

BACKGROUNDER

AN ACT CREATING ONE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST NATIONAL PARK RESERVES

The Greater Nahanni Ecosystem and Park Expansion

Until now, Nahanni NPR has covered an area of 4,766 km², and encompassed only the lower reaches of the South Nahanni and Flat Rivers. The massive expansion announced today by the Government of Canada increases the size of the park reserve by over six times. Nahanni's new boundary will now protect over 30,000 km² of spectacular mountain terrain, unique geological landforms and crucial wildlife habitat.

The Greater Nahanni Ecosystem is a huge and pristine northern landscape. It is an area of 39,000 km² that includes the entire watershed of the South Nahanni River as well as the Nahanni North Karst, just to the north of the existing park. Most of this area lies within the Dehcho Region of the Northwest Territories, but about one sixth of the area, the headwaters of the South Nahanni River, is in the Sahtu Dene and Métis Settlement Area. The Greater Nahanni Ecosystem was the study area for the park expansion project.

Working with Dehcho First Nations to Expand Nahanni

Dehcho First Nations' unwavering commitment to park expansion has been demonstrated through numerous Leadership Resolutions, and a willingness to work side-by-side with Parks Canada to get the job done. In 2003, Dehcho First Nations (DFN) and Parks Canada (PC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding, agreeing to work together to expand the national park reserve. As a result, the Nahanni Expansion Working Group (NEWG) was formed, made up of both DFN and PC members. It directed research studies, managed public consultations and developed boundary options for the Dehcho portion of the Greater Nahanni Ecosystem.

The Nahanni Expansion Working Group studied grizzly bears, woodland caribou, Dall's sheep, bull trout, vegetation, forest fires, glaciers, karst landscapes, tourism and the socio-economic impact of the park. These studies provided NEWG with scientifically defensible conservation targets to assist in the development of boundary options.

Extensive public consultations were held concerning the park expansion; the first round was centred around the local communities and the second round was national in scope. The consultations indicated overwhelming support for expanding Nahanni.

Protection of Wildlife and Landscapes; Visitor Opportunities

This landmark conservation achievement will protect 91 percent of the Dehcho part of the Greater Nahanni Ecosystem. It will enhance the ecological integrity of Nahanni for generations to come by protecting large areas of vital habitat for several key species currently listed as Species of Special Concern. Specifically this means the protection of habitat and ranges for:

- about 500 grizzly bears – more bears than are found in Banff and Jasper national parks combined;
- two herds of the northern mountain population of woodland caribou including migration routes and calving, rutting and wintering grounds;
- alpine species including Dall's sheep and mountain goats;
- important trumpeter swan nesting areas; and
- entire bull trout stream systems.

Nahanni's new boundary includes the highest mountains and largest ice fields in the Northwest Territories. Protecting many of the tributaries to the South Nahanni River, it encompasses the entire watersheds of Caribou River, Clearwater Creek, Cathedral Creek, Rabbitkettle River, Meilleur River, Irvine Creek, Ram River and more.

This greatly enlarged park will also protect the internationally significant Nahanni North Karst, featuring spectacular canyons, caves, underground rivers, sinkholes, isolated rock towers and many other landforms created by the erosion and dissolution of limestone.

Canadian and international visitors will have the opportunity to see the spectacular landscapes and to hike, canoe, and climb in these new park areas. Local communities, tourism operators and river guide-outfitter businesses stand to benefit from increased opportunities for visitor experiences.

A Balanced Approach to Reaching Agreement on the Boundaries

Parks Canada worked with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Natural Resources Canada and territorial governments to undertake a Mineral and Energy Resource Assessment (MERA) for the study area. The MERA ensured that the economic and strategic significance of mineral and energy resource potential was adequately considered in the national park expansion process.

The MERA results, along with the conservation research studies, were used to create a boundary that balances key conservation targets and potential future economic benefit.

Nine percent of the Dehcho part of the Greater Nahanni Ecosystem has been excluded from the expanded national park reserve. This represents all of the hydrocarbon potential and about half of the most important mineral potential identified by the MERA, as well as 100 percent of existing mineral claims and mineral leases, such as the operating Cantung Mine and the Prairie Creek Mine, currently under development. All of the community lands around the community of Nahanni Butte remain outside of the park.

The Government of Canada recognizes pre-existing third party mining rights including access to those rights. Development of these rights, including the right of access, will still be subject to existing regulatory processes.

The Cantung and Prairie Creek mines are not within the expanded park reserve. On July 31, 2008, Parks Canada and the Canadian Zinc Corporation (owners of the Prairie Creek Mine) signed an MOU recognizing each organization's goals and ensuring communication as the park expands and the mine is brought into operation.

Other existing third party interests include outfitter-guided sport hunting zones covering the proposed expansion area. Parks Canada will work with these businesses on a willing seller - willing buyer basis with the intent being to acquire their interests in the park expansion area.

Proposed National Park Reserve in South Nahanni Headwaters Area (Sahtu Settlement Area)

For the headwaters of the South Nahanni River, in the Sahtu Settlement Area, the Sahtu Dene and Métis Final Agreement sets out the process to establish a national park. Accordingly, Parks Canada and the land corporations in the Tulita district of the Sahtu Settlement Area are negotiating an Impact and Benefit Plan for what could become Nááts'ihch'oh National Park Reserve. The government announced an interim land withdrawal for this area in April 2008, which will remain in effect until 2012.