

# FEASIBILITY ASSESSMENT

Respecting an Assessment of the Feasibility of Establishing a Protected Area  
Including a Possible National Park Reserve and Indigenous Protected and  
Conserved Area in the Seal River Watershed

FEBRUARY 2025



Parcs  
Canada

Parks  
Canada



Manitoba 

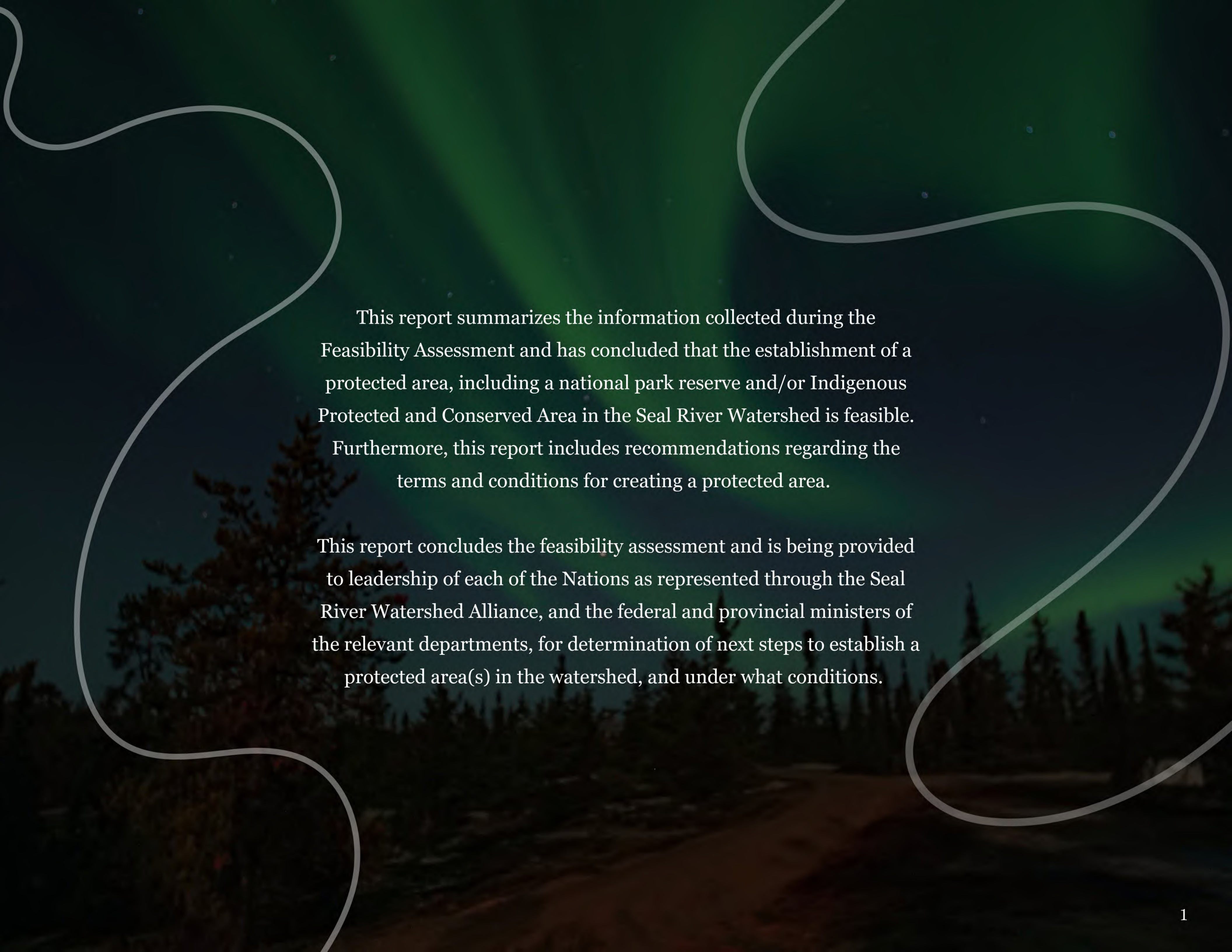




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This report summarizes the information collected during the Feasibility Assessment and has concluded that the establishment of a protected area, including a national park reserve and/or Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area in the Seal River Watershed is feasible. Furthermore, this report includes recommendations regarding the terms and conditions for creating a protected area.

This report concludes the feasibility assessment and is being provided to leadership of each of the Nations as represented through the Seal River Watershed Alliance, and the federal and provincial ministers of the relevant departments, for determination of next steps to establish a protected area(s) in the watershed, and under what conditions.



# BACKGROUND:

Located in northern Manitoba, the approximately 50,000 km<sup>2</sup> Seal River Watershed is one of the largest remaining ecologically intact watersheds in the world. The watershed is located within the ancestral territory of many Indigenous nations and communities, including the Sayisi Dene First Nation, Northlands Denesuline First Nation, Barren Lands First Nation, and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation. These First Nations make up the Seal River Watershed Alliance (SRWA) and have joined together to collaborate and support each other in their shared vision of protecting their respective ancestral lands under an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA).

At the December 2022 United Nations Biodiversity Conference, the governments of Canada and Manitoba joined the SRWA in announcing their intentions to work together to explore the feasibility of an IPCA in the Seal River Watershed. To formalize this commitment, representatives from the SRWA, Indigenous Nations, the Government of Canada, and the Manitoba Government, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) 'Respecting an Assessment of the Feasibility of Establishing a Protected Area Including a Possible National Park Reserve and Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area in the Seal River Watershed,' in January 2024. In addition to their commitment to collaborate on a feasibility assessment, the MOU also provided the entire watershed with temporary protection from mineral exploration and staking. This commitment was formalized through an amendment to the Lands Withdrawn from Prospecting Orders Regulation under The Mines and Minerals Act that withdraws from prospecting and staking out and from lease, all mineral rights within the Seal River watershed until December 31, 2025.

The MOU established a Steering Committee, composed of representatives from each of the four Nations, the Executive Director of the SRWA, as well as Parks Canada and Manitoba, to guide and work together on completing the feasibility assessment. The Steering Committee worked to ensure that Indigenous Knowledge was incorporated into the feasibility assessment and associated recommendations, alongside western science. They considered the environmental, socioeconomic, economic, natural resource, heritage, and cultural benefits and impacts, as well as the impacts on Aboriginal and treaty rights, including in the context of Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982. The SRWA, Canada and Manitoba worked in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration in a relationship based on recognition of rights, respect, and partnership.

As part of the feasibility assessment process, important feedback was gathered from the public and stakeholders to understand common interests and concerns regarding a potential protected area in the watershed.





## The Seal River Watershed Alliance Vision to Protect the Watershed

The Sayisi Dene First Nation, Northlands Dene Nation, Barren Lands First Nation, and O-Piçon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation have come together to protect the entirety of the Seal River Watershed for future generations. Dene and Cree peoples have been sustaining the watershed since time immemorial. Caring for the land, water, caribou, medicines, and fish is at the heart of who we are as Dene and Cree people.

For Dene partners, our stewardship is guided by a story of the caribou passed down from generation to generation. It comes from a time when the Dene and animals could speak the same language and when every aspect of a Dene person's life was tied to the caribou. We depended on them for so much. Our very existence was linked to caribou and the bond we shared together.

The teaching tells us that there was a girl who tied a

ribbon to a caribou in the hope that she would be able to identify it when the caribou returned from migration. This act caused other Dene people to become anxious and nervous, and in that frenzy, they did the same as the girl. With a string tied to each animal, they were essentially claiming ownership over the caribou. This deeply offended the spirit of the caribou. They were outraged because they knew they had an interconnected relationship with the Dene, and the Dene should not act like they were better than the caribou. As a result of this serious offense, the caribou did not return to the people for a long time.

It is with the memory of our hardships during this time that we remind each other and the younger generations that we cannot ever go to a place where we think ourselves better than the caribou, for their spirit will know, and they could choose not to come back to the people again. This teaching helps guide

us in our stewardship work, because we know Dene people are part of nature, not above it.

And it is with this understanding and with the teachings of our Cree partners that our four First Nations have committed to permanently protect the Seal River Watershed as an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA). Our cultures and languages are rooted in our relationship to the caribou and the land, and protecting the watershed means protecting the spirit of our people. It means honouring our interconnectedness with the land and understanding that when we care for the land, the land cares for us. This reciprocity will help our communities heal after the traumas of colonialism, residential schools, and relocation.

Our four First Nations envision a pristine watershed where people, animals and fish are healthy, our unique languages and cultures are thriving, and



there is hope and abundance for all future generations. Our vision is for our Nations to work together to ensure our grandchildren's grandchildren have the opportunity to engage in traditional practices within a healthy Seal River Watershed. We serve as guardians of the lands, waters, medicines, animals and caribou, when we hunt, fish, speak our languages, and honour our spiritual connection to our traditional territory.

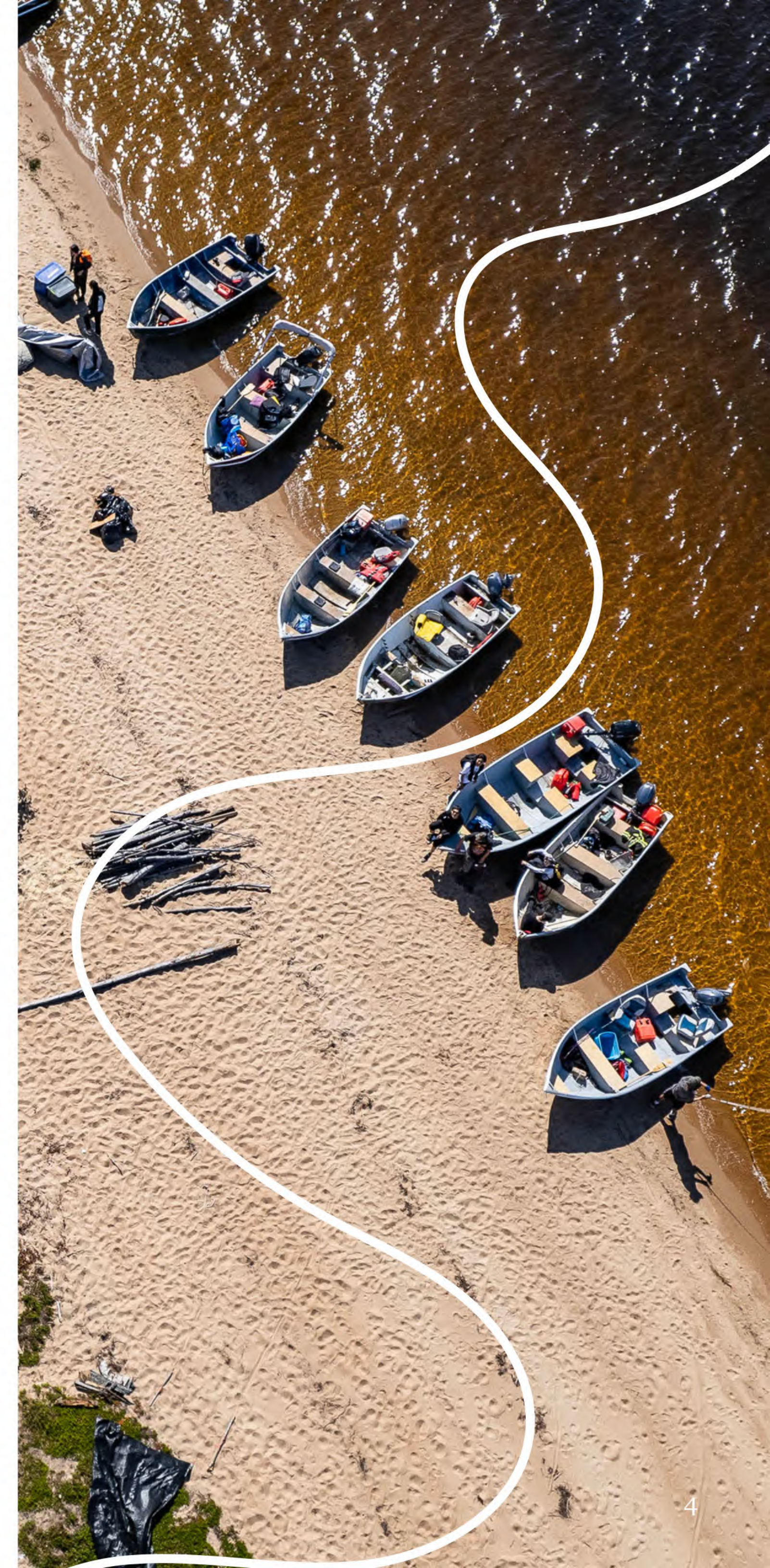
Research shows that the watershed is currently 99.97 percent intact. There are no permanent roads, mines, or hydro developments—making it one of the few places left on the earth with healthy lands and waters on such a sweeping scale.

To ensure the watershed remains whole, our communities and leadership have expressed resounding support for creating the Indigenous Protected Area, for keeping the entire watershed free of mining, and for expanding sustainable, economic opportunities that reflect our values, create jobs and preserve the land.

Our four First Nations have approached the governance and stewardship of the Indigenous Protected Area in ways that respect Dene and Cree laws and cultures. We are asserting our inherent right to care for these lands and waters, and we are working to declare the Indigenous Protected Area through Indigenous law. We are prioritizing the knowledge of our people and combining Indigenous and western science in the way Land Guardians care for the watershed. And because this is an Indigenous-led initiative, our Nations are holding the pen when lines are drawn on the map and agreements are written.

We have a responsibility to care for the Seal River Watershed not just for our Nations, but for all people. We welcome the collaboration of our partners in the Manitoba Government and Government of Canada, and we have worked hard to bring everyone to the table to build consensus and identify our shared aspirations for the watershed.

This Nation-to-Nation-to-Nation approach brings benefits for all of us. With the Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected Area, we can respect Indigenous decision making, continue to build a sustainable conservation economy, create more jobs and training opportunities in remote communities that reflect our values, and meet provincial and national goals for reconciliation, climate, and biodiversity. Working together in the spirit of respectful partnership to permanently protect the Seal River Watershed is critical for our shared future.







## PARKS CANADA'S COMMITMENT TO NATURE AND CULTURE:

Presently, approximately 343,456 square kilometres of land in Canada are protected through 37 national parks, 11 national park reserves and 1 national urban park. Canada's network of national parks plays an important role in halting and reversing biodiversity loss and fighting climate change by protecting healthy ecosystems and contributing to the recovery of species at risk.

The Government of Canada has committed to protecting biodiversity through the conservation of 30% of lands by 2030, and Parks Canada has been working to contribute to this goal by establishing 10 new national parks with Indigenous communities and governments, and with the support of provincial and territorial governments.

The creation of new protected areas based on the principles of shared stewardship provides an opportunity to advance strong relationships with Indigenous communities and contribute to the process of reconciliation between Indigenous peoples, Parks Canada, and other Canadians. Working in partnership to protect the Seal River Watershed would contribute approximately 50,000 km<sup>2</sup> towards Canada's commitment to protecting 30% of lands and waters by 2030.

It is important to recognize that early parks efforts in Canada were rooted in non-Indigenous values, created for the purposes of recreation and conservation through exclusion. This included expropriation and the forceful removal of Indigenous peoples from their land, banning traditional harvesting and cultural practices. Past practices had a negative impact on both Indigenous peoples and their lands.

The Government of Canada has pledged to support the development of IPCAs as it strives to help Canada advance reconciliation, fight climate change and meet its commitment of halting and reversing nature loss by 2030 and achieving a full recovery for nature by 2050. These targets will not be reached without close collaboration and partnership with Indigenous communities. This means moving forward in a way that follows the spirit and intent of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and implements Section 35 rights, treaty obligations, and related commitments.





# MANITOBA'S COMMITMENT TO NATURE AND CULTURE:

Manitoba has worked positively with Indigenous Nations on protected areas, and the Manitoba government is committed to working with Indigenous communities and the federal government to explore how IPCAs can help support management of traditional territories in Manitoba and build Manitoba's network of protected and conserved areas for the benefit of all Manitobans. To date this work has ensured that more than 11 % (72,000 square kilometres) of the province is protected through high quality, ecologically diverse areas that provide effective and permanent conservation of Manitoba's rich biodiversity and heritage.

To build on this important initiative, Manitoba has committed to work in partnership with Indigenous governments, conservation organizations, and the business community to protect and conserve 30 % of Manitoba by 2030. This includes land, freshwater and marine areas supporting the tremendous biological diversity, unique natural features, and cultures found across the province. Partnering with Indigenous Peoples to grow and manage protected areas is an opportunity to promote long-term, locally supported, sustainable land stewardship and contributes to Manitoba's efforts towards reconciliation. Manitoba is committed to reconciliation and is guided by the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the principles set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as articulated in The Path to Reconciliation Act.

Protected and conserved areas are one of the most effective ways to conserve biodiversity in a changing climate. Protected and conserved areas also give us clean air and water, store carbon, protect our communities during extreme weather events like storms, floods and wildfire, and support our well-being and mental health. Protected landscapes benefit all Manitobans. Within protected areas in Manitoba, activities such as ecotourism, licensed hunting, angling, and trapping, lodge operations and outfitting, haying and grazing, winter roads, and other compatible activities are generally allowed if they are not harmful to the habitats being protected. Industrial resource extraction and land conversion are prohibited. When making new protected areas, there are established processes to ensure that the public and interested parties have a chance to provide input. Public input is an important part of the protected areas planning process, and the activities that are ultimately permitted in the Seal River Watershed, if established as a protected area, will reflect that input

Currently almost 14 % of the Seal River Watershed is protected through three provincial parks and an ecological reserve. Working in partnership to protect the rest of the Seal River Watershed could contribute an additional 43,000 square kilometres to Manitoba's protected and conserved area network.





## Significance of the Seal River Watershed

### A Precious and Pristine Wilderness

Spanning over 50,000 square kilometers in northern Manitoba, the Seal River Watershed is one of the largest natural areas on Earth, untouched by industrial development. For countless generations, this vast region has sustained Dene and Cree communities, shaping their traditions, culture, and way of life. The watershed is home to an abundance of plants and animals that support local diets and traditional practices, such as hunting, fishing, and gathering.

For the people of the region, the land is more than a source of survival—it is deeply tied to their identity and well-being. Every aspect of Dene and Cree culture and identity is rooted in their relationship to the caribou and the land.

This pristine wilderness also provides immeasurable benefits to people living outside the area through supporting biodiversity, contributing to recovery of species at risk, and fighting climate change. The healthy functioning ecosystem draws visitors to the area seeking to enjoy opportunities and experiences

provided by a healthy landscape.

### A Living Landscape

Clean, drinkable water flows freely here, nourishing the people and wildlife. The Seal River Watershed is home to one of the last wild rivers in the Hudson Bay basin. This river, flowing over 260km, was designated as a Canadian Heritage River in 1992 due to its ecological and cultural significance. Its tributaries - the North Seal, South Seal and Wolverine Rivers - also play vital roles in nourishing the land, wildlife, and people who call the watershed home. The Seal River Watershed includes portions of four existing protected areas, including parts of Nueltin Lake, Caribou River and Sand Lakes provincial parks and all of Baralzon Lake Ecological Reserve.

This region is a transition zone between the subarctic boreal forest and Arctic tundra, featuring a mosaic of wetlands, lakes, rivers, forests, rocky plains, and sand eskers. These diverse ecosystems and geology create habitats for a remarkable array of plants and animals. The scars and deposits from the last glaciation - part

of the geological history of the Seal River Watershed - have shaped this landscape, influencing where people live, camp, hunt, fish, gather and travel.

For thousands of years, Dene and Cree have lived in harmony with this land, practicing sustainable hunting, fishing and gathering while protecting its natural beauty through cultural practices. These practices honor their responsibilities and ensure knowledge is transferred to future generations. Spending time on the land - hunting, fishing, walking eskers and sharing stories – strengthens the bond between people and place. Their connection is both spiritual and practical, making the watershed a place of healing, knowledge and strength.

The Seal River landscape provides benefits to those living beyond the watershed including all Manitobans. Numerous visitors are drawn to this pristine area seeking to enjoy the natural attributes of the land and water.



## Wildlife of the Seal River Watershed

### Caribou: Life and Tradition

Caribou are central to the identity of the Dene and Cree, who have followed their migrations for millennia. These animals are not only a vital part of the ecosystem but also hold profound cultural and spiritual significance. They nourish not only the body but the spirit, grounding local communities in their traditions and relationships to the land.

When caribou are respected through traditional practices, it restores a sense of wholeness and connection. Drumming ceremonies, for example, open a spiritual link to caribou, reminding people of their roles as caretakers of the land. Despite their importance, caribou populations that use the watershed are under threat from climate change, wastage and industrial development, emphasizing the urgency of conservation efforts to protect these sacred animals and the landscape they depend upon.

### A Home to Hundreds of Species

The Seal River Watershed supports a diverse range of wildlife, including species at risk such as polar bears and peregrine falcons. Wolves, moose, wolverines, and even grizzly bears contribute to the intricate balance of this ecosystem. Each species plays a vital role, from regulating prey populations to shaping vegetation dynamics.

### Life in the waters

The rivers and lakes teem with life, including Arctic grayling, lake trout, walleye (pickerel), whitefish, northern pike and lake sturgeon. These fish not only support the ecosystem but are also vital to the food security and traditions of local communities. At the Seal River's estuary, marine life such as beluga whales and harbour seals thrive and connect the marine and freshwater environments.

### Life in the sky

In the spring a wave of life is injected into the watershed by thousands of migratory birds. Recognized internationally as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, the Seal River Estuary provides critical habitat for migratory birds. From breeding Arctic terns to tiny sandpipers and majestic tundra swans, thousands of birds rely on this region for nesting and stopovers during their long migrations.

### Flora of the Seal River Watershed

The Seal River Watershed is a rich and diverse ecological haven, representing a unique intersection of boreal forest and tundra ecosystems. This natural diversity fosters a variety of plant species, including







traditional medicines, black spruce, tamarack, willows, sedges, and a myriad of mosses and lichens. These plants are vital to the region's ecological health, supporting soil stabilization, water filtration, and carbon storage in extensive peatlands.

Beyond their ecological roles, many of these plants hold deep cultural importance for Indigenous communities. Species like Labrador tea and wild berries are traditionally used for medicinal, ceremonial, and nutritional purposes, forming an essential connection to the land. The health of these plant communities directly supports the resilience of both the natural ecosystem and the cultural practices that have thrived in this region for generations.

### **Protecting the Future of the Watershed**

The Seal River Watershed stands as a beacon of ecological integrity and cultural heritage. A healthy watershed would continue to strengthen the people of the region by reconnecting them with their lands and traditions. While a portion of the area is already protected, protecting the whole Seal River Watershed would help ensure this land remains healthy and sustains its people far into the future. It will safeguard a space for communities to maintain their identities, languages, and traditions. It would also create opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful work based on Indigenous Knowledge and laws.

All of this is tied to the land and the caribou. The Dene and Cree honor their responsibility to care for the land, just as the land and its animals care for them. Protecting the watershed ensures that this sacred relationship—and the vibrant ecosystems it supports—will thrive for generations to come.



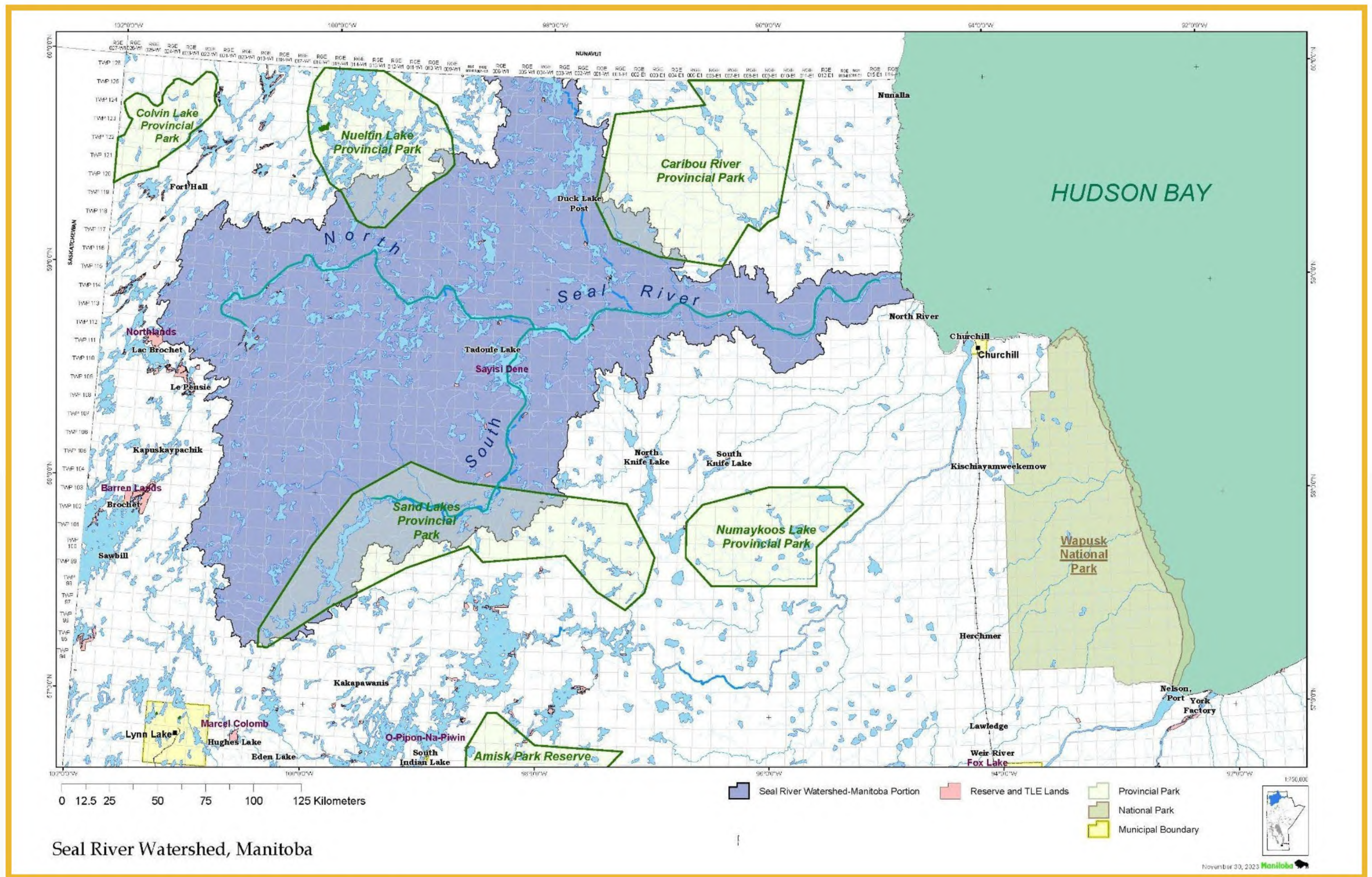


Figure 1. Map of the Seal River Watershed, Manitoba.





## Socioeconomic Considerations for Protecting the Seal River Watershed

Establishing a protected area including a national park reserve and/or IPCA in the Seal River Watershed would have socioeconomic and cultural implications for the people who live both in and outside the region. It is also important to recognize that the First Nations whose traditional territory will be impacted by future activities in the watershed, have a say in whether the values placed on these different socioeconomic elements are significant. The values associated with the Seal River Watershed, whether economic, social, cultural, spiritual, or environmental are also all interconnected, and values such as Indigenous culture, wellbeing, community and family bonding, connection with nature and countless other important benefits cannot be expressed in economic terms.

Each of the four First Nations making up the SRWA have a portion of their traditional territory within the watershed. Northlands Denesuline First Nation and Sayisi Dene First Nation are currently the two Dene communities in Manitoba, and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation and Barren Lands First Nation

are two of the 23 Cree communities who live in northern Manitoba. Currently, there are approximately 2,946 members living in Seal River Watershed Alliance communities, and 2,319 residing elsewhere.

### Restoring Community

In 1956, the Government of Canada forcibly removed the Sayisi Dene from their homelands. This caused significant harm and resulted in the deaths of around one third of community members. The Sayisi Dene have since returned to the watershed to rebuild their community. O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation also experienced forced relocation during the Churchill River Diversion project that took place in the 1970's. "Wage-labour pursuits and government welfare have become increasingly important to the community since the construction of hydropower structures" (Narratives Inc. 2024). Colonial practices have had lasting impacts on the region. Community profiles and media stories have reported on how these communities face ongoing socioeconomic concerns including access to basic services such as

housing, clean water, physical and mental health care, and education, along with high rates of suicide, drug use, and underemployment.

### Economic Values

Mineral exploration has taken place in the watershed as early as the 1950s and has continued at various times over the years. However, high costs associated with the remoteness and inaccessibility of the region has limited the amount of exploration activity, and presents significant barriers to future mining activity. The Manitoba Geological Survey carries out geological investigations that provide information for academic purposes and land use management decisions including related to local needs for resources. These investigations are non-destructive and have minimal impact on the landscape. Some mineral assessment work has taken place in the vicinity of the Seal River, including a recent update to Manitoba Mineral Deposit Database (Rinne 2024), that has shown possible medium to high mineral potential in areas of the watershed, (see Bamburak, 1990; Davies et al., 1962; IK report).



(SRWA community members and leadership have asserted strong opposition to mining in the watershed, noting that this does not align with the SRWA Value to “engage in economic endeavors that maintain respect for healthy lands and waters” (SRWA 2024). They have voiced concerns that activities such as mining and hydroelectric development, along with the associated infrastructure that would be required to carry out these activities, has had devastating impacts on lands and waters in other Indigenous territories. This includes directly impacting caribou migration patterns and population decline, a keystone species of immense significance to local First Nations. Due to the risk of long-lasting negative effects on the environment and health of local Indigenous communities, the SRWA Nations wish to protect the watershed from large scale resource and industrial development for future generations.

Healthy caribou populations play an important role in the northern economy as a source of food and other means of subsistence. The economic value of rights-based caribou hunting in 2005-2006 for the Seal River Watershed communities was estimated at 1.5 million net annual value (IISD 2022). The viability of a healthy caribou population and the benefits that the people in the region derive from them (food, furs, skins, cultural and spiritual identity), relies on a healthy and intact environment.

The SRWA Land Guardians play an important role in stewarding their traditional territories in the watershed. Indigenous Land Guardian programs build skills and create employment opportunities for

community members to live and work in their communities. These programs reduce the need to find work outside of communities or for social assistance. Thirteen Seal River Watershed Land Guardian jobs have already been established along with advisors representing Elders, youth, women, land users, and urban band members in each community. Indigenous Guardian programs in the Northwest Territories, with an initial investment of CAD\$4.5 million generated CAD\$11.1 million in benefits, resulting in a multiplier of 2.5 return in social, economic, cultural, and environmental benefits for every CAD 1 invested (Dehcho First Nations et al., 2016 as quoted in Narratives Inc. 2024; IISD 2022).

Tourism is currently the primary economic activity in the watershed. The five commercial lodges within the watershed, including Community Association Of South Indian Lake’s Big Sand Lake Lodge, bring in an average 1,450 visitors to the watershed, (IISD 2022) generate approximately CAD\$11 million in tourism revenue per year (IK report), and provides jobs in the region to SRWA community members and others.

The lodges typically cater to guests from other parts of the province, non-Manitobans and non-Canadians. In addition to these five lodges, there are twelve outfitters and one lodge outside the area that are licensed to operate in the watershed that largely provide hunting, angling and ecotourism experiences.

The lodges and outfitters are licensed to provide

various activities including angling, big game hunting (caribou, moose, black bear), and ecotourism. Most of these activities are based out of the lodges or licensed out camps, with moose and black bear hunting constrained to allocated areas and angling constrained to authorized waterbodies. There are also numerous permitted boat caches held by lodges and outfitters throughout the watershed. The lodges and outfitters provide jobs in the region to SRWA community members and other Manitobans.

Targeted mapping and understanding the geology of the Seal River areas could be leveraged as a form of geology tourism, including as study headquarters for geology and landforming processes. Lodges and outfitters now and in future could provide supporting infrastructure for geology tourism. Geology tourism is known to provide economic value and additional spin off to communities and businesses - the Seal River area could be considered a natural geology laboratory for the next generation of young scientists.

The Seal River Watershed has the potential for further development of ecotourism, (including geological tourism) and cultural tourism, and community members have expressed excitement about “ecotourism bringing new possibilities for learning and being able to share their cultures with others” (Narratives Inc. 2024).

## Social and Cultural Values

There are many social, cultural, and spiritual values associated with the lands and waters of the Seal



River Watershed, that are inextricably linked to local Dene and Cree people. This results in physical and mental health benefits, knowledge sharing opportunities, family and community bonding and many other benefits. These values are expressed in the holistic worldview that the health of the lands and waters are directly tied to the health and wellbeing of the local people as well as visitors to the area.

Local community activities such as hunting and gathering are often done in collaboration with family and friends and are a major part of wellbeing. The SRWA Indigenous Land Guardian program has resulted in a major impact on their communities. Indigenous Land Guardian programs “improves access to traditional foods, preserves Indigenous language and culture, and increases Indigenous Peoples’ sense of pride and overall community well-being (Dehcho First Nations et al., 2016).

The watershed is in a remote location and the importance of harvesting local traditional foods is important culturally and spiritually, as well as for food security. The Dene and Cree peoples in the region have long relied on the environment of the watershed to provide sustenance and connection to ancestral traditions. Access to caribou, moose, berries, geese, fish, and other nutritional food sources is critical in SRWA communities where access to fresh foods is often not possible due to the excessively high costs of imported foods. Community members have expressed that protecting the Seal River Watershed is critical so they can continue to have access to traditional foods and cultural practices.

Many people are attracted to pristine natural environments. Visitors to the Seal River watershed also enjoy social, cultural and spiritual benefits provided by the natural features of the landscape.

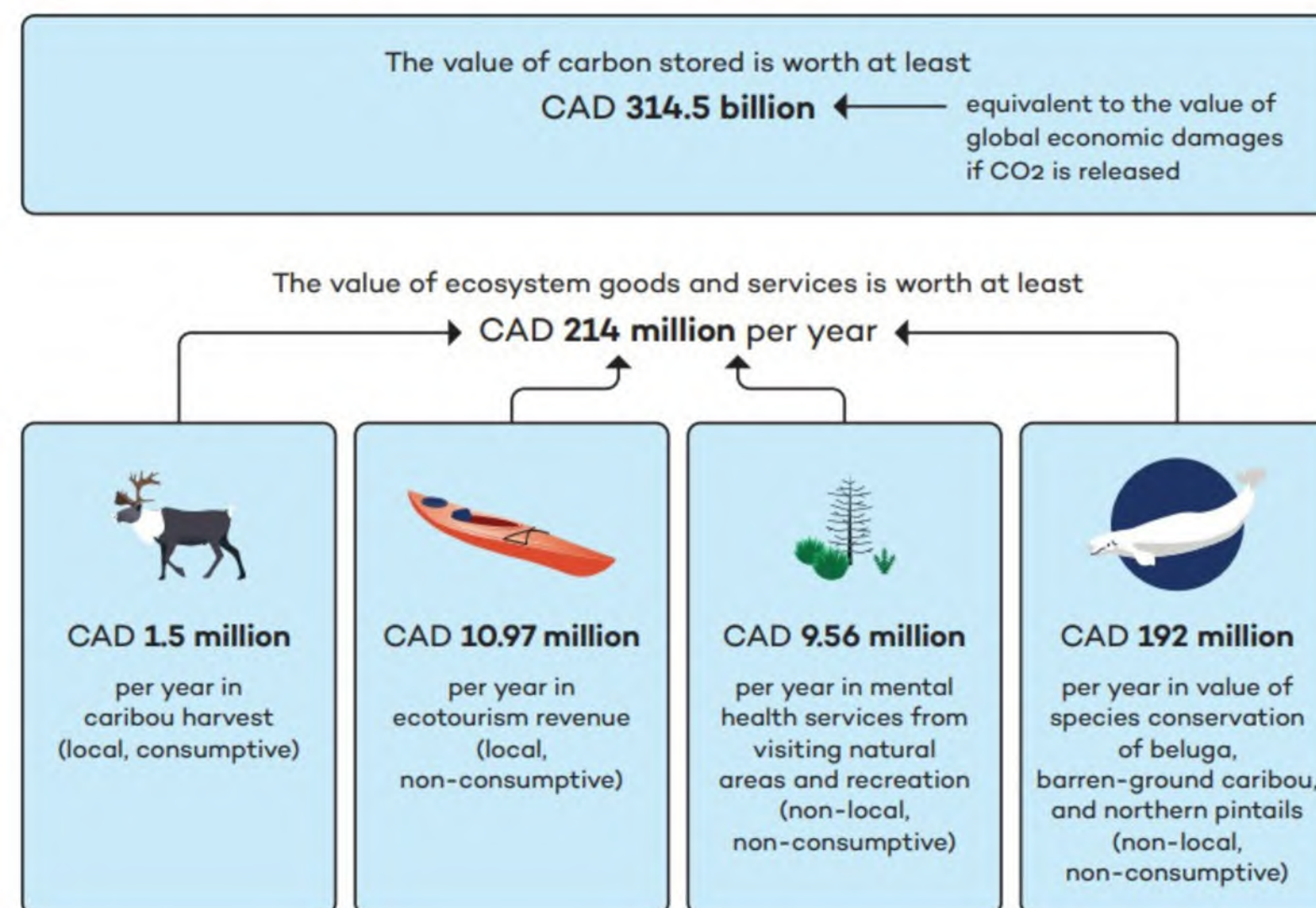
## Ecological Goods and Services

The 2022 International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) report ‘A Value On The Priceless’ examines the valuation of various Ecological Goods and Services (EGS) in the Seal River Watershed, including carbon storage, regulation of the Hudson Bay marine environment, clean air and clean drinking water, harvest of local foods, and tourism. IISD estimates that the Seal River Watershed provides a minimum of CAD\$214 million value of EGS annually, including the local community caribou harvest, ecotourism, health services, and wildlife conservation (IISD 2022). This value would increase further if factoring in the value of all activities associated with lodges and outfitters, community and licensed moose harvest, and non-guided ecotourism in the watershed.





Figure 5. The value of EGS and carbon storage, in CAD 2020



Source: IISD, 2022.

Figure 2. The value of Ecological Goods and Services and carbon storage, in CAD 2020 (from IISD 2022).

The Seal River Watershed is a unique region with significant and interconnected cultural, social, environmental, and economic value. The watershed provides important benefits not only to the Cree Dene, and Inuit Peoples who have stewarded these lands since time immemorial, but globally. The Seal River Watershed communities have determined that they wish to engage in economic activities that are culturally based and support the health of lands and waters within the Watershed.





A photograph of a rocky shoreline with a white wavy line graphic. The rocks are dark and layered, with some reddish-brown patches. The water is a light, sandy color. A white wavy line graphic starts from the left edge and curves downwards towards the bottom right corner.

# INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS AND POTENTIAL CO- DESIGNATIONS:

Protection and conservation of lands by Indigenous peoples is not a new concept, as Indigenous peoples have been stewarding their territories for millennia. The term IPCA was established in 2018 by the Indigenous Circle of Experts (We Rise Together 2018 - [PA234-ICE Report 2018 Mar 22 web.pdf](#)) with the essential elements that an IPCA must be Indigenous led and represent a long-term commitment to conservation and stewardship. IPCAs may be supported through partnership and shared governance models, as well as co-designations of another status, but IPCAs are ultimately initiated and supported through Indigenous laws and protocols.

The role of the Governments of Canada and Manitoba in enabling IPCAs, is as a partner and supporter of the IPCA establishment process. IPCAs can be declared under Indigenous law. Provincial and federal legislative tools can be used to help establish an IPCA and provide additional legal mechanisms to ensure the protection of the area.

There are various options in Manitoba for the establishment of protected or conserved areas. Options are focused on protection of Crown land and include Indigenous, stakeholder and public engagement so that all voices are heard and reflected in the decision-making process. Existing developments, claims, and commitments on the land would be considered through the review. To assist in the creation of a protected area, including a provincial park, Manitoba's Provincial Parks Act allows for the establishment of park reserves. A provincial park reserve is a temporary designation providing interim protection to an area to allow time for further discussions to determine a final permanent designation type and boundaries.

In the case of Parks Canada, Indigenous governments can establish an IPCA that is subsequently co-designated as a national park reserve with shared governance arrangements. In this way Federal governments can play supporting roles in IPCA, including providing funding and capacity building for Indigenous guardians. A federal national park reserve is an area that is managed like a national park but is subject to one or more Indigenous land claims being negotiated between the federal, provincial/territorial and Indigenous governments. The Canada National Park Act applies to national park reserves and provides the same protections to those of national parks. Indigenous peoples continue to use the land for traditional activities such as hunting, fishing, and trapping, and the resolution of the land claims finalizes the boundaries and establishment conditions.

The Manitoba government and Parks Canada are committed to working together to enable Indigenous peoples to fulfill their roles as traditional stewards of lands and waters. By working closely together with Indigenous peoples who have stewarded landscapes for millennia and weaving Indigenous Knowledge with western science, we can gain a more complete picture of conservation issues and solutions.





## FEASIBILITY ASSESSMENT PARTNERSHIP AND PROCESS:

The Steering Committee guided the feasibility assessment process, ensuring that Indigenous Knowledge was incorporated into the feasibility assessment and associated recommendations, alongside other western science, and feedback from public and stakeholder engagement.

To support the work of the Steering Committee, the SRWA, Parks Canada, and the Government of Manitoba established a working group. The working group collected, organized, and incorporated Indigenous Knowledge and various studies on the environmental, natural resource, heritage, cultural, and socio-economic characteristics of the Seal River Watershed for input to the feasibility assessment. This included multiple studies that the SRWA commissioned as a part of their work towards establishing an IPCA in the region. The feasibility assessment also incorporated information from the “Seal River Watershed Alliance Indigenous Knowledge Report”. In the knowledge report, the SRWA communities were engaged to collect their knowledge on plants, animals, lands, waters, and traditional activities. The report also included community mapping sessions, and individual interviews with Elders and land users. This information was paramount to the feasibility assessment, as each of the Sayisi Dene First Nation, Northlands Denesuline First Nation, Barren Lands First Nation, and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation have a deep relationship with and knowledge of the Seal River Watershed as part of their traditional territories and homelands.

The SRWA coordinated in-person community consultation and information sessions for each of the four SRWA communities and for community members living in Churchill, Thompson, and Winnipeg during various periods between July and October, 2024. The SRWA invited Parks Canada and the Government of Manitoba to participate in each of these community meetings to provide information, answer questions, and gather feedback. A total of 317 community members attended these in-person sessions. The SRWA also provided participants with feedback forms to ensure that community members had the opportunity to express their thoughts and offer feedback on potentially partnering with Crown governments to protect the watershed. Overall, 72.7% of survey respondents in SRWA communities and 85.7% of urban community member respondents answered “Yes” to the question “Should we consider protecting all or parts of the Seal River Watershed by establishing a national park reserve with Parks Canada.” Approximately 85% of all respondents agreed that the SRWA should continue talking to Parks Canada and the Government of Manitoba about sharing the responsibility of protecting the watershed. Of note, community members were not asked to consider options for protection through a provincial mechanism.



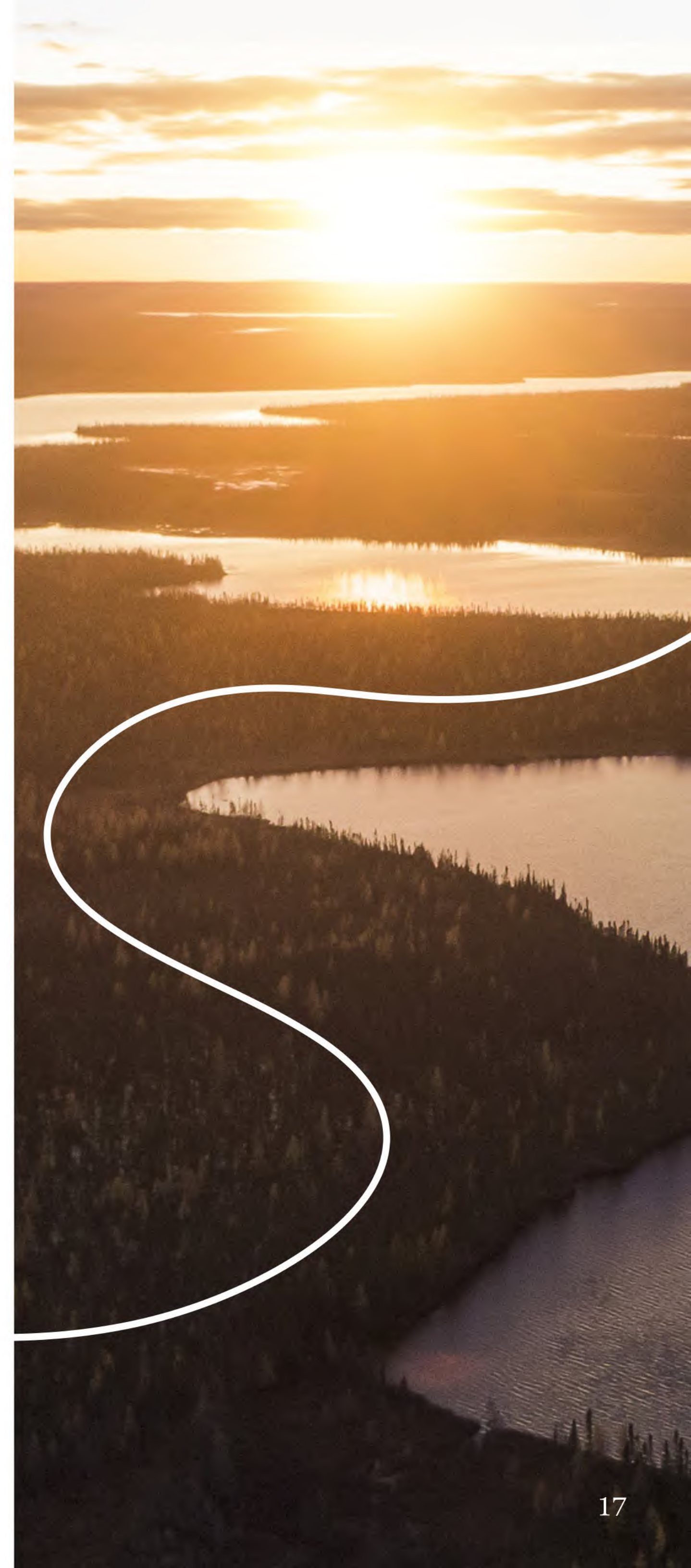
The Nations represented in the SRWA have also been engaging directly with public and stakeholders on their vision to protect the Seal River Watershed as an IPCA since 2018. This has included engaging in multiple meetings and conversations with interested parties in the region. The SRWA has significant support for their IPCA initiative, and has received 29,086 letters of support for their efforts to protect the Seal River Watershed.

During the feasibility assessment process, Parks Canada also engaged with Indigenous governments and organizations. Indigenous Peoples who hold or assert rights and interests in the region were approached through a series of letters and emails and were invited to provide input into assessing the feasibility of establishing a protected area, including a possible national park reserve and Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area in the Seal River Watershed.

Further engagement and consultation with Indigenous governments and organizations by Canada and Manitoba will take place during any potential next steps in a protected area establishment process.

The SRWA, Parks Canada and the Government of Manitoba also arranged meetings with organizations and stakeholders, with interest in the watershed, inviting interested parties to express their opinions and concerns. Letters were received from stakeholders with varied interests that expressed both support and concerns. The parties also held meetings with stakeholders to gain a better understanding of their perspective. Many stakeholders are supportive of protecting the Seal River Watershed through the establishment of a protected area including an IPCA and/or a national park reserve. Some stakeholders expressed an interest in continuing to allow harvesting by non-Indigenous people in the watershed if a protected area is established. Lodge and outfitting businesses generally support the creation of a protected area in the watershed, however expressed concerns regarding the potential impacts that a protected area may have on their business. All stakeholders showed an interest in continuing to be involved and consulted in the establishment process, should the parties decide to proceed with the negotiation of a protected area in the watershed.

As a part of the feasibility assessment process, Parks Canada also administered a public survey on the Parks Canada website, to gather insight and feedback on the perceptions, concerns, and interests in establishing a national park reserve and/or IPCA in the Seal River Watershed. The survey ran over a four-week period, from July 22 to August 24, 2024, and was promoted on the Parks Canada website, through partner and stakeholder networks, on local radio stations, and social media. 1,427 surveys were completed. Based on the findings of the survey, there was significant public support overall for establishing a protected area in the S





Seal River Watershed. Respondents emphasized the importance of conservation, with high priority given to biodiversity, protecting species at risk, and mitigating climate change. The need to protect the area from human impacts like resource development was a consistent theme. Many saw the project as an opportunity to advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and support the ongoing protection of Dene and Cree heritage, as well as Indigenous stewardship.

In the Parks Canada survey results, the key concerns regarding the creation of a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed were the ability to protect species and habitats and to monitor and enforce regulations, particularly in relation to tourism impacts. Some were also concerned about restrictions on activities like hunting and fishing if the area became a national park reserve. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of meaningful engagement with the public, stakeholders, and Indigenous communities.

The SRWA, Parks Canada, and the Government of Manitoba are committed to continue working with stakeholders and local residents to identify the opportunities and challenges associated with establishing a protected area in the Seal River Watershed.

The SRWA, Parks Canada, and the Government of Manitoba worked in partnership on this collaborative Feasibility Assessment. The parties worked together, respecting each other's collective mandates and Indigenous Knowledge, interests, and values. Conducting the feasibility assessment presented an opportunity for the governments of Canada and Manitoba, and Seal River Watershed First Nations to strengthen their relationships and potentially contribute to Canada's growing network of protected and conserved areas based on the recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership.





# STEERING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

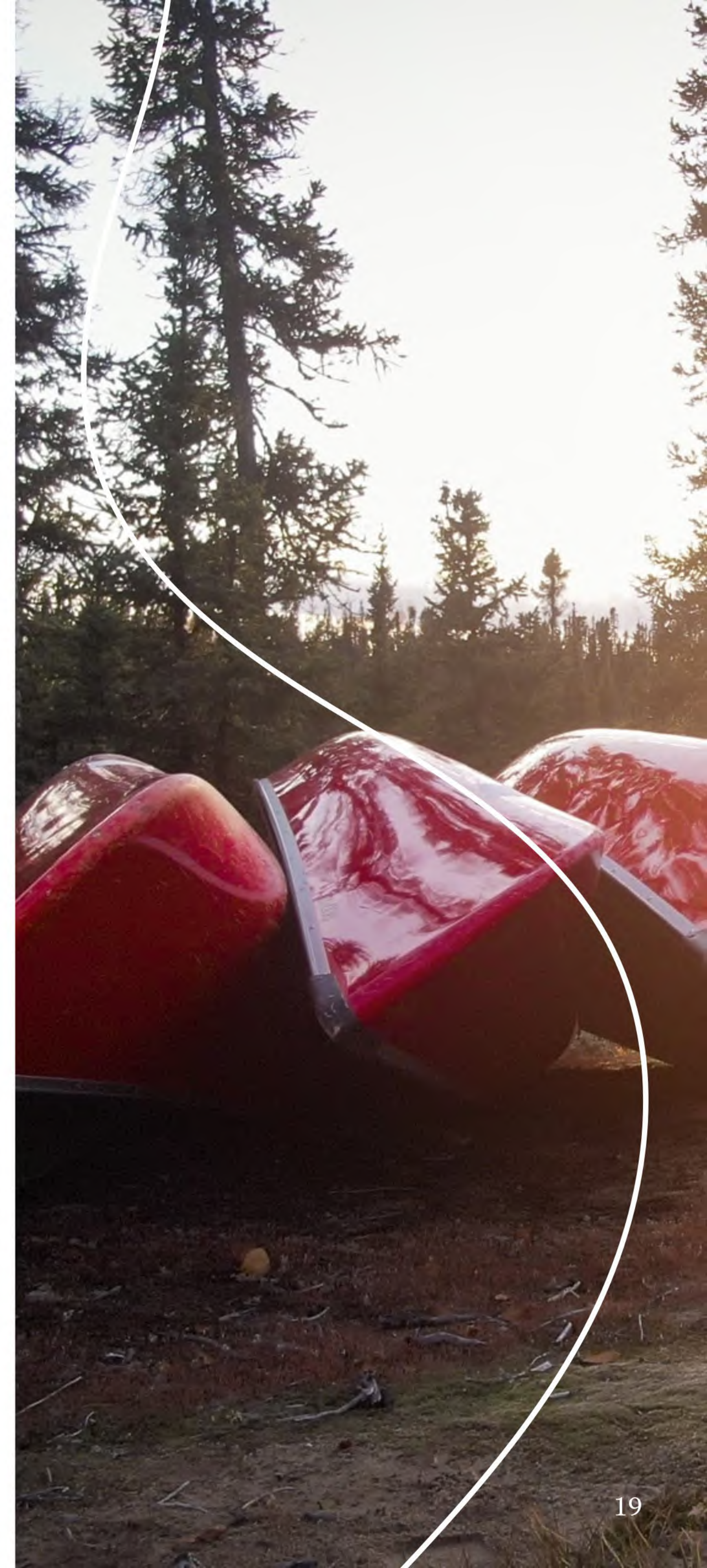
Supporting Indigenous-led governance is a meaningful path for reconciliation and could lead to valuable outcomes for conservation on provincial, national, and global scales. **Establishing an IPCA in the Seal River Watershed would formally acknowledge the local Indigenous Nations and communities as leaders in the stewardship of the Seal River Watershed.**

**The Steering Committee finds that there is strong support for creating new protected areas in the Seal River Watershed.** The SRWA communities have expressed a united desire to permanently protect and conserve this pristine natural landscape for future generations. Feedback from the public is also generally supportive of protecting this area and dialogue needs to continue.

As members of the Steering Committee, we are pleased to confirm our assessment that **a protected area, including a national park reserve and other protected area tools for co-designation of an Indigenous protected and conserved area (IPCA) in the Seal River Watershed is feasible and we recommend exploring all potential land designations that could support an IPCA, including federal and provincial options.** The Committee recognizes that a mosaic of different protection mechanisms can fit within an IPCA.

**The Steering Committee recommends that the interim protection and withdrawal of the Study Area from mineral disposition established under Manitoba's Mines and Minerals Act, subject to any existing rights, titles, interests, entitlements, licences, permits or authorizations will remain in place through all protected area establishment processes, including negotiations and Indigenous, public and stakeholder engagement.**

We are pleased to confirm that the Steering Committee has reached consensus on the following terms and conditions under which the protected area will be feasible. **We are therefore recommending to SRWA leadership and the responsible Ministers for Manitoba and Canada that we proceed with negotiations for the development of a protected area(s) proposal, including a national park reserve and/or IPCA in the study area.** Negotiation and any subsequent establishment processes will include Section 35 consultation with rights-holders and engagement with stakeholders and the public per Canada and Manitoba's formal processes for establishing protected areas.







## Terms and Conditions Under Which A Protected Area, Including a National Park Reserve and/or Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area is Feasible and Framework for Negotiations

**1.** Canada and Manitoba will recognize Indigenous leadership in the management of the protected area. Negotiations will consider all potential land designations that could support the IPCA, including federal and provincial options including a national park reserve and other provincial protected area tools. The shared goal is to reach an agreement for establishment and co-designation of the IPCA that recognizes and affirms the shared vision of the communities and the Indigenous rights and responsibilities of the Nations as the shared objective of all parties for the long-term protection and management of the watershed. This will require permanent protection from large-scale industrial development, with exceptions for local community needs.

**2.** The Indigenous Nations, Canada and Manitoba will create shared decision-making structures for the IPCA that operate on an Indigenous Nation(s) to crown government(s) basis depending on protection mechanisms utilized. The Indigenous Nations and crown governments will commit to seek consensus

through shared decision-making mechanisms, and will place any dispute in abeyance until consensus can be achieved, or the dispute is resolved in accordance with an issue resolution mechanism.

**3.** The Indigenous Nations, Canada and Manitoba will work to secure adequate funding for the Nations to establish and maintain active management within the IPCA, including for a Guardians program, culturally relevant economic development, and on-the-land programs. If approved, funding will be advanced at the time of establishment as per an agreed financial plan, and will provide for sustainability for the IPCA and fiscal autonomy for the First Nations, including through mechanisms such as a long-term trust.

**4.** Canada and Manitoba will ensure an establishment agreement(s) and joint designations recognize and respect the distinct rights-holding Indigenous Peoples identified in Section 35 of the Canada Constitution, each with their own history, identity, culture and way of life.

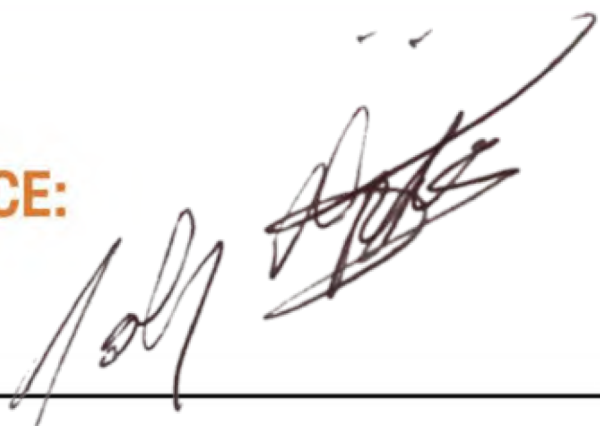
**5.** The Seal River Watershed Study Area within Manitoba as illustrated in Figure 1 will be the area of focus for the development of the protected area. The final boundaries and designations will be determined during the negotiation phase. The parties commit to negotiating land designations that support an IPCA including a national park reserve and provincial options recognizing that a mosaic of different protection mechanisms can fit within an IPCA. Negotiation and any subsequent establishment processes will include Section 35 consultation with rights-holders and engagement with stakeholders and the public per Canada and Manitoba's formal processes for establishing protected areas.

**6.** The negotiation for an establishment agreement that will outline the development of a protected area(s) proposal will be launched immediately following completion of the feasibility assessment.



SEAL RIVER WATERSHED FEASIBILITY  
ASSESSMENT STEERING COMMITTEE

FOR THE SEAL RIVER WATERSHED ALLIANCE:



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Johnny Clipping Sayisi Dene First Nation



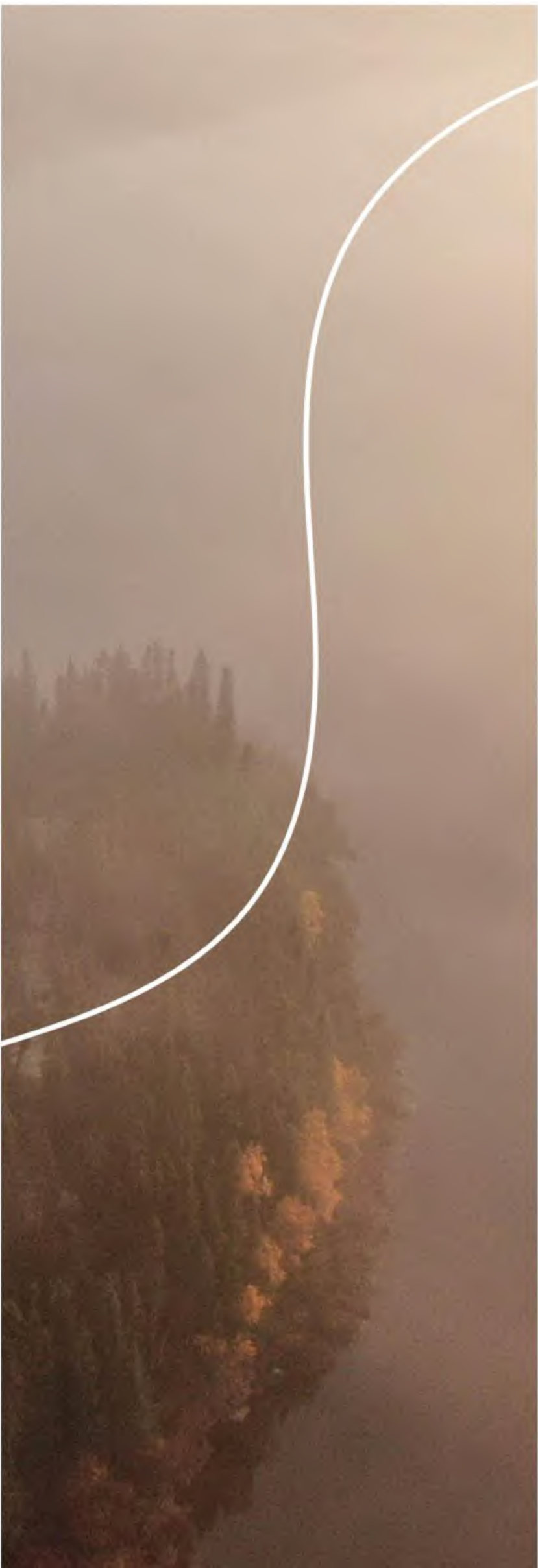
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Adam Nalge Northlands Dene Nation



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Michael Dumas O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation



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Stephanie Thorassie Seal River Watershed Alliance



February 27, 2025

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Date

February 27, 2025

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February 27, 2025

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February 27, 2025

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Date



FOR MANITOBA:



Nicole Armstrong Manitoba Environment and Climate Change

FOR CANADA:



Adriana Bacheschi Parks Canada



David Ebert Parks Canada

February 27, 2024

Date

February 27, 2024

Date

February 27, 2024

Date



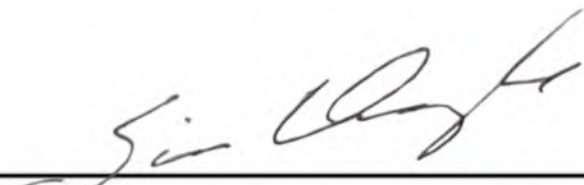


# CONCLUSION OF THE FEASIBILITY ASSESSMENT PROCESS FOR THE PROPOSED PROTECTED AREA, INCLUDING A POSSIBLE NATIONAL PARK RESERVE AND INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREA IN THE SEAL RIVER WATERSHED AND FRAMEWORK FOR NEGOTIATIONS

We approve the recommendations of the report that confirms that establishing a protected area or areas, including a national park reserve and/or Indigenous protected and conserved area in the Seal River watershed is feasible under the specific terms and conditions identified in the report. We direct the Steering Committee and working group to proceed immediately to next steps including negotiations for the establishment of a protected area(s) in the Seal River watershed.

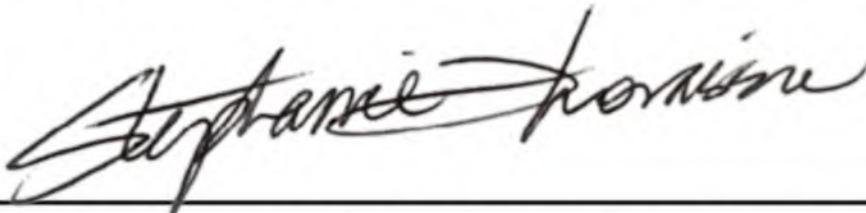
## FOR THE SEAL RIVER WATERSHED ALLIANCE:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Chief Jason Bussidor Sayisi Dene First Nation

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Chief Simon Denechezhe Northland Denesuline First Nation

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Chief Michael Sewap Barren Lands First Nation

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Chief Shirley Ducharme O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation

  
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Stephanie Thorassie Seal River Watershed Alliance



February 28, 2025  
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**FOR MANITOBA:**



The Honourable Mike Moyes Minister of Environment and Climate Change

Date



The Honourable Ian Bushie Minister Natural Resources and Indigenous Futures

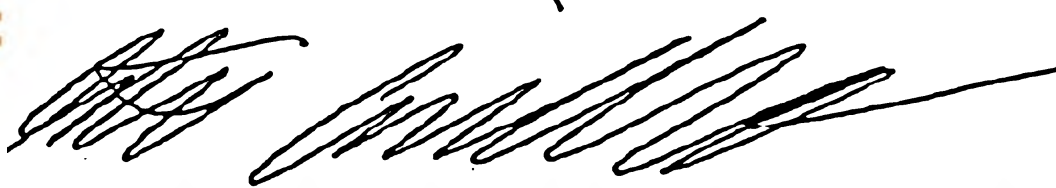
Date



The Honourable Jamie Moses Minister Business, Mining, Trade and Job Creation

Date

**FOR CANADA:**



The Honourable Steven Guilbeault Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada, and responsible for Parks Canada

Date

February 28, 2025

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