

SEAL RIVER WATERSHED PROTECTED AREA PROPOSAL



**Seal River
Watershed**
Indigenous Protected
Area Initiative



Parks
Canada

Parcs
Canada

Manitoba



Executive Summary

The Seal River Watershed, spanning over 50,000 square kilometres in northern Manitoba, is one of the largest ecologically intact watersheds in the world. Home to pristine rivers, diverse ecosystems, and at least 30 species at risk, the region holds immense ecological, cultural, and economic value. It provides clean drinking water and supports sustainable livelihoods through local food harvesting, ecotourism, and conservation economies.

In 2019, four Indigenous governments – Sayisi Dene, Northlands Denesuline, Barren Lands, and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree – formed the Seal River Watershed Alliance (the Alliance) to protect their ancestral lands through the establishment of an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA).



All photos Harv Sawatzky, Parks Canada, unless otherwise indicated.

In early 2024, the governments of Manitoba and Canada, and the Alliance entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to advance a feasibility study, and in early 2025, concluded that establishing an IPCA is feasible.

Today, the Alliance, Canada and Manitoba are proposing to protect the Seal River Watershed as an IPCA with a “mosaic” of protection including the establishment of a new national park, and the designation of a new provincial park. Protecting the Seal River Watershed would support long-term conservation and stewardship while maintaining public access, supporting sustainable tourism, and promoting angling, hunting, ecotourism and other recreational opportunities.

The proposal includes establishing a joint management board appointed by the elected leadership of Indigenous governments, Canada, and Manitoba. The joint management board would operate by consensus, guide stewardship and decision-making, and develop a management plan rooted in science and Indigenous knowledge, local user and community input, and the interests of all Manitobans and Canadians.

The Alliance, Canada, and Manitoba (the parties) are now seeking feedback from the public and stakeholders on this protected area proposal. Manitoba is also seeking feedback on

proposed boundary adjustments to Sand Lakes and Caribou River provincial parks, and Baralzon Lake Ecological Reserve.

Aboriginal and Treaty rights are constitutionally protected, and the proposed protected areas are not expected to impact the Aboriginal and Treaty rights of Indigenous Peoples because rights holders will continue to exercise their rights in the Seal River Watershed. The protected areas would be subject to the finalization of an ongoing Section 35 land claim negotiation in the same region. The protected areas would also be subject to agreements that implement Section 35 rights, such as Treaty Land Entitlement Agreements.

Promoting Indigenous ways of life would be key management objectives of the IPCA. Indigenous communities, governments, and organizations are invited to contribute feedback through this engagement process. Indigenous governments whose constitutionally protected rights may be affected by this initiative are being consulted through a separate Section 35 Crown-Indigenous consultation process.

Public and Stakeholder Engagement

Before creating a new provincial park or changing the boundaries of an existing one, Manitoba must provide an opportunity for public consultation (Section 9(1) under The Provincial Parks Act). We are also seeking advice on proposed boundary changes to Sand Lakes and Caribou River provincial parks, as well as the Baralzon Lake Ecological Reserve.

Creating a new national park would also require transfer of administration and control of Crown (Manitoba) lands to Canada.

We are now inviting Manitobans, Indigenous communities, and stakeholders to share their feedback on this protected area proposal.

Seal River Watershed

The Seal River Watershed is a 50,000 square kilometre (km²) region predominately located in Manitoba's taiga shield ecozone. The land was shaped by the last Ice Age, and features wetlands, lakes, rivers, forests, rocky plains, and sand eskers, creating diverse ecosystems that support a remarkable array of plants and animals, influencing where people live, camp, hunt, fish, gather, and travel.



Indigenous Peoples

The watershed is the ancestral territory of many Indigenous Nations. For thousands of years, Dene, Cree and Inuit have lived in harmony with this land, practising sustainable hunting, fishing and gathering while protecting its natural beauty through cultural practices. These practices honour their responsibilities and ensure knowledge is transferred to future generations. Spending time on the land – hunting, fishing, traveling on land and water, and sharing stories – strengthens the bond between people and place. The Indigenous connection to the area is both spiritual and practical, making the watershed an important place of healing, knowledge and strength.

The members of the Seal River Watershed Alliance: Sayisi Dene First Nation, Northlands Denesuline First Nation, Barren Lands First Nation, and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation have a special connection to the barren-ground caribou population in the area. The four Nations joined together in 2019 to collaborate and support each other in their shared vision of protecting their respective ancestral lands as an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA).

Tadoule Lake is the current home of Sayisi Dene First Nation. This community of approximately 350 residents is the only permanent year-round community in the watershed.

Significance of the Seal River Watershed

Clean, drinkable water flows freely through the Seal River Watershed which is also home to one of the last wild rivers in the Hudson Bay basin. The Seal River, flowing over 260 kilometres, is the largest unimpacted river in northern Manitoba. Its tributaries – the North Seal, South Seal and Wolverine Rivers – also play vital roles in nourishing the land, wildlife, and people who call the watershed home.

The pristine Seal River Watershed provides numerous ecological benefits. There are at least 30 known species at risk within the region. This includes barren-ground caribou, wolverines, polar bears, grizzly bears, and olive-sided flycatchers. Harbour seals can be found as far as 200 kilometres inland from the mouth of the Seal River, giving the river its name.



The Seal River Watershed also provides significant ecological goods and services such as carbon storage, regulation of the Hudson Bay marine environment, clean air and clean drinking water, harvest of local foods, and tourism. A 2022 report (https://www.iisd.org/system/files/2022-04/ecological-goods-services-seal_river-watershed.pdf) from the International Institute for Sustainable Development estimates that the Seal River Watershed provides a minimum of CAD\$214 million value of ecological goods and services annually, including the local community caribou harvest, ecotourism, health services, and wildlife conservation. This value would increase further if factoring in the value of all activities associated with lodges and outfitters, community and licensed moose harvest, and non-guided ecotourism in the watershed. The value of the carbon stored is worth at least CAD \$314.5 billion alone (equivalent to the value of global economic damage if carbon dioxide is released).

There is currently no industrial development (mining, hydroelectric generation, forestry, commercial fishing) in the watershed. There are no known active mineral claims, mining leases, or significant petroleum discoveries in the area, and the entire watershed has been withdrawn from new mineral claims while a protected area is under consideration.

There are several lodges and outfitters in the area licensed to provide angling, hunting, and ecotourism opportunities to guests. Other visitors to the watershed pursue self-guided hunting, fishing and ecotourism opportunities.

Why Protect the Seal River Watershed?

The four First Nations that formed the Seal River Watershed Alliance united to champion protection of the entire Seal River Watershed. The Alliance wants to protect the land and ensure the area remains a pristine watershed where people, animals and fish are healthy, Indigenous languages and culture thrive and there is hope for future generations.

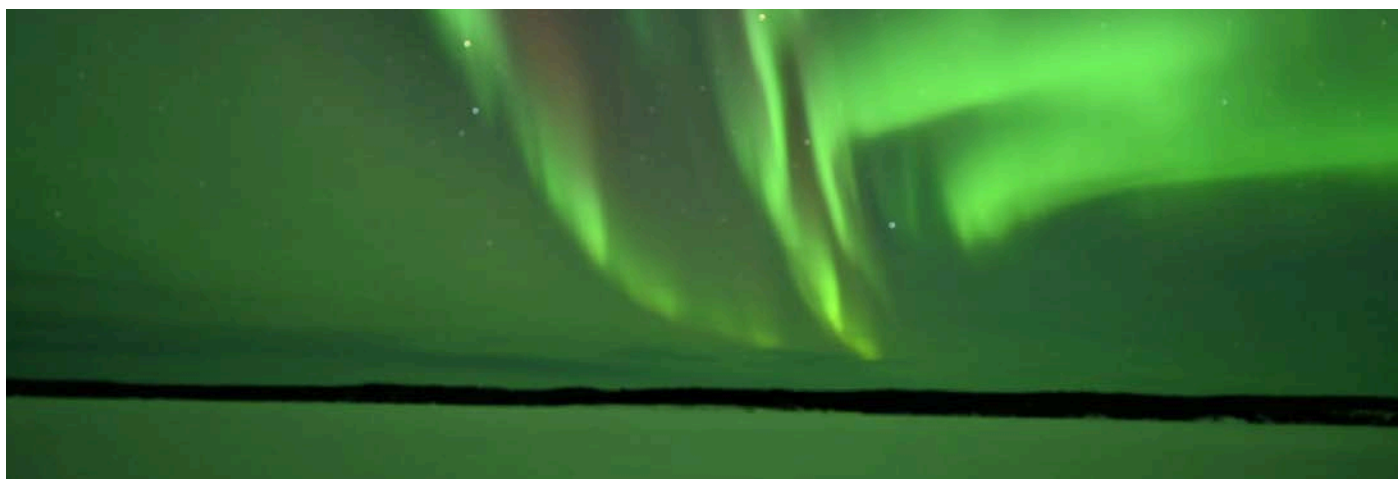


Photo: Michael Dumas

Manitoba and Canada recognize the immeasurable value that nature provides society and want to act on a generational opportunity to protect this pristine natural area. Protecting the Seal River area promotes nature, preserves the tremendous biological diversity and unique natural features found in the area, and provides numerous essential ecological services that benefit the wellbeing of all people.

Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas

An IPCA is an area where the purpose, development, establishment, and ongoing management reflect and enable Indigenous culture, interests and leadership. IPCAs are places that Indigenous governments identify for conservation and they can take many forms. IPCAs vary by the place, jurisdictional landscape, the goals and values of the communities leading their development, and the partners involved. However, IPCAs generally include three essential elements: (1) they are Indigenous-led; (2) they represent a long-term commitment to conservation; and (3) they elevate Indigenous rights and responsibilities.

IPCA's are a meaningful path for reconciliation and can lead to valuable outcomes for conservation on provincial, national and global scales. IPCAs generate sustainable economic growth opportunities via a conservation economy, build respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, and help ensure healthy communities. There are currently no IPCAs in Manitoba.

Legislated Protected Areas

Legislated protected areas preserve natural and cultural legacies for future generations. Protected areas are lands and waters that are recognized, dedicated and managed over the long term, through legal or other effective means, to conserve biodiversity, ecosystems and cultural values.



Photo: Seal River Watershed Alliance

In Manitoba, examples of legislated protected areas include parts of provincial parks and wildlife management areas, ecological reserves, provincially significant peatlands, and other designated Crown lands. Provincial parks play an important role in the lives of Manitobans. Parks contribute to the conservation of natural lands and cultural heritage, offer fantastic outdoor recreational opportunities, contribute to Manitoba's economy through tourism, and strengthen Manitoba's climate change resiliency and adaptability. Provincial parks are dedicated to the people of Manitoba and are maintained for the benefit of future generations.

You can read more about protected areas in Manitoba here:

https://manitoba.ca/sd/pubs/protected_areas/pa_factsheet.pdf

National Parks are a cornerstone of Canada's \$90 billion tourism industry. Investment toward new protected areas brings tangible economic benefits to Canadians. In National Parks, Indigenous communities benefit directly from employment opportunities and, in the longer term, may also benefit from economic development and increased local employment opportunities in other sectors, such as Indigenous tourism as part of a conservation economy. National Parks offer a unique opportunity to achieve conservation goals while advancing reconciliation through Indigenous-led stewardship, providing access to nature, and the potential to conserve and restore nature. They enable federal investment that supports socio-economic benefits in communities and connect people to the landscapes and stories that shape Canada.

Parks Canada has partnered within IPCA spaces for decades, supporting cultural objectives in addition to nature, integrating shared governance, supporting guardians and developing conservation economies. With a mandate to protect and present, Parks Canada sets national and international standards for conservation and cultural heritage. National Parks serve as vital anchors in a broader network of protected areas, supporting ecosystem health, wildlife corridors, and climate resilience. The establishment of a new national park in Manitoba in

the Seal River Watershed is expected to include a commitment to new financial and human resources from Canada to support park establishment and its ongoing operation.

Aboriginal and Treaty Rights

Aboriginal and Treaty rights are protected in the Canadian Constitution and rights-holders would continue to exercise their rights in the Seal River Watershed such that their constitutionally protected rights to hunt, fish, trap, gather, travel and engage in other rights activities would be respected and promoted as key management objectives throughout the Seal River Watershed. All legislated protected areas in Manitoba – whether federal or provincial – are subject to Aboriginal and Treaty rights being honoured, meaning that creating a legislated protected area in the Seal River Watershed is not expected to impact the Aboriginal and Treaty rights of Indigenous Peoples. Crown-Indigenous consultation with Indigenous governments that exercise rights in the watershed would provide the opportunity for Manitoba and Canada to understand any concerns and determine if accommodation measures are appropriate.

Existing Protected Area Designations

Approximately 14 per cent of the Seal River Watershed is already designated as a protected area. The three existing provincial parks in the area are non-operational wilderness parks (provincial parks that do not have staff or operating resources) designated between 15 and 30 years ago: Nueltin Lake, Caribou River and Sand Lakes. The three provincial parks, along with the Baralzon Lake Ecological Reserve (created in 1989), comprise a portion of Manitoba's network of protected areas created to conserve the province's biodiversity, ecosystems and cultural values.

Recognizing its ecological and cultural importance, the Seal River was designated through the Canadian Heritage Rivers System in 1992. The Seal River Estuary was designated by Birds Canada and Nature Canada as an Important Bird Area in 1999, acknowledging the importance of this area for many species of shorebirds, passerines, and sea birds.





Photo: Chris Paetkau, Build Films

Proposed Protected Area

Feasibility Assessment

In January 2024, the Alliance, Canada, and the Manitoba government signed a MOU to carry out a feasibility assessment for establishing a protected area, including a possible national park and IPCA in the Seal River Watershed. The feasibility assessment was completed in March 2025 with the parties determining that establishing a protected area in the region was feasible. The commitments made by the signatories to the feasibility assessment report directed the development of this proposal. You can learn more about the Seal River Watershed in the February 2025 feasibility assessment report available here: <https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/cnnpn-cnnp/riviere-seal-river/edf-far>

Mosaic Model

The Alliance, Canada and Manitoba are proposing to create a mosaic of different protected area designations in the Seal River Watershed (Figure 1). The use of a mosaic of designations offers unique and varied opportunities for supporting local conservation economies such as sustainable tourism and recreation, providing a range of opportunities for visitors to experience nature and culture in the area.

Harvesting and sharing wildlife is central to Indigenous ways of life. None of the proposed designations impact the continuation of Aboriginal and Treaty rights. Indigenous Peoples would continue to exercise their rights throughout the entire watershed.

IPCA: The Alliance proposes to declare the entire Seal River Watershed within Manitoba (49,779 km²) as an IPCA.

National Park: Approximately 18,500 km² of the Seal River Watershed, presently comprised of predominately Manitoba Crown lands, is proposed to be transferred from Manitoba to Canada to establish a national park under the Canada National Parks Act. This area would

include the majority of the eastern third of the watershed, from the Nunavut border south to Sand Lakes Provincial Park, east to Hudson Bay, and include the land around the community of Tadoule Lake. This would include transitioning the small portion of Caribou River Provincial Park within the Seal River Watershed from provincial to national park.

Public access, including for recreational angling and ecotourism activities, would continue to be allowed throughout the national park. Non-Indigenous big game hunting is not an allowable activity in national parks. However, as a transitional establishment measure, approximately 8,500 km² of the new national park would allow outfitting and licensed hunting to continue for ten years following park establishment (Figure 1). Existing lodges would continue to be licensed to offer big-game outfitting opportunities within this portion of the national park for this period. The intent is to allow harvesting that is respectful to community values and ensure fish and wildlife populations, and the land and water that they depend on, remain healthy for generations to come. Outfitting and licensed hunting would not be permitted in the remaining portions of the national park. Industrial development such as mining and forestry would not be allowed in the proposed new national park.



Provincial Park: The western two thirds of the watershed, approximately 31,000 km², is proposed to become a new provincial park. Activities such as hunting, fishing, guided outfitting, and ecotourism would continue to be allowed in the new provincial park. Existing lodges and outfitting operations, and the full range of outdoor activities that typically occur in Manitoba's provincial parks would continue to be permitted in the new provincial park.

The new provincial park is proposed to be classified as an Indigenous Traditional Use Park. Within the new provincial park, different land use categories (as set out in The Provincial Parks Act) would describe the main use of the lands within the park and would potentially include:

Wilderness - to protect representative or unique natural landscapes in an undisturbed state and provide recreational opportunities that depend on a pristine environment;

Backcountry - to protect examples of natural landscapes and provide basic facilities and trails for nature-oriented recreation in a largely undisturbed environment;

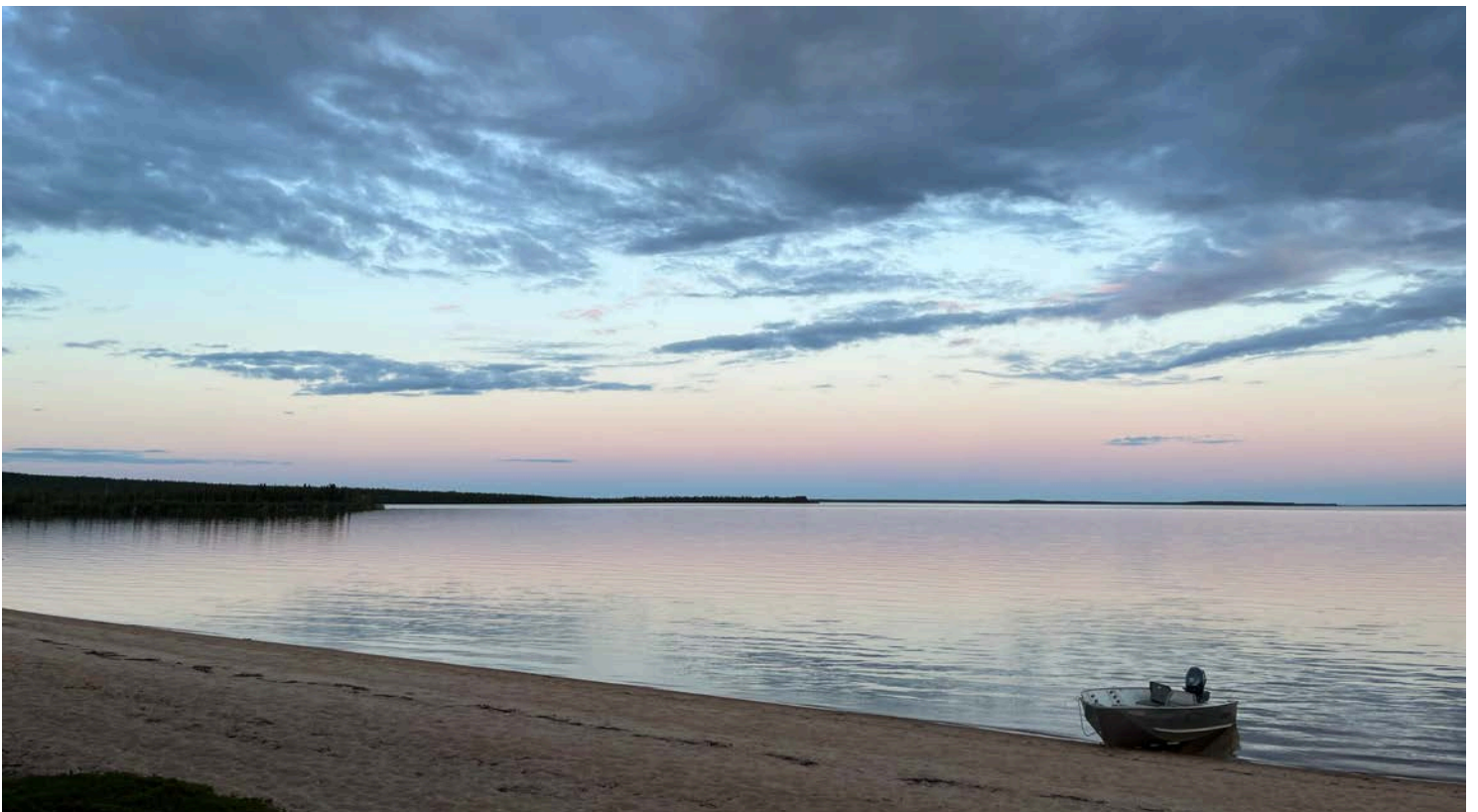
Access and/or Winter Road Access - to provide a point or route of access in a provincial park or a location for a lodge and associated facilities, or to permit the construction and operation of a winter road; and

Indigenous Heritage - to protect a unique or representative site containing a resource of cultural, spiritual or heritage significance to Indigenous persons.

What is an Indigenous Traditional Use Provincial Park?

An indigenous traditional use park is a provincial park where the main purpose is to preserve land that has been traditionally used by Indigenous persons and that is significant to Indigenous persons because of its natural features or cultural importance.

The proposed new provincial park for the Seal River watershed would remain open to all Manitobans for activities such as fishing, hunting, hiking, birding, and canoeing. As with other provincial parks in Manitoba that are considered protected, industrial development such as mining and forestry would not be allowed in the new proposed provincial park.



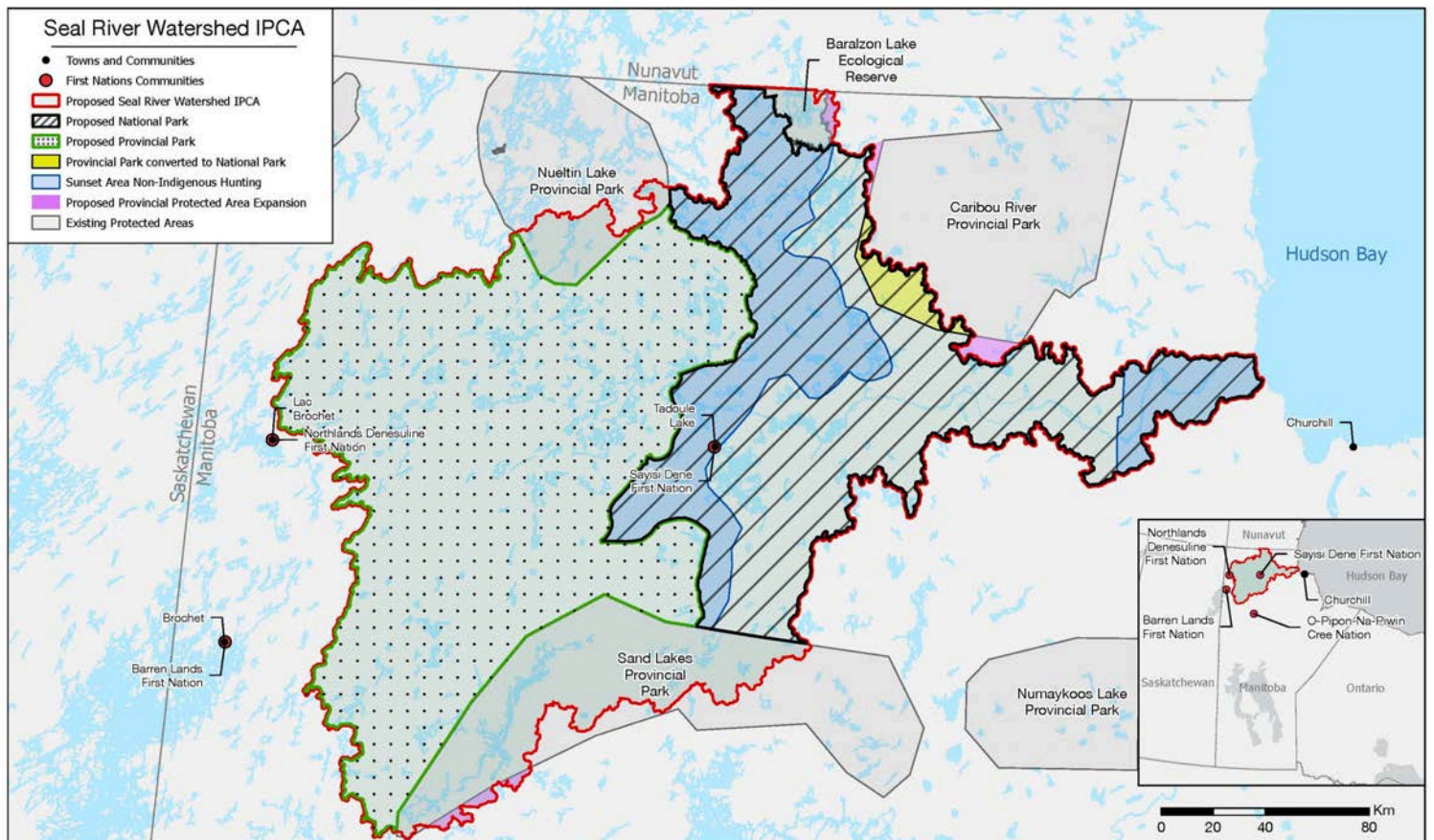


Figure 1. Proposed Seal River Watershed IPCA indicating portions proposed to be protected via provincial park and national park (including portions allowing outfitting/licensed hunting for 10-years). Map indicates portion of Caribou River Provincial Park proposed to become national park and indicates boundary adjustments proposed for Caribou River and Sand Lakes provincial parks and Baralzon Ecological Reserve to align their boundaries with Seal River Watershed. Please note that all boundaries for the proposed protected areas are subject to the land claim agreement for the proposed Kivahiktuq settlement area.

As noted above, all outdoor activities that typically occur in Manitoba's provincial parks would apply to the new provincial park, including in each of these land use categories.

The existing provincial parks (Nueltin Lake, Sand Lakes and Caribou River) and Baralzon Lake Ecological Reserve would remain as part of the watershed. However, minor adjustments are proposed for Sand Lakes, Caribou River and Baralzon Lake boundaries to align better with Seal River Watershed boundaries. The boundary of Caribou River Provincial Park would also be adjusted to accommodate the proposed new national park. Within the Seal River Watershed, Manitoba proposes to align the existing boundaries of the provincial parks as shown in Figure 1. The portions of the existing provincial parks within the watershed would be part of the overall 'mosaic' and managed by the joint management board.

Exclusions from Protected Areas for Community Use

Some lands, such as around the community of Tadoule Lake, would be needed for community development such as gravel extractions for roads and would be excluded from protected areas. Collectively, these areas are expected to make up a very small portion of the watershed.



Governance Structure

Collaborative stewardship of the proposed Seal River Watershed protected area by the Alliance, Canada and Manitoba is mutually beneficial for local communities along with all Canadians, Manitobans, and the environment.

The Alliance, Canada, and Manitoba propose to create a joint management board for the entire IPCA including the national and provincial park areas. The joint management board would be appointed by the elected leadership of the Indigenous governments, the Manitoba government and the Government of Canada. Final decisions would be made by the government with jurisdiction. All parties are committed to working collaboratively and respectfully to advance a common vision for the Seal River Watershed.

Decisions made by the joint management board would be made with the best available information, including Indigenous knowledge and values, local user and community perspectives, and scientific knowledge. One of the responsibilities of the joint management board would be to create a management plan for the IPCA with a long-term environmental and cultural vision including protecting land and waters, managing visitors, and supporting the way of life of the Indigenous Peoples. Management plans would be developed with input from Indigenous Peoples, local users and communities, stakeholders and the public, and would be reviewed and updated periodically.

Potential Future Considerations

Land Claim Agreement and Treaty Land Entitlement

The proposed Seal River protected area would be subject to agreements that recognize and protect Section 35 rights and agreements that implement Section 35 rights.

Currently, an Inuit land claim to lands and waters in Manitoba, left unresolved by Article 42 of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, is being negotiated between Canada, Manitoba and Inuit of Nunavut. Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) and the Kivalliq Inuit Association, the Inuit governing bodies, understand the importance of the Seal River Watershed Protected Area proposal, and support it on the understanding that it will be carried out in a way that is fully consistent with the recognition of Inuit rights in northern Manitoba. The governments of Manitoba and Canada and NTI are currently negotiating a land claim agreement. The settlement of the land claim would occur prior to the establishment of a national park or similar measures within the proposed Kivahiktuq settlement area.

Another consideration that could impact the Seal River Watershed is Treaty Land Entitlement. Several First Nations in Manitoba have outstanding Treaty Land Entitlements. In accordance with the Manitoba Framework Agreement, an agreement that implements Section 35 rights, these First Nations can select lands within provincial parks established after the Date of Execution (1997) and within new national parks to be set aside as reserve lands. The Seal River protected area would be subject to both Treaty Land Entitlement selections that have already been made and those that may be made in the future.

The final boundary and establishment conditions for Seal River legislated protected areas will be determined upon the resolution of the Inuit land claim in Manitoba and Treaty Land Entitlements in the watershed.

Proposed Hydro Fibre Transmission Corridor

The proposed Kivalliq Hydro Fibre Link, a renewable energy and broadband internet nation building project between Manitoba and Nunavut, would require Section 35 consultation and environmental regulatory assessment (which includes public and stakeholder input). Any protected area designations or governance arrangements achieved in the Seal River Watershed would need to reflect the Manitoba government's commitments for the proposed energy and communications corridor.

Next Steps

The Alliance, Canada, and Manitoba are now seeking feedback from the public and stakeholders on the proposed mosaic of protected areas within the Seal River Watershed as a whole. Manitoba is also seeking feedback on the designation of a new provincial park, the transfer of Manitoba Crown lands to Canada for the establishment of a national park, and the proposed adjustments to the boundaries of Sand Lakes and Caribou River provincial parks and Baralzon Lake Ecological Reserve.

The Alliance, Canada, and Manitoba will consider the advice and suggestions while working to develop the IPCA and the mosaic of legislated protected area designations that best reflects the shared goals of the parties, the priorities of local communities, and the needs, interests and aspirations of Manitobans and Canadians as users and visitors to the watershed.

Indigenous Nations and governments whose constitutionally protected rights may be affected by this proposed protected area, and who are being separately consulted through Section 35 consultation processes, are also welcome to contribute feedback in this process.

Share Your Views

We want to hear from you. Your input will help shape the future of the Seal River Watershed.

Please visit <http://EngageMB.ca> to provide your feedback on the protected area proposal for the Seal River Watershed. Comments may also be mailed, faxed or emailed to:

Seal River Watershed Protected Area Proposal

Manitoba Parks
258 Portage Ave – 4th Floor (Box 50)
Winnipeg MB R3C 0B6
Email: parksystem@gov.mb.ca
Fax: 204-945-0012

Proposal feedback will be received until June 2, 2026, and all feedback will be shared with Seal River Watershed Alliance and Parks Canada.



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