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From the Breathing Lands to the...

Birthing Place

JANUARY 2022

A newly proposed National Marine Conservation Area reflects a new form of preservation that conserves biological diversity, harnesses the power of nature in mitigating climate change, and emphasizes the importance of traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous sovereignty across a huge swath of James and Hudson Bay.

The arctic coastline of Ontario's Far North spans 1,290 km—nearly the same distance as the drive from Toronto to Fredericton, New Brunswick. Yet these tidewater shores are unknown to many southern residents, despite the fact that James and Hudson Bay contain some of the greatest biodiversity and intact wilderness remaining on the planet. This massive interface of ocean, wetlands and free-flowing rivers, home to beluga whales, walrus and polar bears, as well as billions of migrating and breeding birds, drives the vitality of a broader ecosystem and supports many First Nations.

Indigenous leaders have sought to safeguard their home territory for decades. Now, the region is finally emerging as a critical natural buffer against the climate emergency and extinction crisis. The proposed Mushkegowuk National

Marine Conservation Area (NMCA) would encompass the entire coastal corridor of northern Ontario between Manitoba and Quebec, extending offshore into the federal waters and Nunavut islands of James and Hudson Bay. Cree Elders refer to this unique seascape as the “Birthing Place,” says Lawrence Martin, the manager of Mushkegowuk Marine Conservation, part of an Indigenous council representing communities in the area. This name reflects the sea and coastline's remarkable productivity for everything from eelgrass and capelin to species of iconic marine mammals and long-distance migrating avifauna that have been pushed to the brink of extinction elsewhere—and it's one of the primary reasons local communities want it protected.

Martin hopes Canadians will rally behind an exciting, once-in-a-lifetime initiative that was spearheaded by a partnership between Omushkego communities, Wildlands League and Oceans North. Last August, the federal government committed to taking the next step in protecting over 90,000 square kilometres and started the process of creating Canada's newest NMCA. Not only does the opportunity represent a huge contribution to the country's objectives of protecting 25 percent of its land and inland waters by 2025 and 30 percent by 2030, it also reflects a new form of preservation driven by the urgent need to conserve biological diversity, harness the power of nature in battling climate change and emphasizing the importance of traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous sovereignty.

“We have been the stewards of these lands and waters for millennia,” says Jonathan Solomon, former Grand Chief of the Mushkegowuk Council. “Now we want to protect the coastal and marine ecosystems that underpin the Omushkego way of life for future generations.”



Parks Canada has a mandate to identify and protect outstanding examples of the country's 29 marine areas. So far only five in the Great Lakes, Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific regions are formally represented by NMCA's and other marine parks. The federal government's collaborative, nation-to-nation agreement with the Mushkegowuk Council begins the process of establishing such a designation for James and Hudson Bay. Working with local residents, academic researchers and government scientists have begun studying the biodiversity and cultural values of the region, as well as measuring its role in mitigating climate change. Cree Elders point out the significance of the coastline and offshore waters in supporting life; researchers like Zou Zou Kuzyk, a coastal oceanographer at the University of Manitoba specializing in coastal areas, allude to a huge gap in quantifying the global significance of these northern waters.

“There has not been a dedicated oceanography study of James Bay since the late 1970s and early 1980s,” Kuzyk says. “Since then, the climate has changed, the broader environment has changed, and even the methods and tools that are available for studying ocean areas have changed. So many of us have been thinking that James Bay is a significant gap.”

— Zou Zou Kuzyk, University of Manitoba

Filling this knowledge gap is a critical component of creating a new national marine conservation area, and will rely on a collaborative process that engages local people like Sam Hunter. This Peawanuck resident has been travelling, hunting and keeping tabs on the coastal region he often refers to as his “place of peace and serenity” for decades, carrying on the lifestyle of his ancestors. Hunter is quick to point out all the climate-related changes he's observed in his homeland, often related to the rapid thawing of permafrost due to climate change.

Like many in his community, Hunter describes ponds and rivers drying up as the ground drains and thaws, ultimately making these areas far less productive for waterfowl and other wildlife. Hunter serves as a guide for scientific expeditions in his traditional lands and has become a vocal advocate for conservation. Last winter, he walked 600 km across the frozen Far North to raise awareness of the changes climate change is rapidly imposing on Cree people. Kuzyk notes the ice season on James Bay has already shortened by several weeks in the past few decades, and riverbanks and wetlands are eroding and disappearing as underlying permafrost thaws. For his part, Hunter believes the new marine conservation area will draw more attention to the area and provide a living laboratory to continue to assess changes to the lands and waters over time.

Locals like Hunter often highlight the significance of the saltwater shores as a haven for migratory birds. Some two- to three million snow geese gather in coastal wetlands during the spring and fall each year and form a key part of the local diet. In fact, the coastline provides some of the most prolific bird habitat on the planet, with 14 species of shorebirds (including the endangered red knot) and 37 species of waterfowl, all of which are funneled into the natural migratory corridor of James and Hudson Bay. Wildlands League executive director Janet Sumner recalls being stunned by the lushness of coastal meadows on her visits to the area. “They are like a sea of purple, pink and blue wildflowers, waving gently in

the breeze,” she says. Such a feast for the senses is also prime habitat for breeding songbirds like palm warblers and Lincoln's sparrows.

Radiating inland from the coast, the Far North is globally significant for another reason. Once again, Cree Elders have coined the perfect name for what's recognized as the world's third-largest wetland: the “Breathing Lands.” Martin explains the Elders offer a reminder that the ocean, coastline and inland peatlands and rivers are all interconnected. He hopes a marine conservation area is just the beginning in preserving the values of the Indigenous lifestyle before additional changes, such as the Ring of Fire mineral development, are imposed on the land. “This is all one ecosystem,” Martin says. “What happens on the land flows through the rivers and the peatlands to the bay. We know that everything will be impacted.”

That outlook resonates with Anna Baggio, the conservation director at Wildlands League.

“To have something so big, so whole and with all its parts working together is what makes this place special. It's the intersection of water, wildlife and carbon and it's part of the identity of the people who live there. From a conservation standpoint, it gives you a look at what we could preserve for the future.” — Anna Baggio, Wildlands League



Sumner admits that most Canadians will never be fortunate enough to visit James and Hudson Bay, but it's still something we should be proud of. She was thrilled when former Grand Chief Jonathan Solomon acknowledged the numerous letters of encouragement he received from hundreds of Canadians and people from around the world supporting the vision of an Indigenous-led protected area in such a globally significant spot. Sumner says this wave of support validated the efforts of Wildlands League and its partner organization, Oceans North.

Oceans North executive director Louie Porta is excited about how a new marine conservation area will contribute to his organization's mandate to foster science- and community-based conservation in the Arctic. Last summer, Oceans North organized scientific expeditions to James Bay with researchers including Kuzyk, collecting water chemistry data, assessing carbon in seabed sediments, and studying why the area's shallow, nutrient-rich waters are such a trove of biodiversity. “To take on the dual crises of biodiversity loss and climate change, we need to protect marine areas like western James Bay that both provide habitat and sequester carbon,” says Porta. “But conservation must also meet the needs of the people who rely on the lands and the waters. Oceans North is proud to support this Indigenous-led initiative as the Omushkego work to protect this globally significant ecosystem.”

Martin says the Far North communities he represents are eager to get started. Besides gathering critical baseline data, he envisions a marine conservation area as a way for Indigenous people to reclaim their homelands, including reverting Anglicized place names to the original Cree—adopting terms like the “Birthing Place” and the “Breathing Lands” that profoundly capture the magnitude of this region. “There's a lot of buzz going on right now,” says Martin. “We've always recognized how this place gives life. We want to save it—not only for ourselves but for the whole earth. We all depend on this being kept intact.”



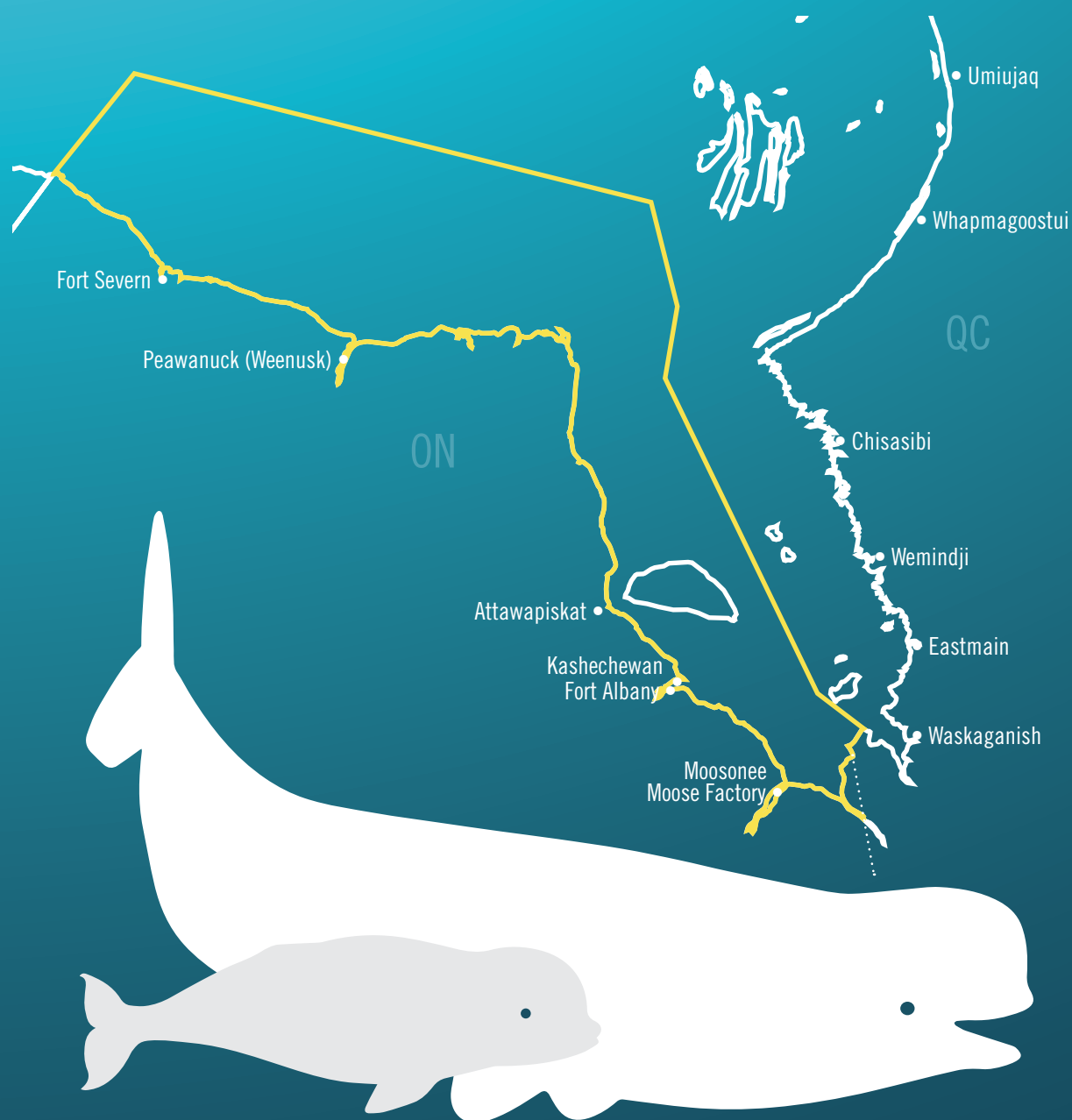
170+ species of geese, ducks
and shorebirds including long-distance
migrators such as endangered red knots

The Mushkegowuk NMCA study area

1,290 km of coast, 91,000 km² offshore waters



Rich in blue carbon stored
in sediments, plants and wildlife



The most
southern
population of
polar bears
in the world

5 species
of seals
and 30+
species
of fishes

20% of Canada's belugas
including one unique population that
resides in James Bay year-round

“We’ve always recognized how this place gives life. We want to save it—not only for ourselves but for the whole earth. We all depend on this being kept intact.” — Lawrence Martin, Mushkegowuk Council



Wildlands League is a not-for-profit charity working to protect public land and water since 1968. We are policy experts, negotiators and communicators standing up for wildlife and standing with communities. We tackle irresponsible development that threatens precious rivers, lakes and wildlife habitat. We create solutions and hope. We give voice to Canada’s irreplaceable nature to make sure at least half of the country is protected for all children, the climate and for the planet.



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