



Seal River Watershed

Indigenous Protected Area Initiative



NEWS UPDATE

WINTER 2023

New SRWA Partnership Announced at United Nations Conference



From L to R: Jan Forster, Manitoba Deputy Minister of Economic Development and Training, Honourable Steven Guilbeault, Minister of Environment and Climate Change of Canada, Stephanie Thorassie, Executive Director, Seal River Watershed Alliance, Adriana Bacheschi, Director, National Park Establishment

A new collaboration with the provincial and federal governments will allow the Seal River Watershed Alliance to begin feasibility studies that will explore the benefits of designating the unique watershed in northwestern Manitoba as a protected space.

The announcement was made at the UN Biodiversity Conference, called COP15, in Montreal in mid-December.

Establishing an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) means its lands and waters would remain intact and undisturbed, while allowing Indigenous People to continue their cultural, sustainable traditions.

“These four Nations have come together to assert our inherent right to steward these lands for our communities, for the caribou, and for all people. Eighty per cent of the world’s remaining biodiversity is on lands cared for by Indigenous Peoples, and recognizing Indigenous decision-making on the land is essential for the planet and our shared future. We are looking forward to working with our partners in Canada and Manitoba on a nation-to-nation-to-nation basis to advance this work,” said Stephanie Thorassie, Seal River Watershed Alliance executive director, at the announcement.

There are many benefits to protecting the Seal River Watershed, including ensuring the survival of an ecological rarity, supporting Indigenous sovereignty and the local tourism industry, and helping the federal government meet its nature conservation and climate goals.

While the four Nations represented by SRWA understand the benefits of the watershed as cultural and traditional, the two Crown governments need measured statistics, facts and figures to move forward in establishing an IPA. These feasibility studies, which will be conducted by Knowledge Keepers and scientists, are the beginning of that process.

“Climate change and biodiversity loss are threatening ecosystems across Canada and demand urgent action from governments. Today’s announcement is an important step forward, and demonstrates how much we can achieve to protect nature when we work together, advancing the goals of reconciliation, for the benefit of the Sayisi Dene First Nation, Northlands Denesuline First Nation, Barren Lands First Nation, and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation, Manitobans, and all Canadians,” said the Honourable Steven Guilbeault, Minister of Environment and Climate Change and Minister responsible for Parks Canada.

SRWA attended COP15 – a once-in-a-decade negotiation on biodiversity – to present its perspectives in over 10 presentations to the audience of international governments. It continues to gain a reputation for its urgent advocacy and invaluable insight into one of the world’s most unspoiled watersheds.

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Seal River Watershed Home to Three Species of Bears

Three years ago some community members of Sayisi Dene First Nation were camping at Stoney Lake.. They were looking through their binoculars at the shore fishing when they saw a giant rock suddenly move! They could not believe the size of this bear! It had extra wide shoulders and blonde colouring down its back. They called out to one another in astonishment, "That's not a black bear, that's a grizzly!" That same day, two other community members saw the same bear further down the road as it was aggressively coming towards them on their ATV without fear of the sound of the machine, or their voices. This is not normal black bear behavior.

Local people have talked about grizzly sightings in the Seal River Watershed for years.

Now a recent research paper shows that grizzly bears are becoming more common in northern Manitoba. Their presence has increased over the past forty years, likely coming from existing populations in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. This study

confirms what we have known for a long time. Called Ghotelzaseh or Dtlezeh in Dene, Kakenokuskwe osow Muskwa in Cree, and Akla in Inuktitut, grizzlies have appeared in our oral histories of our territories as far back as we remember.

It's unfortunate it sometimes takes

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western science research for people to take note of what Indigenous knowledge has already recognized. But it's good the biodiversity of our lands is getting more attention.

It's rare to have three kinds of bears in one landscape, but the Seal River Watershed is home to polar, grizzly, and black bears. It's a testament to how special the watershed is.

In addition to bears, it sustains barren ground caribou, moose, wolverines, belugas, sturgeon, tens of thousands of migratory birds, and countless other species.

This abundance also sustains our cultures, languages, and traditions. That is why we are working to create the Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected Area. Ensuring the animals thrive on the land means our peoples will thrive too.

The presence of the bears reminds us of the resilience of the land. Grizzlies are expanding their range, and polar bears are starting to intermix with grizzlies as climate change threatens their populations. They are adapting, even in the face of challenges. It's humbling, and we honour the endurance of these mighty animals.





The Value of the Seal River Watershed in Two Languages

In a world rapidly losing large, healthy lands, the Seal River Watershed offers an exception. A recent report found that the watershed remains 99.97 per cent intact. That means an area the size of Nova Scotia is free of mining developments and permanent roads, and sustains animals, plants, boreal forest, and clean waters.

By leaving these lands as they are, we are helping the planet.

The report, called *A Value on the Priceless*, looked at benefits the land provides and assigned an economic value to them. It estimated that the Seal River Watershed generates about \$214 million a year in value from caribou harvest, ecotourism, mental health and wellbeing, and species conservation.

The watershed also holds an enormous amount of carbon—equivalent to 8 years' worth of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. Storing that carbon alone generates at least \$314 million in value, according to the report.

This kind of report analyzes what is known as “ecological goods and services,” and it is a distinctly western approach.

Indigenous communities don't tend to think of the land in terms of dollar amounts and economic returns. We know the land sustains us. It feeds our languages and cultures, and it supports

our relationship with caribou, fish, berries, medicinal plants, and more. These are the values we honour.

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The Seal River Watershed Alliance commissioned this report because we want to collect different kinds of information so people from different cultures understand why these lands and waters matter to communities, Manitoba, and the world.

To advance the Indigenous Protected Area, we want to come to the table with the kind of information policy makers and government officials need. They have to figure out how to pay for projects and what delivers a return on investment. We are preparing reports that offer the answers they need.

We are adding western analysis to all the knowledge our communities already have. Indigenous knowledge is older than universities. Our people have been in the Seal River Watershed for millennia, and we know the many benefits the land provides.

Whether you look at it from an Indigenous lens or from this report's “ecological goods and services” perspective, the picture of the watershed is clear. These lands help sustain people, animals, and the planet. There are not many pristine places left in the world. We know the value of ensuring the Seal River Watershed remains healthy for generations to come.

There are not many pristine places left in the world and the picture of the Seal River Watershed is clear: these lands help sustain people, animals, and the planet.



SRWA Land Guardians Secure Funding & Take First River Trip

By Stephanie Thorassie

The very first project of the new Seal River Watershed Alliance Land Guardians program started in a good way. We planned a week-long intro to moving water training course traveling from Tadoule to Shetani Lake. The morning of our launch, we gathered on the Back Beach in a frenzy of loading canoes and packing supplies. As we prepared to set off, community members told us: “You can’t leave without going past Front Beach.”

We didn’t understand at first, but when we paddled around the point, we saw half the community lined up on the shore. They had a drum ceremony going, and people were singing and cheering and honking horns. As we turned to leave, a bald eagle flew right over us. And the sound of the drums followed us all the way across Tadoule Lake.

When you have that kind of community support, you know your time on the land will go well.

We had blue skies and warm days the entire trip. And we learned that the alliance’s Land Guardians program received federal funding for our first year of operation, with opportunities to renew support.

I felt so proud of the team when I heard the news.

Our group of community representatives – who will now become Land Guardians – have been on the ground building support for the Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected Area and asserting Indigenous leadership in caring for these lands and waters. Their hard work is paying off, and this federal funding for the Guardians program is just the latest sign.

The Guardians brought so much strength, resilience, and knowledge to our river trip.

One of the goals of the trip was to gain whitewater paddling certificates. The proposed Seal River Watershed Indigenous Protected Area will support ecotourism, including the chance to paddle Manitoba’s last undammed river.

We know our people can guide visitors, but they need training in Western ideas to accompany their Indigenous Knowledge. For example, land users in our community avoid rapids. Why would you put yourself in harm’s way by going through the whitewater when you can portage around it? So, most of our team didn’t have experience with this kind of paddling.

The first day in the whitewater, some of our participants swamped the boat, sending them and their supplies overboard. They were shaken up. But the next day, they went back and owned it. They mastered ferrying, s-curves, and peel outs. And by the end of the day, those same youth who had been white in the face after the swamping wanted to swim through the rapids feet first, and all I could see were helmets and huge smiles.





On our first portage day we surprised our white water trainers, who came from the south. They warned us the portage would be tough and take over four hours, but our group got it done in just over one. Youth who had never carried a canoe were running through the moss and our camp auntie hauled all her packs and bannock supplies with no problem. We have that blood memory of being nomadic and moving big parties of people

and gear fast. I was so proud when I saw the looks on our guides' faces.

The trip embodied the value of bringing Indigenous and western teaching together. Our community knows these lands. We know we can scoop water from the edge of the canoe and drink it. We know it's hard to fish in Shetani Lake because the seals eat so many. We know the migration patterns of the birds that nest here. Our Guardians will combine this knowledge with western skills – from whitewater safety to GIS mapping, and bird monitoring – to be the best stewards of the watershed.

On the last day of paddling to camp, a storm threatened the team on one side of the river and another storm rolled in off the other bank. But nothing touched our paddlers. Our community prayed our trip would go well, and it did. Incredible things happen when you have the support of your peoples and the lands.



Training for SRWA Land Guardians

Land guardians are a crucial component of the future viability of the Seal River Watershed. The team recently had two opportunities to learn from Elders, share ideas and define their motivation, roles, and responsibilities.

In October 2022, the SRWA land guardians gathered in Tadoule Lake for a Hunting Education and Ethics seminar conducted by Sayisi Dene member Angela Code. Participants engaged in insightful conversation, from comparisons of Indigenous worldviews and European colonial worldviews, to sustainability of the past and into the future. They discussed hunting and ethics from an Indigenous perspective, which includes using all parts of the caribou. A highlight was watching an animation called *Adaygooy*, which describes the age-old reciprocal agreement the Dene people have with the caribou.

At the end of November, the same group gathered with SRWA staff and partners in Winnipeg to launch the SRWA Land Guardians Network. They discussed their special role of protecting the land, honouring teachings from Elders, and passing knowledge onto next generations.

The land guardians are located in four different communities, so they made the most of their time together, talking about responsibilities such as enforcing laws, conducting caribou counts, and assisting with rescue. They enjoyed wisdom from Elder Simon Samuel and appreciated presentations from Parks Canada and Indigenous Leadership Initiative. They created a list of desired training sessions such as small engine repair, navigational skills, water quality, and bird monitoring. They clarified their purpose as Land Guardians, saying they aim to permanently protect the Seal River; ensure the watershed is an Indigenous-protected and conserved area; and honour and continue ancestors' knowledge.

On the final day in Winnipeg, eight attendees took part in a Canadian Firearms Safety Course to receive their firearms license (PAL). This useful certification helps to build capacity for long-term economic opportunities for the watershed, such as eco-tourism.



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A Globally Unique Place for Waterfowl

By Jeff Wells for Boreal Conservation

A new report released by Ducks Unlimited Canada, Oceans North Canada, and the Manitoba Government described the results of surveys in a special part of the Boreal Forest called the Seal River Watershed of northern Manitoba.

The Seal River Watershed is a 12-million-acre landscape of forests, wetlands, lakes, streams and rivers that flows eastward more than 200 miles from near the Saskatchewan border to the ocean of Hudson Bay. The Seal River has no dams on its length, allowing both fish and the seals that follow them, to travel far inland, hence the river's name. The new report details the number and variety of ducks and geese counted from low-flying airplane-based surveys from 2013-2015 in the easternmost part of the watershed.

The report shows that the Seal River Watershed is a critically important breeding and migratory stop-over for huge numbers of waterfowl including lots of the species that people in the U.S. love to see in migration and winter.

The numbers are impressive and include many seaducks that make up the coastal wintering bird communities of both Atlantic and Pacific Coasts of the U.S. and southern Canada. Black scoters—the males jet black with bright orange bill knobs—were one of the most abundant of the breeding and migrating ducks documented in the report with thousands estimated to occur in the area.

Numbers of other seaducks and diving ducks were also impressive including long-tailed ducks, scaup (the aerial surveys could not differentiate between the two very similar-looking species) and, in migration, common goldeneye. Dabbling ducks like green-winged teal, American wigeon,

northern pintail, and mallards also were found in the thousands. The observers in the planes doing the surveys also noted loons and sandhill cranes. Interestingly, they documented both common loons and Pacific loons.

Another publication, the Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas which was completed in 2014, further highlights that the watershed's landscape supports significant numbers of certain land birds including many of those that are spilling into the U.S. on migration. Birds like Blackpoll Warblers, White-throated Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, Swainson's Thrushes, and Palm Warblers are among the many species that call the Seal River Watershed their summer breeding grounds. A few landbirds that nest in the watershed are quite range-restricted and are particularly sought after by birders including the Harris's Sparrow and the Smith's Longspur.

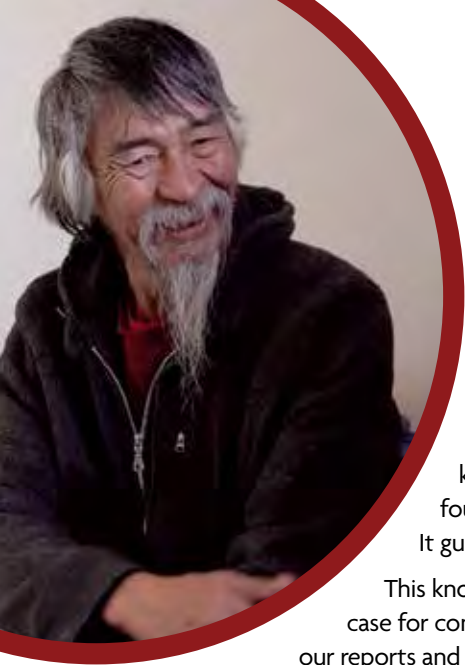
The atlas also confirmed that many of the same wetlands that support the waterfowl highlighted in the report by Ducks Unlimited Canada and partners also support significant numbers of shorebirds like Greater and Lesser yellowlegs and Least Sandpipers, and colonially nesting birds like Common Terns.

Fortunately, the Seal River Watershed Alliance, a coalition led by four Indigenous governments (Sayisi Dene First Nation, Northlands Dene, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation, and Barrenlands Cree Nation) are working to designate the 12-million-acre (50,000 km²) watershed as an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area.



Their efforts will mean that millions of birds will have a vast landscape to nest and raise their young forever. Those same birds will migrate south from the Seal River Watershed to bring joy to birders across southern Canada and the U.S. and beyond.

Hopefully this new report released by Ducks Unlimited Canada and partners will give the Manitoba government and the Canadian federal government even more resolve to follow the lead of the Indigenous governments of the Seal River Watershed Alliance as they work for protection of this amazing Boreal landscape.



Indigenous Knowledge Gathering Tour

Indigenous knowledge has existed for as long as the first nations have inhabited these lands, and the watershed. It is this knowledge that forms the foundation for the work we do. It guides us.

This knowledge will feed into our case for conservation and strengthen our reports and documents. Paired with the western science, we will have both sides of the information needed to stand in confidence and explain to both the Western world and, more importantly our own peoples the reasons why we are doing the work we do.

By visiting each community and enlisting the support of the grass roots people we are strengthening our alliances. We are conducting interviews with elders, youth, and land users who have family history in the watershed and have personal experience out on the land harvesting. Our ancestors have used the watershed and our people still continue to use the watershed today for travelling, camping, trapping, hunting, fishing, medicine picking, berry picking and have lived in the watershed. With the stories that are shared, we are building a case for conservation to present to federal and provincial government. The watershed is sacred to our people, it's what we live off of.

SRWA and Narratives Inc. team visited the 4 alliance communities in Manitoba.

- **October 1-2, 2021:** Barren Lands First Nation (Brochet, MB) (16 Interviews conducted)
- **October 4-5, 2021:** Sayisi Dene First Nation (Tadoule Lake, MB) (13 Interviews conducted)
- **October 16-17, 2021:** Northlands Denesuline First Nation (Lac Brochet, MB) (18 Interviews conducted)
- **October 20-21, 2021:** O-Pi-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (South Indian Lake, MB) (16 Interviews conducted)
- **December 16, 2021:** Off-Reserve IK Gathering hosted in Winnipeg, MB. (12 Interviews conducted)

At the Indigenous Knowledge Gathering tours, the SRWA team provided a community update to the alliance communities and introduced Narratives Inc. We explained what kind of information we were gathering and how we will be using the information. Following traditional protocol, group meetings were arranged where all generations were encouraged to come together to share and learn from each other. Community-wide mapping sessions were held, where all community members were invited to review maps of the Watershed and to identify areas of significance to them and their community. Information that was collected was inputted in a GIS Report. A total of 305 alliance community members were engaged in the Indigenous knowledge gathering study



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