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### *Poplar River is still waiting*

## **Status Report: Protected Areas in Manitoba**

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Manitobans always indicate they want more of our lands and waters protected from development. National surveys for environmental organizations over the last 10–15 years show citizens here value our forest regions, our remaining natural grassed lands, and our waterways. We also want to see our government act on commitments to complete networks of protected areas across our province's regions. So what is happening? What is the status of protected areas delivery?

We have seen a flurry of government announcements recently, some of them well in advance of action to protect lands. One standard essential for government, the media, and environmental organizations to uphold requires: announcement and acknowledgement when an action is actually done, and can be verified. That standard has been in place in Manitoba for fifteen years. Currently it is at risk.

### **Turn the Clock Back**

In 1989 Manitoba's parks branch wrote a national overview report about protected areas across Canada. This report concluded that Manitoba had the least lands protected from development of any province or territory. Only Riding Mountain national park and a few ecological reserves qualified as protected. Parks established in the 50s, 60s, and 70s were not protected from industrial activity.

Manitoba led Canada for proportion of lands protected between 1990 and 2000 with 5.5 million ha protected. Actions included review of wildlife management areas across the province with upgraded regulation and protection for 132,000 ha; the Wapusk

national park on Hudson Bay; and new park reserves nominated by First Nations.

### **Protection Standard**

Protected areas standards are embedded in Manitoba public policy through legislation, regulation, and national reporting. Various acts are used to designate protected areas in Manitoba. It is essential to note that parks in Manitoba are not necessarily protected areas. To date Manitoba has no specific regulation or standards for protected waterways. Manitoba Conservation's web site currently confirms that "At a minimum, protected areas prohibit, through legal means, logging, mining (including aggregate extraction), and oil, petroleum, natural gas or hydro-electric development."

Manitoba Wildlands releases a protected areas grade each year, based on criteria used by WWF Canada, and Nature Canada. The grade reports on new protected areas, new partnerships (for private or urban lands, for instance), whether protection standards and technical methods are being upheld, etc. Manitoba is about one third done establishing protected areas networks in our regions. Manitoba Wildlands also releases a statistical audit of government's protected areas steps. The audit and grade are based on public actions, government regulations, and data. Both tools are posted on our web site. Both will be released later this fall.

### **Election 2007**

Manitoba's geographic location means our province will have greater than median climate change impacts. Protected areas, especially with north-south corridors for flora and fauna are urgently needed. Our Election 2007 survey of political parties included climate change and protected areas issues. All parties' answers underline that protected areas establishment is a non-partisan issue, and, as the Premier has indicated at announcements, about benefits for all Manitobans.

During the election, Gary Doer, leader of the NDP and Premier of Manitoba, made renewed commitments for protected areas, especially in our boreal regions and for lands nominated by First Nations. He also endorsed again the east side World Heritage Site (WHS) undertaking, and committed to permanent protection for Poplar River First Nations' traditional territory, anchoring the WHS.

Protected lands, lands plans, and an overall management system must be in place for UNESCO to endorse this WHS.

There are outstanding, significant requests from Manitoba First Nations for protected lands. Two have been on the books since 1999, and renewed again formally this year. Poplar River's permanent protection is not yet in place. An early 2006 government commitment was to establish one new significant protected area per year. At that rate Manitoba may finish its protected areas networks in about 30 years.

### **Recent Announcements**

- Little Limestone Lake, with a narrow shoreline, was announced June 2007. The regulation that is part of the steps for all other protected areas in Manitoba, protection from mining activity, has not been done.
- Paint Lake Park (East Paint Lake park reserve, protected since 1997) was announced as being doubled in size. Now none of it is protected.
- A change in land use and upgrade for a portion of Nopoming was announced, but Mines Act regulation has not been done, so it is not protected.
- Renewal of several park reserves was announced early in 2007, including expansion of one. Regulations for all but the expanded park reserve are posted.
- Whitemouth Falls provincial park expansion was announced. The Mines Act regulation is outstanding, so this great grey owl habitat is not yet protected.

There is time for Manitoba's government to clean up its protected areas regulations, and confirm its protection standards before this year's Protected Areas Grade. Our government needs to announce protected areas when they are actually done!