

## **Will Manitoba Protect Lands and Waters?**

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Spring 2005 is shaping up to be the most important spring in five years for protected areas establishment in our province. (Protected areas are lands protected from developments, including hydro, mining, forestry, oil and gas.)

Manitoba's network of protected areas is made up of: wildlife management areas, ecological reserves, defense base lands, forest zones, national parks, park reserves, zones in parks, and entire parks. Several pieces of legislation are used to establish a protected area. In some cases an older designation has been reviewed to identify lands that are intact, with healthy habitat, and free of tenure. All protected areas in Manitoba also have mining rights withdrawn. Public policy and commitments for protected areas establishment, from across the provinces' political spectrum, have been in place for 15 years. Manitoba has natural regions mapping, and methods for assessing landscapes and regions to identify and design lands to protect. In summer 2000 Manitoba led the country in the proportion of our province that was protected from development during the 1990's. Five million hectares were protected during the decade!

But in 1990 when World Wildlife Fund Canada challenged all Canada's governments to start establishing permanent protected areas, Manitoba had the least protected land in the country! Only Riding Mountain National Park, and ecological reserves were protected from development. Parks established in the 1960's and 1970's did not have any lands guaranteed to be free of development and industrial extraction. Manitobans support protecting our forest regions, our northern tundra, our remaining prairies, and our lakes and rivers. In polling and surveys 85% or more of Manitobans want Manitoba's networks of protected areas completed. Today that job is about one-third done.

Today, there are over 100 areas of special interest under review for protection in our province. Many have already been reviewed and are supported by the mining industry. In fact, the mining sector has been working on identifying future protected areas for six years. Today there are almost four million hectares in Manitoba which the mining sector supports for protected status. Many of these sites are in fact those designed by Manitoba Conservation. Manitoba Hydro, despite written support of protected areas establishment, has shown no willingness to help make it happen. Manitobans expect their government and their hydro company to get on with establishing protected areas, but the public sector developers seem intent on building generation stations and transmission lines before protected areas are established. They need to think about conservation first!

The protected areas audit conducted by Manitoba Wildlands, November 2004 shows that we are actually seeing a decrease in the quantum of protected land in our province. The new Water Protection Act does not include standards for water bodies currently inside protected areas, and does not set standards for protection of headwaters, and water

*Manitoba Wildlands continues the work of WWF Canada and Nature Canada for establishment of Manitoba Protected Areas.*

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sources. But 2005 is full of opportunities for the Manitoba government to show that it knows how to get the job done.

Between January 2005, the time of writing for the Cottager, and summer 2005 Manitoba needs to:

- fulfill the MOU with Canada for establishment of the Lowlands national park, put interim protection on lands which have community support, enable research, land use planning, and resolve legacy issues
- put permanent protection on the 800,000 hectare Poplar /Nanowin Rivers protected area East of Lake Winnipeg
- put interim protection on two new park reserves along the Ontario/Manitoba border, so the communities can get on with planning for the World Heritage Site
- protect the fjords along the west coast of Hudson Bay
- support the 4.3 million ha World Heritage Site from Lake Winnipeg into Ontario by enabling the communities to plan, manage and protect these lands from development
- make sure the environmental standards for forestry license and other permits include the requirement to establish any protected areas not done yet
- make sure that existing cottage developments are surrounded by additional protected lands and a guarantee that a mine, clearcut, or road will not appear on the lake's edge!

Will our government get on with the job? Will they act on public policy and their commitments? Will we have significant new forest lands inside new protected areas by June 2005? Will protected waters become part of the plan to protect our province's natural regions?

For cottagers, and all Manitobans who know and love our heritage of forest, water, rock and sky this is the spring to look around and think about our province's future. Everything we touch comes from or uses nature to be manufactured or built. Are we doing enough to protect the future of our lakes and forests? Do we think about our future economy and our future environment together? Do we plan and protect before we develop? It is time to make sure the decision makers are always thinking about both, together. Otherwise we may not have the economy or the environment we need in the future.