



WWF-Canada

245 Eglinton Avenue E.
Suite 410
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M4P 3J1

Tel: (416) 489-8800
Fax: (416) 489-3611
Toll Free: 1-800-26-PANDA
(1-800-267-2632)
panda@wwfcanada.org
www.wwf.ca

News Release

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International Conservation Honour for NWT's Deh Cho First Nations and Government of Canada

(Yellowknife: April 17, 2003) – The Deh Cho First Nations and the Government of Canada will receive an international conservation honour today for withdrawing a vast tract of land from industrial development in the Northwest Territories' Mackenzie Valley. This pristine sub-arctic region is home to the Deh Cho peoples as well as to huge populations of wildlife including caribou, grizzly bears, and migratory birds. These intact wildlife habitats are important watersheds and hunting, trapping and fishing areas for the Deh Cho – resources that have sustained them for thousands of years. WWF is officially recognizing this as an internationally significant *Gift to the Earth*, as representatives of the government of Canada and the Deh Cho First Nations meet in Fort Providence, NWT, to sign the Land Withdrawal and an Interim Resource Management Agreement. This major habitat and cultural conservation step is especially important because it comes in advance of finalising plans for a natural gas pipeline along the Mackenzie Valley.

“This is a tremendous achievement in an area coming under significant pressure for industrial development,” said Bill Carpenter, WWF-Canada's Northwest Territories Conservation Director. “I'd like to congratulate Grand Chief Michael Nadli, the Deh Cho Elders, the Deh Cho negotiating team and the Government of Canada on outstanding work.”

Unlike the situation 30 years ago, most Aboriginal groups now support the development of a gas pipeline in the Mackenzie Valley – but not at any cost. Under today's interim land withdrawal, about 7 million hectares will be protected from any industrial activity for five years, while more detailed assessments of resources are completed for these areas. In total, taking into account two previous land withdrawals, 10.1 million hectares (nearly half the Deh Cho lands) will be protected. The land withdrawal does allow for the possibility of a future Mackenzie Valley gas pipeline.



“This is a fundamental and very welcome shift in policy for the federal government, which WWF strongly supports,” said Dr. Peter Ewins, WWF-Canada’s Arctic Director. “It’s a major expression of the government’s support for taking a conservation-first approach, which is rooted in northern Aboriginal land claims and traditional values. The government is recognising that protection of key cultural and wildlife areas must come first, before frontier areas are developed. This is clearly a minimum requirement to meet the principles and commitments of sustainable development.”

A Gift to the Earth is a distinction reserved by WWF for environmental efforts of global significance. Since the program started seven years ago, only two other *Gifts* have been recognized in Canada. The first was when the B.C. government agreed to protect 1 million hectares of the northern Rockies in 1997. The second was last year, when Lisaak Forest Resources Limited, a native-controlled company on Vancouver Island, set aside valleys of pristine old growth forests as part of its revolutionary forest management techniques.

More Information

Bill Carpenter, NWT Regional Conservation Director, WWF-Canada, tel: (403) 997-6335
E-mail: wwfnwt@mailmarinenet.net

Dr. Peter Ewins, Director, Arctic Conservation, WWF-Canada, tel: (416) 489-4567 ext. 286
E-mail: pewins@wwfcanada.org

Susan Viets, Communications Manager, WWF-Canada, tel: (416) 489-4567 ext. 353
E-mail : sviets@wwfcanada.org