

# THE ALLIANCE

UPDATES FROM THE SEAL RIVER WATERSHED  
INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AREA INITIATIVE

Summer 2020

Vol 1

Page 1



People gather around a campfire during the Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit.  
(Credit: Christopher Paetkau, Build Films)

*Sayisi Dene First Nation is leading an initiative to protect the entirety of the Seal River watershed from industrial activity in partnership with our Cree, Dene and Inuit neighbours.*

Every aspect of our cultures, spirituality and identities are rooted in our relationship to the caribou and to the lands which sustain us.

***We 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.***

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## Executive Director's Message



Ernie Bussidor tends a fire in the Seal River Watershed. (Credit: Ernie Bussidor, SDFN)

Near the confluence of these river arms, the people of Sayisi Dene First Nation reside at Tadoule Lake.

Where the northern and southern arms of this river meet (twelve miles east of Tadoule) is Shethani Lake. It is from here that the Seal River proper flows unimpeded into Hudson Bay.

Shethani Lake Esker is an ancient stop-over point for Sayisi Dene.

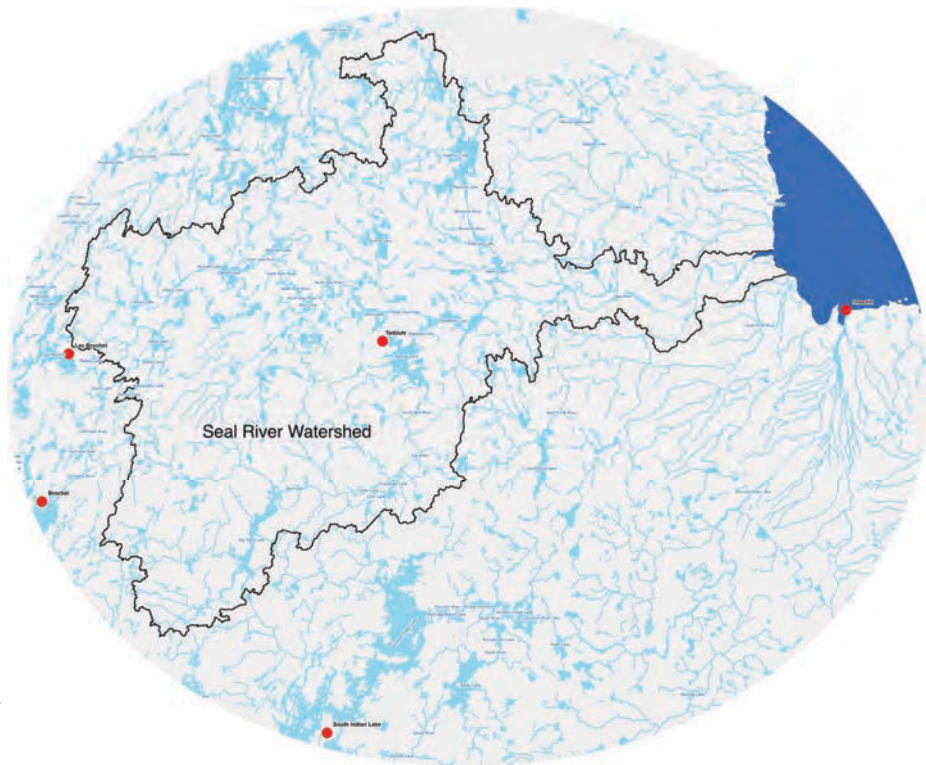
It was at this point where Dene birchbark canoes were made to cross the Seal River, enroute to the Stone Fort (later known as Churchill).

It is also at this point that harbor seals are usually seen in large numbers, giving the river its name, and henceforth all the way to the coast.

***I have felt the power of this huge volume of water when I entered the main artery of this river on a canoe.***

There are no more lakes between Shethani Lake and Hudson Bay, just a wide, fast-moving river with ample white-water for over 200 kilometers.

At the mouth of the Seal River on Hudson Bay is an area used historically and currently by both the Inuit of Kivilliq region and the Sayisi Dene of Tadoule Lake for hunting and seasonal harvesting of Beluga whales and Arctic char.



## Executive Director's Message



Sayisi Dene First Nation members cheer after climbing a steep rock hill during an epic canoe trip up the Seal River in 2017. L to R: Thomas Cutlip, Lennox Bussidor, Paul Ellis, Jedrick Thorassie, Kyle Clipping-Powderhorn, Dean Powderhorn, Trayvon Mowatt, Sandy Clipping-Powderhorn, and Tyler Bussidor. (Credit: Ernie Bussidor, SDFN)

***Five Indigenous communities with three distinct cultures are working together with a common purpose and in harmony to create an Indigenous Protected Area.***

Our goal is to protect our watershed from industrial development: to leave it in its pristine state for future generations to enjoy.

This initiative is a unique opportunity for us to pass on our knowledge, history and culture to our youth.

It will also allow us to showcase our cultural richness and diversity and this incredible, pristine wilderness to the outside world.

Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) is in support of our initiative and has contributed financially towards this project. How we proceed -- how we shape this protected area -- is ours to decide.

On the scientific side, this is an amazing opportunity to protect and monitor the quality of water along with the fish and animals and plants that make this watershed their home. Caribou, the mainstay food resource of the surrounding communities, also winter in the watershed, and we must ensure their numbers remain healthy for future generations to carry on the tradition of life with our valuable food source.

Sayisi Dene First Nation, along with the full support of the surrounding alliance of Indigenous nations, wish to declare this watershed as an Indigenous Protected Area, and are prepared to discuss our aspirations with the governments of Canada and Manitoba, and to seek their partnership in developing the northern corner of the province.

***Masi cho***

***Ernie Bussidor, Executive Director  
Seal River Watershed Alliance***



The view from Ernie Bussidor's canoe as he paddled the Seal River with a group of friends in 2017. (Credit: Ernie Bussidor, SDFN)





Leadership meeting in Winnipeg in February 2020. Back row (L-R): Mandy Wallmann (CPAWS) Chief John Clarke (BLFN) Brayden Clarke (BLFN) William Dysart (OPCN), Steve Ducharme (OPCN), Walter Duck (SDFN), Michael Dumas (OPCN), Ernie Bussidor (SDFN), Steven Nitah (ILI), Ron Thiessen (CPAWS). Middle Row (L-R): Luke Suluk (Arviat Inuit Culture & Heritage), Thomas Alikasua (Arviat HTO), Shane Ubluriak (Inuit youth), Alex Ishalook (Arviat HTO), Stephanie Thorassie (SDFN), Johnny Clipping (SDFN), Chief Evan Yassie (SDFN), Rebecca Thorassie (SDFN). Bottom (L-R) Cory Shefman (OKT LLP), Shaunna Morgan Siegers (ILI), Peter Alareak (Inuit consultant), Simon Samuel (NDFN), Rainer Duck (OPCN)

## Cooperation And Commitment To Conservation At Historic First Leadership Meeting

**"Protect the land and it will protect you."**

The Seal River Watershed Alliance of Dene, Cree and Inuit peoples met in Winnipeg for a historic meeting to ensure that the plans developed for our Indigenous Protected Area reflect our common values and vision for the watershed.

We shared our cultures and our languages and a strong resolve to continue to protect these lands, waters, plants and animals.

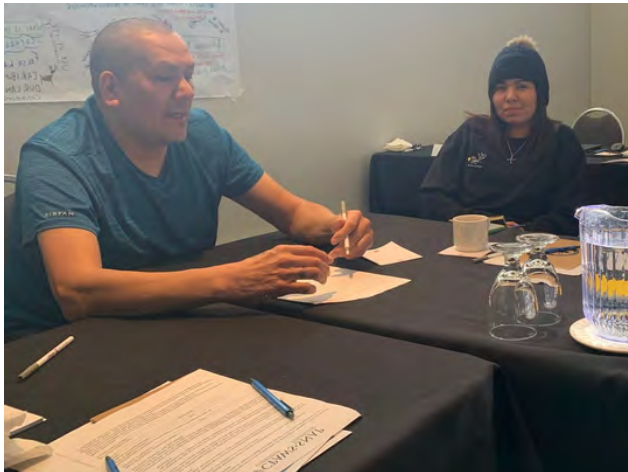
We ask our ancestors to guide us in this work that we are doing for our children, our grandchildren and those yet to come.

We were invigorated by the spirit of cooperation and the strong commitment to preserving the watershed expressed by all who participated in the meetings on February 19, 20 and 21, 2020.

## The Seal River Watershed Alliance



Arviat HTO



Mike Dumas (OPCN) and Rebecca Thorassie (SDFN) at the February 2020 leadership meeting in Winnipeg (credit: Mira Oberman, CPAWS)

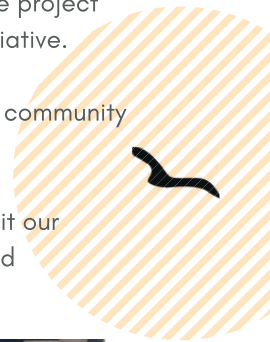
## Initiative Continues Amid Covid-19 Restrictions

*Efforts to establish an Indigenous Protected Area in the Seal River Watershed continue amidst community lockdowns resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.*

While face-to-face meetings are on hold, the project team is working remotely to advance the initiative.

Please feel free to reach out directly to your community facilitators for more information.

Be sure to follow our Facebook page and visit our website to learn more about the initiative and participate in upcoming contests.



## Welcome New Initiative Team Members

*We are pleased to welcome several new team members who will be helping community members learn about the initiative and ensure that it reflects the values and needs of their communities.*

- **Stephanie Thorassie, executive and project assistant for Sayisi Dene First Nation**
- **Rebecca Thorassie, youth ambassador for Sayisi Dene First Nation**
- **Dylan Duck, facilitator for Sayisi Dene First Nation**
- **Priscilla Duck, youth ambassador for Sayisi Dene First Nation**
- **Mike Dumas, facilitator for O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation**
- **Jonas Denechezhe, facilitator for Northlands Dene First Nation**
- **Jaylanta Tssessaze, youth ambassador for Northlands Dene First Nation**
- **Luke Suluk, facilitator for Arviat**



Project Team meets remotely by phone and video conference in April 2020 (credit: Mira Oberman, CPAWS)

*Thanks to Jederick Thorassie of Sayisi Dene First Nation for your beautiful work on the initiative logo.*



# Seal River Watershed

## Indigenous Protected Area Initiative





Youth participants at the Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit. Top row (L to R): Simon Duck, Bryson Tssessaze, Dawson Tssessaze, Natalie Uluadluak, Andrea Alikut, Randy Anowtalik, Alexandra Wood, Roxane Spence, Nicolas Duck, Ethan Clipping, Darren Yassie and Francis Yassie. Bottom row (L to R): Sandy Clipping, Casey Hyslop, Dallas Duck, Roberta Tssessaze, Jaylanta Tssessaze, Ashley Taite, Rebecca Thorassie, Rainer Duck, and Skyler Dysart. (Credit: Mira Oberman, CPAWS)

## Regional Benefits

Here are just some of the many of ways our region and our Nations will benefit from protecting the Seal River Watershed.

- Keep our drinking water clean
- Keep our rivers and lakes stocked with fish
- Enjoy good health and well-being from pristine lands and waters
- Preserve our lands and way of life for future generations
- Build an economy on eco and cultural tourism, with spin-off benefits from handicraft, art, etc.
- Create jobs and generate pride for our young people
- Revive and promote our history, cultures and languages
- Foster a sense of unity, well-being and common purpose among Dene, Cree and Inuit as we work together on a project for the good of our people
- Engage in reconciliation and renewal of relationships with federal and provincial governments



## What is an Indigenous Protected Area?

*An Indigenous Protected Area conserves ecosystems and biodiversity while supporting sustainable and culturally appropriate human uses.*

Indigenous governments have the primary decision-making role for managing lands and waters in an Indigenous Protected Area.

The federal government has pledged to support the development of “many” Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas as it strives to help Canada advance reconciliation, fight climate change and meet its commitments to protect 17 percent of our lands and fresh waters by 2020.

### Indigenous Protected Areas should:

- **promote respect for Indigenous knowledge systems**
- **respect protocols and ceremony**
- **support the revitalization of Indigenous languages**
- **seed conservation economies**
- **conserve cultural keystone species and protect food security**
- **adopt integrated, holistic approaches to governance and planning.**

### -- Indigenous Circle of Experts



*Camp light shines through a caribou drum during hand games at the Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit. (credit: Mira Oberman, CPAWS)*

## Northlands Community Engagement Meeting



SDFN Chief Evan Yassie (L) , NDFN Chief Simon Denechezhe (C) and Project Director Ernie Bussidor (R) speak at a community meeting on February 4, 2020. (Credit: Ron Thiessen, CPAWS.)

*The first of what will be many community engagement meetings about the Seal River Watershed initiative drew a crowd of around 100 members of Northlands Denesuline First Nation (NDFN) in early February 2020.*

Chief Simon Denechezhe explained why Northlands joined the initiative to protect the watershed from industrial development. Several council members also voiced their support for the initiative, which is led by Sayisi Dene First Nation. More than 60 NDFN members at the meeting signed a referendum supporting the initiative.

Project Director Ernie Bussidor spoke passionately about what the alliance - which also includes O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation, Barren Lands First Nation and the Inuit of Kivalliq -- is hoping to achieve.

“Each of us - Dene, Cree, and Inuit - all have stories of similar origin and all have a richness of language and culture and history,” Bussidor told the crowd gathered at Petit Casimir Memorial School in Lac Brochet, Manitoba.

“We should all learn from it, and show the world our resilience, and our fierce desire to keep our lands and waters intact and unspoiled,” Bussidor said. “There is only so much wilderness left in the world, and this rare opportunity is being presented to us.”



## Youth Share Interest In Hide Tanning With 60 People In Arviat

*Four youth from Arviat helped their community engage in traditional practices by organizing a caribou hide tanning workshop.*

Nearly 60 young people learned from elder Mary Anowtalik how she removes hair and tans the caribou hide to make waterproof clothing and boots, sleeping pads, sewing materials and other items.

The workshop organizers — Andrea Alikut, Natalie Uluadluak, Kirsten Pameolik, and Randy Anowtalik — were among 15 Dene, Cree and Inuit youth who spent a week in the woods near Tadoule Lake, Manitoba in September 2019.

One of the more remarkable moments of the Tadoule Lake summit was when the youth discovered that the Inuit and Dene work caribou hides in different ways and with different tools.

April Anowtalik was among many Arviat youth at the January 2020 workshop who recorded Mary’s teaching so that they could carry on the skinning and tanning tradition in their households.

April had not processed a hide since she was a little girl. She expressed sadness that fewer than 20 people in the community of nearly 3,000 still knew how to carry out a tradition that had been so critical for her ancestors living off the land.





## Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit



Fish monitoring exercise lands a big one during the Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit. (Credit: Christopher Paetkau, Build Films)

***The sound of drums and laughter echoed across a rippling lake as a group of Dene, Cree and Inuit youth learned how to play traditional Dene hand games next to a crackling campfire.***

A caribou hide hung nearby: earlier that day the youth were taught how to carefully scrape off the hair and prepare the hide for tanning.

"It was nice meeting new people -- meeting Aboriginal people -- and I've gained new friendships and learned a lot of new things," said Kirsten Pameolik, who was among four youth from Arviat at the Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit in September 2019. "I've learned that it's important that we protect our land because this is where our ancestors survived and it's important to keep our tradition or our culture alive."

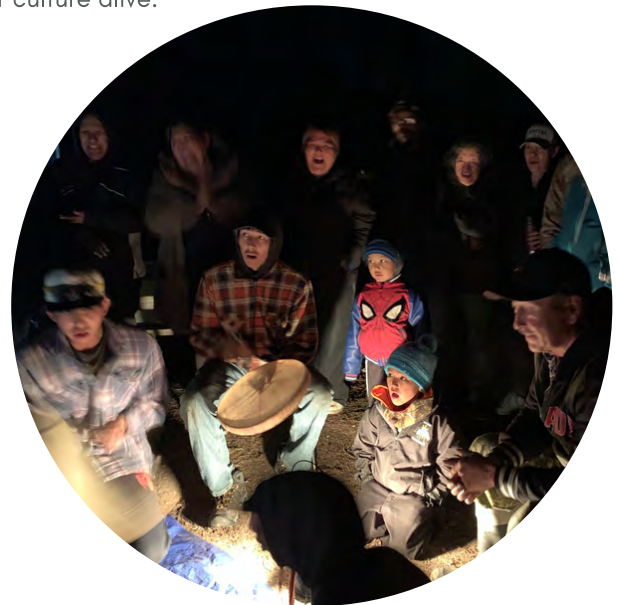
The week-long summit aimed to foster future leaders, teach valuable stewardship skills and connect Indigenous youth with traditional practices in order to lay the groundwork for an Indigenous Guardians program in the Seal River Watershed. Indigenous Guardians welcome visitors and act as stewards of the lands, waters and wildlife in an Indigenous Protected Area.

"Right now there is an opportunity to become trained and employed as Indigenous Guardians," said Ron Thiessen, executive director of CPAWS Manitoba.

"What this summit is doing is providing some of that initial training and identifying people who'd like to do this as a job or a career: live off the land, welcome tourists, do science, Indigenous knowledge gathering, and help to take care of the landscape."

The youth were introduced to water quality testing, fish monitoring, trail cameras and archeology. They also learned about the initiative to protect the Seal River Watershed and were granted teachings by elders of Sayisi Dene First Nation and the opportunity to practice hide tanning with Stephanie Thorassie.

"A project that requires the elders to teach the adults, and the adults to teach the youth about the traditional way of life - of cultural revival, and language revitalization, and a grasp of our history - is necessary if we want to live in balance within our territories, and united in cause with our neighbors," said Ernie Bussidor, Executive Director of the Alliance.



Community members and visitors to SDFN participate in hand games at the summit (Credit: Mira Oberman, CPAWS)



# Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit

***"I'm sure that each and every one of us that are here will apply what we've learned here in our own communities and in our own ways," said Rainer Duck, one of five youth from O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation.***

***"The trees, the land the animals, it's all connected and just so beautiful. It's very important that we sustain that way of life for our future generations, for us to pass on that knowledge, and for them to protect what is rightfully ours."***

The youth from northern Manitoba and Nunavut were required to complete community volunteer service projects that engaged other youth through a peer-education model as part of the Canadian Wilderness Stewardship Program.

Those who completed the service projects were invited to Ottawa to share their experiences with youth from New Brunswick, Ontario and Quebec.

"It was great meeting other community members, different youth, learning new stuff," said Roberta Tssessaze, one of four youth from Northlands Denesuline First Nation who attended the summit.

The visitors were welcomed warmly by Sayisi Dene First Nation. Many community members set up tents and joined the youth at the Twin Lakes campsite, which has long been used for gatherings. People took turns frying bannock over the fire, chopping wood and tidying the campsite while sharing stories and laughter.

"This is an opportunity to reinvigorate the Dene, the Cree and the Inuit cultures and share them with each other and with the world," said Shaunna Morgan Siegers, operations manager for the Indigenous Leadership Initiative.

"The cultures are strong and young people are practicing their skills and traditions. They have knowledge to share. The elders are here and they're sharing that knowledge. We have toddlers out here and they're witnessing people caring for the caribou the way that their ancestors have always cared for it."



Rainer Duck (OPCN) at the summit. (Credit: Mira Oberman, CPAWS)



Nicolas Duck (SDFN) Michelle Ewacha (CPAWS) Sandy Clipping (SDFN) and Casey Hyslop (SDFN) at the summit. (Credit: Mira Oberman, CPAWS)

## Sharing Her Love For The Land And Water Empowers Young Woman From Tadoule Lake

*Rebecca Thorassie is a quiet young woman who is finding her voice by speaking to her remote northern Manitoba community about the need to protect their lands and waters.*

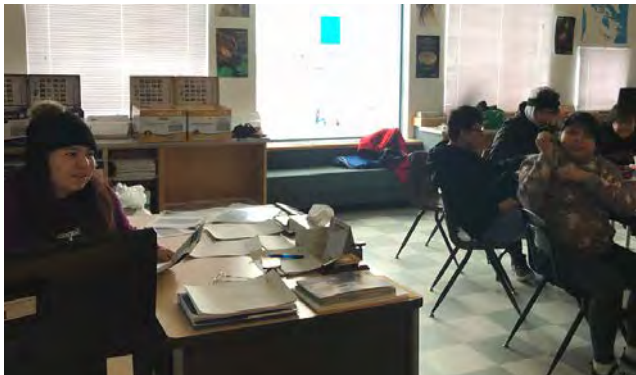
Rebecca, 20, was among 15 Dene, Cree and Inuit youth who spent a week in the woods of Sayisi Dene First Nation for the Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit. The summit aimed to foster future leaders, teach valuable stewardship skills & connect Indigenous youth with traditional practices.

Rebecca was proud to welcome the other youth to Sayisi Dene First Nation and to learn about the global significance of the lands and waters her family has called home for generations.

Rebecca's experience volunteering as a Wilderness Stewardship Ambassador led her to a part-time job as a Youth Ambassador with the Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected Area Initiative.

"I wanted this job because its a opportunity to learn more about my beautiful homeland and surrounding areas," Rebecca said. "I want to encourage and keep our traditions alive while developing a stronger independent voice for myself and my community."

Rebecca expressed an interest in teaching other youth from her community about the importance of taking care of the land and water by doing simple things like picking up garbage and recycling.



*Rebecca Thorassie teaching youth in Tadoule Lake about the importance of conserving the Seal River Watershed (credit: Michelle Ewacha, CPAWS)*



*Rebecca Thorassie presented her community service project at the Canadian Wilderness Stewardship conference in Ottawa (credit: Michelle Ewacha, CPAWS)*

Rebecca shared the knowledge she gained from the Youth Stewardship Summit in a presentation to grade 6-12 students at Peter Yassie Memorial School in Tadoule Lake.

"Protecting this watershed is really important, cause when you guys get older you will have fresh water if you guys can start doing something now," Rebecca told the students in January 2020.

"Keeping the land clean too - recycling and all that, it can go a long way."

*Masi cho to the non-governmental non-profit Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) for supporting our youth through its Canadian Wilderness Stewardship Program.*

*CPAWS Manitoba organized the Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit and brought our youth to Ottawa to share what they learned with youth from Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick. CPAWS also supported the hide tanning workshop in Arviat and volunteer projects in other Alliance communities.*

*The program was funded by the Government of Canada under the Canada Service Corps program.*



# Key Project Partners



INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

# Supporters



# Patrons

This project was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada



METCALF FOUNDATION



Stephanie Thorassie of Sayisi Dene First Nation teaches youth about caribou hide tanning at the Tadoule Lake Stewardship Summit. (credit: Chris Paetkau, Build Films)

# BQCMB Supports Indigenous Protected Areas, Youth Involvement

The Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board (BQCMB) voted unanimously to support the establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas at its November 2019 meeting in Arviat, Nunavut.

The Seal River Watershed initiative was the first IPA to gain formal support from the BQCMB following a presentation by Executive Director Ernie Bussidor.

Bussidor was first appointed to the BQCMB in 2017 and currently serves as an alternate for Sayisi Dene First Nation.

The board discussed and resolved to address the impact of roads and industrial development on caribou, sale of caribou meat, and climate change. In doing so, members acknowledged the effects of these human influences leading to more wildfire, increased predation, overhunting and a host of other factors contributing to the decline of both the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq herds.

The need for youth to become more involved in caribou issues was another strong theme running through the week-long meeting.

More information: <https://arctic-caribou.com/>



# About the Initiative

## Where Is the Seal River Watershed?

*In the northernmost reaches of Manitoba there is a pristine expanse of tundra, wetlands and forests as vast as Nova Scotia.*

Only one community is located in the 50,000 square kilometre watershed: the Sayisi Dene First Nation, which lies on the beautiful shores of Tadoule Lake and has a population of fewer than 400 people.

The Seal River still flows freely into Hudson Bay: unlike Manitoba’s other major northern rivers, the Seal’s entire 260 km path is unhindered by dams and other industrial developments.

## Why Should We Protect the Seal River Watershed?

*The Seal River Watershed is one of the last great wild places on our planet.*

Caribou and polar bears roam beneath massive flocks of birds near an estuary teeming with beluga whales. There are no permanent roads. No mines. No logging interests. No industrial development of any kind.

The water is so clean you can dip a cup in the river and drink from it.

The Dene, Cree and Inuit peoples who have cared for these lands and waters since time immemorial continue to rely upon the unsullied watershed to support their families and maintain cherished traditions.



## How Can I Get Involved?

*Our Nations have joined together in the spirit of cooperation and mutual respect.*

The Alliance has pledged to maintain a transparent process which reflects the values and interests of our communities.

Facilitators will be working to engage community members in the initiative and to gather knowledge that will shape how the protected area is designed and managed.

Please contact your community’s facilitators or the project team to learn about opportunities to get involved. We are here to answer all questions and concerns.

We hope you will follow our Facebook page for upcoming contests and events. Please visit our website to learn more about the initiative.

