator picked up only a small number of canoeing groups near the mouth of the Seal River for boat transport to Churchill. Fewer canoeists paddled the Seal River in 2018 due to a railway closure. Without the operation of the train, there was no cost-effective way for canoeists to bring their canoes back down south.

An anecdotal report suggested there was a greater number of polar bears in the area, particularly sows with cubs. Conversely, caribou and wolf sightings were decreased.

2019 The Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area Initiative was formally launched. This initiative is led by Sayisi Dene First Nation in partnership with Northlands Denesuline First Nation, Barren Lands First Nation and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation. It was announced in August that the initiative was one of the recipients of a Canada Nature Fund grant.

Work continued on the development of the CHRS Seal River Story Map.

The railway to Churchill reopened, after being closed since May 2017 due to a major wash-out.

The local operator based in Churchill reported increased pick ups of canoeists, with approximately 12 canoes picked up in total from the Seal River mouth over the course of the summer. This was an increase from 2018 due to the railway being open again.

The shack near the river mouth used by canoeists waiting for pick-up was reported to be in poor condition and not likely to be repaired.

An anecdotal report suggested that the spring ice near the river mouth had become thinner in recent years, creating a barrier to spring goose hunting.

2020 The Seal River Story Map was launched on the CHRS website.

> Annual Canada goose banding was conducted in the Seal River area in the summer. This banding was conducted within portions of the Eastern Prairie Population Canada goose range in northern Manitoba to determine annual and long-term harvest and survival rates.

Manitoba government staff conducted a patrol via helicopter to the mouth of the Seal in September. No users were observed, but ATV tracks leading from the Seal River Heritage Lodge to a viewing area were

The Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected Area Initiative work continued. In August 2020, the federal government announced \$3.2 million in funding from the Canada Nature Fund would be provided to this initiative.

Ducks Unlimited Canada's National Boreal Program released a waterfowl survey report in September that recommended protection of the Seal River estuary and surrounding areas. The report, based on waterfowl surveys conducted in 2013-2015, found high waterfowl densities in these areas and a very high diversity of species, indicating that these areas are highly important waterfowl breeding, moulting, and migratory bird habitat. The surveys were conducted through a partnership of Ducks Unlimited Canada, Oceans North Canada and the Government of Manitoba.

An annual Canada goose breeding population index survey usually flown by the Ontario Government and Canadian Wildlife Service in the Southern Hudson Bay region was not conducted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Significant events, actions, research or studies: 2014-2024 Year

2021 Annual Canada goose banding was not conducted as usual due to wildfires affecting helicopter usage across Manitoba. The Canada goose breeding population survey was also not conducted in 2021.

A study released in August showed that beluga whales with calves moved throughout the Churchill and Seal River estuaries to raise their offspring during the summer months, rather than congregating in distinct groups. These findings supported a proposal to protect marine habitat in western Hudson Bay, as they showed that belugas with calves roam widely within the area.

The Seal River Watershed Alliance and Audubon's Boreal Conservation program partnered to install ten automated sound recording units within the river's watershed.

In September, a genetic biopsy (aerial darting) field program was conducted on the Western Hudson Bay and Southern Hudson Bay polar bear subpopulations along the coastline in Manitoba and Ontario. This included portions of the Seal River and Hayes Rivers near the coastline of Hudson Bay. This project was led by Environment and Climate Change Canada and supported by the Government of Manitoba. The purpose of the study was to understand the movement of bears across the Western Hudson and Southern Hudson subpopulation boundary.

An aerial survey was flown to estimate the abundance of polar bears in the Western Hudson Bay subpopulation, which ranges from Chesterfield Inlet, NU to just east of the MB/On border. The survey area therefore included portions of the Seal River and Hayes River watersheds, from the Hudson Bay coastline inward. This survey was led by Government of Nunavut and supported by Government of Manitoba.

In February the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Manitoba Chapter released "Natural Abundance: 2022 An Evaluation of Species Richness in the Seal River Watershed." This report compiled the records of 260 species that are known to live within the Seal River Watershed, including 20 considered to be Species at Risk, based on publicly available data including provincial government records, natural history records, citizen science, and Indigenous Knowledge.

In April a report was released titled "A Value on the Priceless: Ecological goods and services generated in the Seal River Watershed." This was a collaboration between the International Institute for Sustainable Development, the Seal River Watershed Alliance and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Manitoba Chapter, intended to assess the economic value of ecosystem benefits provided by the Seal River Watershed. The study found that the value of carbon stored in the watershed is worth at least \$314.5 billion (CAD) and the value of ecosystem goods and services is worth at least \$214 million per year (CAD).

127 subarctic breeding Canada geese were banded by Province of Manitoba staff in the Seal River estuary area in August.

A Canada goose breeding population aerial survey was flown by the Mississippi Flyway Council along transects located throughout the entire Hudson Bay coastline from the Nunavut/Manitoba border to the Ontario/Quebec border. Observations in the Seal and Hayes River estuary areas followed the long-term trend of being classed as low density breeding in comparison to other areas along the Hudson Bay coastline.

Environment and Climate Change Canada continued an annual program to capture a sample of polar bear genetics within the Western Hudson Bay subpopulation from the Nelson River north to the MB/NU border, including potentially bears in proximity to the Seal River. This program has the longest term dataset of any polar bear subpopulation in Canada, collecting information related to body condition, cub survival and demographic data, which is compared to sea ice and other environmental conditions.

An aerial survey was flown to estimate the abundance of barren-ground caribou in the Qamanirjuaq population, which ranges between Nunavut and northern Manitoba, including the Seal River watershed. The survey itself was flown on the calving grounds of the Qamanirjuaq herd, which is in Nunavut. This survey was led by the Government of Nunavut and supported by the Government of Manitoba.

The Seal River Watershed Alliance received funding from Environment and Climate Change Canada in support of its Guardians program. Community Representatives from each of the four Alliance Nations were transitioned into Guardians and The Alliance Guardians' Network was formally launched in November.

A beluga whale population study was published with results showing a high density of beluga calves at the Seal River estuary, suggesting that the location may be preferred for calf rearing in the summer season.

### Significant events, actions, research or studies: 2014-2024 Year

In November the International Institute for Sustainable Development released "Seal River Watershed: The case for conservation." This report described the environmental, social, cultural, and economic value of the Seal River Watershed, and the significance of protecting the watershed for future generations.

In December the federal government, Manitoba government and the Seal River Watershed Alliance announced a commitment to work together on a feasibility assessment for an Indigenous protected area in the Seal River Watershed.

2023 Oceans North and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Manitoba chapter held a gala at the Qaumajuq Inuit Art Gallery in January in support of a proposal to establish a National Marine Conservation Area in the Western Hudson Bay area.

A Canada goose breeding population aerial survey was again flown by the Mississippi Flyway Council along transects located throughout the entire Hudson Bay coastline from the Nunavut/Manitoba border to the Ontario/Quebec border.

Environment and Climate Change Canada continued an annual program to capture a sample of polar bear genetics within the Western Hudson Bay subpopulation from the Nelson River north to the MB/ NU border, including potentially bears in proximity to the Seal River.

The SRWA worked with partners to attend and present at the United Nations 2023 Water Conference in New York City in March.

The SRWA Land Guardians Network conducted several monitoring activities and training events including drone licensing and training, a 3-day fish spawn camp, and learning about bird monitoring and stewardship.

The SRWA hosted their annual land summit where land guardians paddled in the watershed and camped out for four days, learning about wildlife monitoring and data recording, navigational training, drone use, eco-tourism, and participated in various cultural workshops with knowledge keepers and elders.

The Assiniboine Park Conservancy, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Manitoba Hydro, the University of Manitoba and the University of Victoria partnered on a research project involving satellite tagging harbour seals in the Churchill River estuary area. The seals were tagged in May. Subsequent monitoring of the transmitted data showed movement of the seals into the Seal River, including travelling up the river as much as 80 km inland.

On January 18, 2024 the SRWA and the Governments of Canada and Manitoba signed a 2024 memorandum of understanding (MOU) to formally work together on a feasibility assessment for an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area, and potentially a national park reserve, in the Seal River Watershed. The MOU included an agreement to temporarily protect the study area from mineral exploration and staking for the duration of the feasibility assessment.

A research paper was published indicating that polar bear earth dens had been discovered on and near the Seal River, based on den surveys conducted in 2022 and 2023. While these dens had not been previously documented in published literature, there was pre-existing local knowledge of denning in the area. The research was conducted by the University of Saskatchewan.

The Seal River Watershed Alliance and the National Audubon Society published "The Birds of the Seal River Watershed: A Bird Survey Summary Report 2021-2023," a report on the findings of a co-led bioacoustics research project in Manitoba that combined Indigenous knowledge and Western science.

The Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board released a 10-year management plan - Caribou is Life: The Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Plan 2023-2032. The management plan notes that the latest survey results indicated that the Qamanirjuaq caribou herd which range between Nunavut and northern Manitoba, including in the Seal River watershed, has declined significantly since the mid 1990s, going from just under 500,000 in 1994 to approximately 250,000 in 2022.

# CHANGES AND THREATS TO NATURAL, CULTURAL AND RECREATIONAL VALUES

# Natural Heritage Values

As described in the 2006 and 2014 Seal River ten-year monitoring reports, the river's designation to the CHRS was based primarily on the following outstanding natural heritage features:

- The Seal is the largest remaining un-dammed river in northern Manitoba.
- The river valley contains excellent representation of the subarctic boreal forest of the Precambrian Shield, and the arctic tundra of the Hudson Bay Lowlands.
- The valley is habitat for approximately 30 species of plants which are rare in Manitoba and supports some unusually large white spruce and tamarack.
- The corridor includes glacial features such as northern Manitoba's largest drumlin fields, extensive boulder fields, and 300 metrewide eskers extending up to several hundred kilometres in a north-south direction, sometimes as lake peninsulas or submerged landforms.
- The estuary area is rebounding from the weight of the glaciers at a rate of about 53 centimetres per century, among the fastest in the world.
- The area is undisturbed habitat for populations of moose, black bear, wolf, fox, snowshoe hare, ptarmigan, Canada goose, ducks, otter and beaver. Wolverine, golden and bald eagle, osprey, and polar bear are also found. The river's estuary is the calving and feeding grounds for thousands of beluga whales, part of the largest concentration in the world and the Seal is part of the winter range for the Qamanirjuaq caribou herd, which at one time numbered over 400,000 but now is estimated at approximately 250,000. Harbour seals travel up the river from Hudson Bay and can be observed as far upstream as Shethanei Lake.

# Condition of Natural Values since 2014

A number of research and monitoring projects were undertaken in the Seal River area between 2014–2024 (see Table 1) which have contributed increased information regarding the river's natural values. These were mostly focused on wildlife, such

as waterfowl banding and surveying. Research conducted away from the Seal River corridor has also contributed information about the river itself, such as harbour seal tagging conducted in the Churchill area that subsequently provided data about the seals' activity in the Seal River.

For the most part, the natural values of the Seal River have remained constant since 2014. The wide range of research and monitoring activities that have been conducted have led to an increase in the amount of information about the river's wildlife and plant species available in published literature. This has resulted in improved understanding about species diversity and abundance in the Seal River area, and more information about the importance of the Seal River for providing habitat for different species, such as calf rearing habitat for beluga whales and breeding, moulting and migratory habitat for many waterfowl species.

While the natural values that supported the Seal River's designation to the CHRS are mostly unchanged, the river corridor is undoubtedly being affected by climate change, potentially in unknown ways. This will require ongoing monitoring and future study. An increase to the length of the ice-free period in Hudson Bay and the resulting impacts to polar bears is a popularly cited climate change concern. How exactly this will impact the occurrence of polar bears at the eastern end of the Seal River corridor remains to be seen. There may also be changes in the occurrence of grizzly bears in the Seal River corridor in the coming years. This species has been occasionally sighted in the area for many years, but their presence may become more commonplace as the species' range shifts.

One notable negative change is the steady <u>decline</u> in the size of the Qamanirjuaq caribou herd, whose winter range overlaps with the Seal River corridor. This herd has been in a slow decline for at least 20 years, with a nearly 50 per cent reduction in herd size between 1994 and 2022. The Beverly and Qamanirjuag herds, as well as other barren-

ground caribou herds, have been considered for designation as a Threatened species in Canada for several years, but a decision on this has not yet been made. In Caribou is Life: Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Plan 2023-2032 and its Supporting Document, the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board outlines six main threats to the herds including climate change, land use activities, disturbance and habitat loss, harvest, predators, wildfires and cumulative effects, as well as several strategies to mitigate these threats.

# Cultural Heritage Values

The cultural heritage associated with the Seal River corridor is significant. As described in the 2006 and 2014 Seal River ten-year monitoring reports, some of the specific historical features of interest in the river corridor include:

- · A large number of prehistoric artifacts and archaeological sites including fire rings, scrapers, flakes, projectiles and hammers, often exposed on the surface of eskers at campsites and along the caribou trails by the river between Tadoule Lake and Great Island. The age of these finds spans the Paleo-Indian peoples of 7,000 years ago, to the Taltheili Tradition of 1 A.D. to 1700 A.D.
- The remains of Dene and European trappers' cabins, and 100 year-old grave sites marked by picket fences on top of eskers, reflecting more recent occupation.
- An association with the European explorer Samuel Hearne of the Hudson's Bay Company. Hearne left Fort Prince of Wales, near Churchill, in February 1771, on his second of three attempts to locate the copper fields which were said to border the northern ocean. Hearne followed the Seal River inland on foot to Shethanei Lake.
- An abandoned mining camp on Great Island, which operated during the 1940's and 1950's. Well preserved log buildings, a dynamite storage shack, a drilling platform, and other remnants were scattered throughout the site at the time of designation. The mining camp has since burned down.

## Condition of Cultural Heritage Values **Since 2014**

The Seal River's cultural heritage values remain unchanged since 2014. The river corridor has thousands of years of history of use by Indigenous Peoples, and this use and occupation is ongoing in the present day. In recent years, federal funding for Guardians Programs enabled the Seal River Watershed Alliance to hire Land Guardians and Youth Land Guardians. These individuals are acting as representatives for their communities and working with Elders and others on a variety of monitoring projects and the collection of Indigenous Knowledge. The relationship between Northern Manitoba's Dene and Cree peoples and the Seal River watershed continues to be strong and traditions continue to be passed on to the next generation. Readers of this report are encouraged to visit the Seal River Watershed Alliance's website to learn more about this relationship between people and land in the Alliance's own words, as well as the communities involved and their work towards the protection of the watershed.

# Recreational Heritage Values

The Seal River's CHRS designation was also based on its recreational values; specifically, that the river provides an outstanding wilderness river paddling experience. The recreational features of the river include:

• A 260 kilometre (km) whitewater "trip of a lifetime" from Tadoule Lake to Hudson Bay involving 20 km of lake travel between Tadoule and Shethanei lakes; 40 km on Shethanei Lake, where waves and winds can be dangerous; 64 km through numerous rapids and a narrow, deep gorge; 28 km of intermittent whitewater along the scenic channel of Great Island, including a possible 3 km portage; 124 km of flat country, transitional subarctic tundra forest and boulder field rapids; 4 km through marshes, tidal flats, islands, shelves and reefs at the estuary, requiring timing with the tides; and ending with a float plane or motorboat pick-up. While informal campsites can be found along the western twothirds of the river, the densely-willowed river banks closer toward Hudson Bay can make finding a suitable campsite a challenge.

- Trophy-size lake trout can be caught on Shethanei Lake, and large northern pike and grayling are present throughout the river.
- · Hikes to the top of eskers and rocky knolls offer 360 degree vistas of a totally natural environment. Short hikes along eskers and beaches, or across Great Island, allow modern-day explorers to follow the timeless migration path of the barrenground caribou. Visitors can also retrace the steps of Samuel Hearne by climbing the esker that was his vantage point on Shethanei Lake.

# Condition of Recreational Values since 2014

Paddling down the Seal River to Hudson Bay is a fairly exclusive experience that only a small number of recreational paddlers undertake each year. Numbers are limited due to the technical difficulty of the trip, as well as the remoteness of the river which makes it difficult and expensive to access. Typically, paddlers begin their journey by getting dropped off by air charter at the start of their route, although some also paddle in via other routes, and then end with either an air or motorboat pick up near the river's mouth for transport to Churchill or a different northern community (paddling down the Hudson Bay coast from the estuary to Churchill is not recommended due to the dangers involved).

The recreational experience the Seal River offers has generally remained unchanged since 2014. The number of paddlers visiting the river fluctuates annually and can be affected in any given year by factors such as weather or external issues which limit peoples' ability to travel. An example of this in the 2014-2024 period include reduced paddlers in 2017 and 2018 as a result of the closure of the rail-line to Churchill. Paddling plans may also be affected by the availability and cost of pick-up/ charter services. For many years there was one particular operator who picked paddlers up at the river's mouth for boat transport to Churchill, but he is no longer providing that service. The Seal River also continues to offer exceptional wildlife viewing opportunities for those paddling down the river as well as those who stay at the Seal River Heritage Lodge near the river's mouth.

As indicated in the sections above, few changes have been noted in the Seal River's natural, cultural and recreational values. The limited number of changes and threats that have been identified are listed in Table 2. Values which have not been subject to any change are not listed in the table.

TABLE 2: Changes and Threats to Seal River Natural, Cultural and Recreational Values

Value	Description of Change or Threat	Reason for Change or Threat	Action Taken in Response	Change or Threat Still Present?
Natural Valu	ies			
Significant Animal Populations – Barren- ground Caribou	Steady decline in the size of the Qamanirjuaq caribou herd over the past few decades.	Multiple factors: climate change, land use activities, disturbance, etc.	Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board developed and is implementing the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Plan 2023–2032.	Yes
Rare Animal Species – Polar Bear	Southern and Western Hudson Bay polar bear subpopulations at risk due to changes to sea ice in Hudson Bay.	Climate change	Various provincial, national and international management actions are being taken that are relevant to this issue.	Yes
Rare Bird Species	Changes have been made to the status of different bird species listed under COSEWIC and/ or Canada's Species At Risk Act (SARA), including buff-breasted sandpiper (designated as special concern under SARA in 2017) and Harris' sparrow (designated as special concern under SARA in 2023).	Changes in conservation status have occurred due to changes in species population numbers, changes in the way a population is assessed, or other factors, including potentially unknown causes.	Research and monitoring activities are ongoing.	Yes

# NEW RECORDED VALUES

Recent research has contributed additional information in published literature regarding the importance of the Seal River and its watershed in providing habitat for a variety of wildlife. This includes:

- A recent assessment of beluga whale habitat demonstrated that the overall density of calves was greater at the Seal River than the Churchill River estuary. This suggested that the Seal estuary may be preferred for calf rearing in the summer (Westdal, K. H., Davies, J., & Ferguson, S. H., 2022).
- In 2024, research was published regarding polar bear earth dens and pits that were observed in recent years along the Sear River riverbank (Clark, D. A., Kennah, J. L., MacLean, C. C., & Atkinson, S. N., 2024). These dens are thought to belong to the Western Hudson Bay subpopulation, whose range was previously recorded as extending to Wapusk National Park

- and the Churchill Wildlife Management Area. There was existing local knowledge of denning along the Seal River prior to this, but it had not previously been recorded in published literature.
- A bird survey conducted by the Seal River Watershed Alliance and The National Audubon Society between 2021-2023 resulted in the detection of 102 bird species. Of these, five are listed as Species of Special Concern and are protected under Canada's Species at Risk Act (common nighthawk, Harris's sparrow, olivesided flycatcher, peregrine falcon and rusty blackbird) and one is designated as Threatened by The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (lesser yellowlegs).

In addition, a 2021 Ducks Unlimited Canada report indicated that the Seal River watershed stores an estimated 1.7 billion tonnes of carbon, equivalent to 6.2 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> (IISD Report, 2022).



Photo credit: Manitoba Important Bird Areas Program



To be designated a Canadian Heritage River, a river and its immediate environment must meet certain natural, cultural and recreational integrity values. A review of the CHRS integrity values has confirmed that the Seal River continues to hold these values and that they have been subject to no changes or threats.

See Appendix A for a comprehensive list of CHRS integrity values.



The Seal River designation document "Toward a Management Plan for the Seal Heritage River" was prepared in 1990. The document describes management goals and objectives for the river, and recommended actions to be implemented as part of the long-term management of the river. Over 30 years have passed since that document was prepared, and much has changed in terms of the way such management or stewardship plans are developed and written in the present day.

As was noted in the 2014 twenty-year report, the Seal River designation document is outdated both in terms of basic terminology as well as current river management plans and practices. Despite this, the 2014 report included a listing of the 1990 management plan recommendations with comments on their degree of achievement, as this

is a general requirement of CHRS ten-year reports. That table has not been duplicated in this report, as there would be little value in doing so given the current context. In particular, the work of the Seal River Watershed Alliance to designate a protected area in the river's watershed, including the current preparation of a feasibility study and ongoing discussions between the Alliance, the Manitoba government, the Canadian government and various stakeholders, has significant implications for the way in which the Seal River will be managed going forward. It is anticipated that once the feasibility study has concluded and a final decision is made on permanent protection of all or a portion of the watershed, then a new management or stewardship plan will be developed which can be utilized and referred to for CHRS reporting purposes.



Follow the link below to view a short video from 2020 regarding the Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area proposal.

# Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area Initiative Video



Photo credit: Harv Sawatzky



A CHRS plaque has not been installed.

# SUMMARY OF BENEFITS OF DESIGNATION

A requirement of CHRS 10-year monitoring reports is to describe any benefits or detrimental effects resulting from the designation. A list of such benefits was identified in 2014 for the preparation of the previous ten-year monitoring report, and those are repeated with a few modifications in Table 3 below. As was also noted in that report, the remoteness and isolation of the Seal River limits the ability of the designation to create tangible benefits. However, the CHRS designation does lend support to proposals to protect and conserve the Seal River corridor and its watershed.



Photo credit: Manitoba Important Bird Areas Program

TABLE 3: Benefits of The Seal River CHRS Designation

Type of Benefit	Description
Environmental Benefits	<ul> <li>Increased support for conservation of the river corridor, habitat, and surrounding environment</li> <li>Designation and potential impacts to Heritage River values are considered during the review of proposals for development or other activities along the river corridor</li> </ul>
Cultural Benefits	<ul> <li>Increased avenues for recognizing the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the river corridor</li> <li>Increased support and/or awareness of the need to identify and protect archaeological resources and culturally significant sites or artifacts</li> <li>Increased profile for the river in Manitoba and across Canada, leading to improved knowledge of and appreciation for the river's natural and cultural history and features.</li> </ul>
Recreational Benefits	<ul> <li>Designation may have slightly increased the number of people paddling the river as a result of its increased profile</li> <li>Information on paddling the river that is available to potential canoeists has improved/increased</li> <li>The river is promoted as a Canadian Heritage River on canoeing outfitter websites</li> </ul>
Improved Knowledge	<ul> <li>The preparation of CHRS background documents and monitoring reports provided a repository of baseline information regarding vegetation, landscapes, wildlife, cultural history and other aspects of the river corridor.</li> <li>By remaining un-dammed and free of other impoundments, unlike other rivers that have been modified for hydroelectric purposes, the Seal can be used as a "control" site for scientific research</li> </ul>
Education/ Promotion	The CHRS designation has resulted in the production of a variety of educational or promotional products, such as a poster, webpage, and story map

No detrimental effects have been observed as resulting from the CHRS designation.

# CONCLUSIONS AND OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Based on the findings of this report, the natural heritage, cultural heritage, and recreation values of the Seal River remain intact and, for the most part, unchanged since CHRS designation in 1992. As such, the Seal River is worthy of continued designation as a river of national significance within the Canadian Heritage Rivers System.

# Overall Assessment

The designation of the Seal River as a Canadian Heritage River should remain in place.



Photo credit: Jeremy Davies

# **APPENDIX A:** CHRS Natural, Cultural and Recreational Integrity Values

# 1. NATURAL INTEGRITY VALUES

- The nominated section is of sufficient size to include significant representations of all of the natural processes, features or other phenomena that give the river its outstanding natural value.
- The nominated section includes those ecosystem components which contribute significantly to the provision of habitat for species in need of protection.
- There are no human-made impoundments within the nominated section.
- · All key elements and ecosystem components are unaffected by impoundments located outside the nominated section.
- The water in the nominated section is uncontaminated to the extent that its natural aquatic ecosystem is
- The natural aesthetic character of the nominated section is free of, or not adversely affected by, human developments.

# 2. CULTURAL INTEGRITY VALUES

- The nominated section is of sufficient size to include significant representations of all of the features, activities or other phenomena that give the river its outstanding cultural value.
- The visual character of the nominated section enables uninterrupted appreciation of at least one of the periods of the river's historical importance.
- The key artifacts and sites comprising the cultural values for which the river is nominated, are unimpaired by impoundments and human land uses.
- The water quality of the nominated section does not detract from the visual character or the cultural experience provided by its cultural values.

# 3. RECREATIONAL INTEGRITY VALUES

- The river possesses water of a quality suitable for contact recreational activities, including those recreational opportunities for which it is nominated.
- The river's visual appearance is capable of providing river travelers with a continuous natural experience, or a combined natural and cultural experience, without significant interruption by modern human intrusions.
- The river is capable of supporting recreational uses without significant loss of, or impact on, its natural and cultural values or its visual character.

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Photo credit: J. Pearlman

Notes		

