

## 22. Wood Buffalo National Park (Canada) (N 256)

Year of inscription on the World Heritage List 1983

Criteria (vii)(ix)(x)

Year(s) of inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger N/A

Previous Committee Decisions see page <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/256/documents/>

### International Assistance

Requests approved: 0

Total amount approved: USD 0

For more details, see page <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/256/assistance/>

### UNESCO Extra-budgetary Funds

N/A

### Previous monitoring missions

September/October 2016: Joint World Heritage Centre/IUCN Reactive Monitoring mission; August 2022: Joint World Heritage Centre/IUCN Reactive Monitoring mission

### Factors affecting the property identified in previous reports

- Road construction (issue resolved)
- Renewable energy facilities (existing and planned hydroelectric dams, including Site C and Amisk)
- Oil and gas (Alberta oil sands mining; proposed changes to regulations which would allow release of oil sands process-affected water (OSPW))
- Climate change (affecting hydrology and ecology of the property)
- Lack of adequate and comprehensive environmental monitoring
- Governance (lack of effective engagement with First Nations and Métis in monitoring activities and insufficient consideration of local and Indigenous knowledge)
- Groundwater, surface water and air pollution
- Cumulative impacts (insufficiently understood cumulative impacts of multiple development pressures)
- Management System/Management Plan (insufficient participation of local communities and indigenous peoples)

*Illustrative material* see page <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/256/>

### Current conservation issues

On 1 February 2022, the State Party submitted a state of conservation report, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/256/documents> and summarized below, responding to Committee Decision **44 COM 7B.190**, and having incorporated the perspectives of government and indigenous partners, focusing on the period from 2019 when the Action Plan (AP) was developed to December 2021:

- Two thirds of the actions under the AP to maintain the property's Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) are completed or underway, supported by an overall federal budget of CAD 87.4 million (USD 66 million) until spring 2024;
- Another addition to the provincial parks adjacent to the property further increased the area of the vast contiguous conservation complex;
- Progress in terms of integrated monitoring of the Peace Athabasca Delta (PAD) by the federal government, the Alberta province and indigenous partners with additional efforts underway to co-develop monitoring elsewhere;
- Collaboration of the same partners above is reported for the design and evaluation of two proposed water control structures in the PAD to support indigenous access and use and 'ecological gains';
- Commitment that all impact assessments of upstream developments pursuant to federal legislation explicitly consider specific and cumulative impacts on the property's OUV, including the proposed Amisk dam on the Peace River;
- A climate change vulnerability analysis incorporating indigenous peoples' knowledge and science is underway to better understand the assumed trends towards warmer and drier conditions;
- Issues related to water governance, flow regulation, and tailings pond management are extremely complex where focus has been placed on bringing together all implicated jurisdictions and incorporating indigenous perspectives. Acknowledgement of the long-term resourcing needs for the AP's implementation;
- Acknowledgment of the unchanged situation since the 2018 Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), which indicated a failure to meet several desired outcomes and negative trends for the PAD, migratory waterfowl, wolf-wood bison relationship and grasslands;
- Proposed regulations are being developed under the Fisheries Act to authorize the release of treated oil sands process-affected water (OSPW) under strict conditions that are protective of the environment. Indigenous peoples have indicated that they do not support the release of treated effluent and view releases as a potential infringement of their rights and a significant threat to the park's OUV.
- Across its report, the State Party acknowledges significant hardship for First Nations and Métis peoples over the century since the park's establishment, including restrictions and expulsion despite the promises of Treaty 8 and other rights, their unique knowledge and multifaceted interrelationships with the land. A commitment to establishing a 'new relationship' with First Nations and Métis via a Cooperative Management Committee (CMC) and a bilateral engagement referring to communities as an 'integral part of the ecosystem' was made. Consistent with this, indigenous leadership met in 2021 with the Minister responsible for Parks Canada Agency (PCA) and the PCA's President and CEO.

On 15 March 2022, the State Party submitted further information to officially announce the expansion of Kitaskino Nuwenëné Wildland Provincial Park (KNWPP).

The joint World Heritage Centre/IUCN Reactive Monitoring mission took place from 18 to 26 August 2022 and the report is available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/256/documents/>.

Since the mission, the World Heritage Centre has received information from third parties on the 10-year review of the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan (LARP), the impacts of logging on the Wabasca bison herd and on the seepage of OSPW from tailings ponds at the Kearl oil sands project, situated near the Athabasca River, 75 km upstream from the property. This information was transmitted to the State Party

by letters dated 14 February and 9 March 2023. A reply was received from the State Party on 6 April 2023.

In a letter dated 16 June 2023 to the State Party, UNESCO expressed its solidarity with the citizens of Canada, its federal government, and the governments of all the areas, including Wood Buffalo National Park and Nahanni National Park, affected by the devastating fires and extreme weather conditions and their far-reaching consequences.

#### Analysis and Conclusions of the World Heritage Centre and IUCN

The Reactive Monitoring mission concluded that most threats to the OUV of the property remain, in particular:

- Longstanding and unresolved conflicts and tensions between indigenous rightsholders and government and private sector actors which impact on the management of the property;
- Changes in the hydrology of the PAD resulting from hydropower development along the upper Peace River and climate change affecting its biodiversity, productivity and navigability;
- Potential impacts caused by the oil sands projects along the Athabasca River south of the property, including potential impacts associated with seepage from the large tailings ponds generated by oil sands projects and the lack of a clear strategy to reclaim these areas and treat the large volumes of toxic OSPW accumulated over decades of oil sands development;
- Cumulative effects of industrial developments around the property;
- Absence of a formal buffer zone for the property and issues related to land use in the overall landscape;
- Long-term future of the Wood Bison population.

Evidence from the SEA conducted in 2018 shows that current trends for key attributes remain negative and that the state of conservation of the PAD, which hosts many of the attributes underpinning the OUV of the property, remains of particular concern.

The 2022 mission acknowledged that in response to the recommendations of the 2016 mission, the State Party has developed and is implementing a structured AP with the aim of reversing the current downward trends in some of the desired outcomes. Considering that its implementation only started in 2019, the mission noted that it was too early to assess the extent to which the AP will succeed in reversing the current negative trends and restoring the OUV of the property, including the ecological integrity of the PAD.

The mission observed important progress in the implementation of some parts of the AP, in particular efforts to strengthen partnerships and move towards co-management of the property with the indigenous rightsholders, the creation of additional protected areas to the south of the property to act as a buffer and better protect the values of the property, measures to improve the conservation of the Roland Lake Bison herd, and work on the development of an Integrated Research and Monitoring Programme, using both science and indigenous knowledge.

Significant effort and investment are also being made to develop a hydrodynamic model to understand the flows required to deliver environmental benefits to the PAD, through flow releases from the W.A.C. Bennett Dam and existing and future water control structures. However, a functional modelling platform, which can inform decision-making, will not be available before 2024 and the mission concluded that progress in hydrodynamic model development to date has not yet resulted in concrete measures to restore the ecological and hydrological integrity of the PAD.

Major concerns remain about the lack of progress in addressing cumulative impacts of industrial developments around the property. Expansion of existing oil sands projects has continued without full consideration of the potential impacts on the OUV of the property. A systematic risk assessment of tailings ponds in the Alberta Oil Sands region, focusing on the PAD, has not yet started. New proposals to allow the release of treated OSPW into the Athabasca River are extremely concerning. The Federal Minister for Environment and Climate Change assured the mission that OSPW releases would only be allowed if the released water was treated to a standard of 'drinking water quality', while other options were also being considered to dispose of OSPW accumulated over decades of oil sands development. In this context, the recent confirmation of seepage of OSPW from tailings ponds at the Kearl oil sands project is extremely alarming and further demonstrates the potential impact of the tailing ponds on the

OUV of the property and on the livelihoods of indigenous communities, while highlighting the urgency of addressing this threat.

The mission considered that efforts to address the multiple threats to the OUV of the property will need to be sustained beyond the current timeframe of the AP and that more substantial funding will need to be mobilized. While the AP is ambitious in some respects, the mission considered it needs to be strengthened in other areas. The mission proposed 17 priority recommendations to improve the AP and address current weaknesses.

Based on the findings of the mission, the World Heritage Centre and IUCN conclude that the OUV of the property continues to face significant ascertained and potential threats, in particular as a result of changes in the hydrology of the PAD exacerbated by the impacts of climate change and industrial developments around the property. The AP should be further strengthened based on the recommendations of the mission. Moreover, financial support for its implementation needs to be sustained beyond its current timeframe until 2026. It is further recommended that a new joint World Heritage Centre/IUCN Reactive Monitoring mission be invited in 2026 to assess whether the current downward trends and observed degradation of the OUV of the property have been reversed and whether the property meets the conditions for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger, in line with Paragraph 180 of the Operational Guidelines.

### **Draft Decision: 45 COM 7B.22**

*The World Heritage Committee,*

1. *Having examined Document WHC/23/45.COM/7B.Add,*
2. *Recalling Decisions **39 COM 7B.18**, **41 COM 7B.2**, **43 COM 7B.1** and **44 COM 7B.190**, adopted at its 39th (Bonn, 2015), 41st (Krakow, 2017), 43rd (Baku, 2019) and extended 44th (Fuzhou/online, 2021) sessions respectively,*
3. *Notes with concern the conclusion of the 2022 joint World Heritage Centre/IUCN Reactive Monitoring mission that the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property continues to face significant ascertained and potential threats, in particular as a result of changes in the hydrology of the Peace Athabasca Delta (PAD) exacerbated by the impacts of climate change and of the industrial developments around the property;*
4. *Acknowledges that the State Party has developed and is implementing a structured Action Plan with the aim of reversing the current downward trends in some of the desired outcomes linked to the attributes of the OUV, and notes the conclusion of the 2022 mission that it is too early to assess how successful the Action Plan will be in restoring the OUV of the property, including the ecological integrity of the PAD;*
5. *Welcomes the progress made in implementing parts of the Action Plan, including efforts to move towards co-management of the property with the indigenous rightsholders, the creation of additional protected areas to the south of the property, the measures taken to improve the conservation of the Roland Lake Bison herd, and the work on developing an Integrated Research and Monitoring Programme;*
6. *Appreciates the ongoing work to develop a hydrologic model to understand the flows required to deliver environmental benefits to the PAD, but expresses concern that a functional modelling platform, which can inform decision-making, will not be available before 2024 and that, to date, no operational strategy or protocol for implementing potential water releases or control structures that might be proposed based on the outcomes of the hydrologic model has been agreed;*