



Gift to the Earth



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Protected Areas Network in the Upper Mackenzie Valley, Canada

10.1 million ha protected in advance of industrial development

SUMMARY

The Deh Cho First Nations and the Government of Canada have agreed to protect a total of 10.1 million ha of pristine northern boreal forest and wetland habitats in Canada's Mackenzie Valley, thereby establishing an extensive interconnected network of culturally and ecologically significant areas. In addition to the permanently protected Nahanni National Park, the remaining areas are withdrawn from industrial development opportunity for an initial 5-year period, during which time more detailed resource assessments will be completed, and a permanent protected areas network confirmed.

The Deh Cho have depended on the land and its wildlife species for many thousands of years, and remain strongly committed to protecting the land, traditional values and conservation options for future generations, especially in the current climate of increased industrial development pressures. The Government of Canada has also long recognized the benefits of establishing networks of representative protected areas across the country and its oceans, but in most regions this commitment has yet to be fulfilled.

In advance of the proposed construction of a major natural gas pipeline along the Mackenzie Valley, and in the absence of detailed biophysical information on the region's resources, protection of this network of key cultural and ecological areas represents a vital precautionary step that will help retain future conservation and sustainable development options.

This sequencing of networks of protected areas in advance of new industrial development showcases the 'Conservation First' approach, that is embedded in Aboriginal traditions and settled land claims across northern Canada. World Wildlife Fund (WWF) believes that this approach is critical to achieving sustainable development.

WWF recognises this globally significant conservation initiative as a Gift to the Earth, and highlights this as an outstanding example of partnerships to achieve a common, well-balanced vision.



Caribou – a key species in the Mackenzie Valley - ©M Hobson

BACKGROUND

The Mackenzie is one of the world's last remaining great rivers still in its natural state. Its vast watershed covers 180 million ha, one sixth the size of Canada. Unlike many other parts of the inhabited world, here habitats are mainly in their natural state, with unpolluted water, clean air, intact predator-prey systems, and healthy wildlife populations still providing important subsistence resources for local people. The Deh Cho region of the Northwest Territories covers 20.8 million ha, where the mighty Mackenzie River drains from the western end of Great Slave Lake. "Deh Cho" means 'Big River' in the local language.



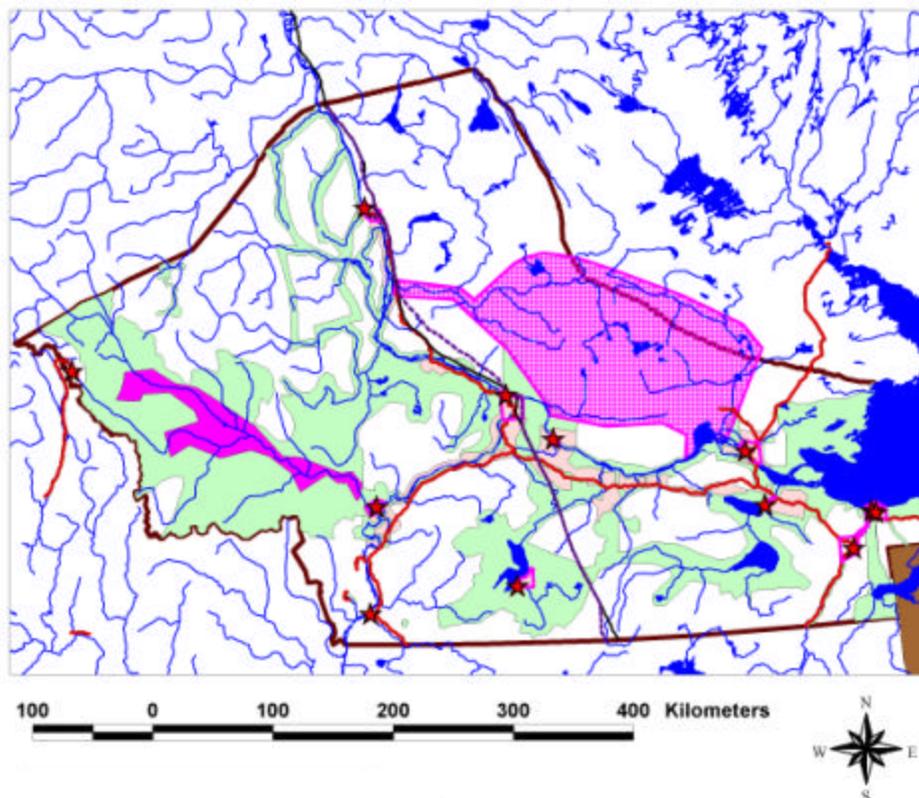
Typical habitat complex in the Mackenzie Valley - ©P Jalkotsky

Characteristic wildlife includes caribou, grizzly bear, wolf, wolverine, moose, and huge populations of migratory ducks, geese, swans, shorebirds, raptors and loons. Many of these species range over huge areas, therefore their survival depends upon protecting well-connected large areas of habitat.

The Deh Cho people comprise 11 small communities in the upper reaches of Canada's great Mackenzie Valley. They have survived for thousands of years in balance with the land and its natural resources. They still value very highly the bounties provided by nature, but today also want to benefit from potential industrial development. The proposed Mackenzie natural gas pipeline would pass through the heart of the Deh Cho lands (see map). This has accelerated the mapping and protection of key cultural and ecological areas.

Unlike other Aboriginal groups in the Mackenzie Valley, the Deh Cho have not yet settled their land claims with the federal government. Natural resources are still managed mainly by governments. Nevertheless, the Deh Cho First Nations have now reached an agreement with the Canadian government on resource development, and on the protection of nearly half of their traditional homelands – including the interim land withdrawal signed on April 17th, 2003.

10.1 MILLION HECTARE NETWORK OF KEY CULTURAL AND ECOLOGICAL PROTECTED AREAS IN THE DEH CHO REGION, CANADA



For illustration only. Not a legal document. Deh Cho land withdrawals Initialed by Deh Cho First Nations and Federal Negotiators on April 11, 2003.

THE CONSERVATION BENEFITS

Safeguarding a well-connected representative sample of natural habitat in any region is key to conserving future options, for both biodiversity and people. This 10.1 million ha complex of pristine boreal forest and wetland habitats will anchor biodiversity conservation measures ahead of major industrial development in this frontier region. A wide array of intact wildlife populations and ecosystems will be protected. The Deh Cho will be able to continue to hunt, fish and trap wildlife, maintaining their deep cultural links with the land.

These same protected areas will also serve as ecological benchmarks against which to assess the biological changes detected in association with new industrial development in this region, hence facilitating effective mitigation steps.

RELEVANCE TO THE TARGETS OF WWF'S PRIORITY PROGRAMS

The entire Deh Cho region is within two of the world's 200 most important ecoregions, as recognized by WWF. In addition, this 10 million ha initiative protects highly significant boreal forest and freshwater ecosystems - two global priorities for WWF. Furthermore, the network of interconnected protected areas will provide wildlife and natural processes an optimal opportunity to adapt to the rapid consequences of climate change.

Finally, this major habitat protection initiative represents an outstanding tangible first step towards achieving the 'Conservation First' approach in the Mackenzie Valley – establishing an adequate, representative network of protected areas in advance of new industrial development.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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The **GIFT TO THE EARTH** is WWF's highest recognition for a globally significant conservation achievement, which addresses WWF's conservation priorities by:

- 🌍 Advancing conservation of biodiversity, especially forest, freshwater and marine ecosystems, or enhancing the prospects for survival of threatened species
- 🌍 Addressing global threats posed by climate change, toxic chemicals and unsustainable use of resources such as timber, freshwater and fisheries.

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