

Mikisew Cree First Nation’s Call to Better Safeguard Wood Buffalo National Park



Submitted by: The Mikisew Cree First Nation

“The world needs to know what’s happening here, and the effect from the oil industry and the Bennett Dam and climate change. The people here are suffering and they cannot practice their God-given right to hunt, to trap, to fish, to be Mikisew. It’s a sad reality.”

Mikisew Cree elder

We, the Mikisew Cree First Nation, are an indigenous group whose homeland includes the World Heritage Site, Wood Buffalo National Park and Peace-Athabasca Delta in northern Canada.

The Peace-Athabasca Delta is the largest inland freshwater delta in North America and arguably the largest boreal wetland in the world. It supports wood bison, migratory waterfowl and songbirds, and a range of unique and important natural processes, all of which were part of justifying the inscription of Wood Buffalo National Park as a World Heritage

site. Critically, the Peace-Athabasca Delta also supports the ways of life of indigenous peoples such as us. For Mikisew people, the Peace-Athabasca Delta, called Ayapaskaw in Cree, is everything.

As traditional stewards of these lands and waters, we have witnessed parts of the Peace-Athabasca Delta in Wood Buffalo National Park deteriorate as a result of industrial activities and climate change. Because our culture is tied to the Peace-Athabasca Delta, the loss of Wood Buffalo National Park’s natural values puts our distinctive culture at risk. The Peace-Athabasca Delta has already deteriorated to a point that our elders feel a sense of tremendous loss and sadness for current and future generations.

Industrial activities along the two main rivers that create the Delta are changing the water quantity and quality within the Park. On the Peace River, a new, major dam is under

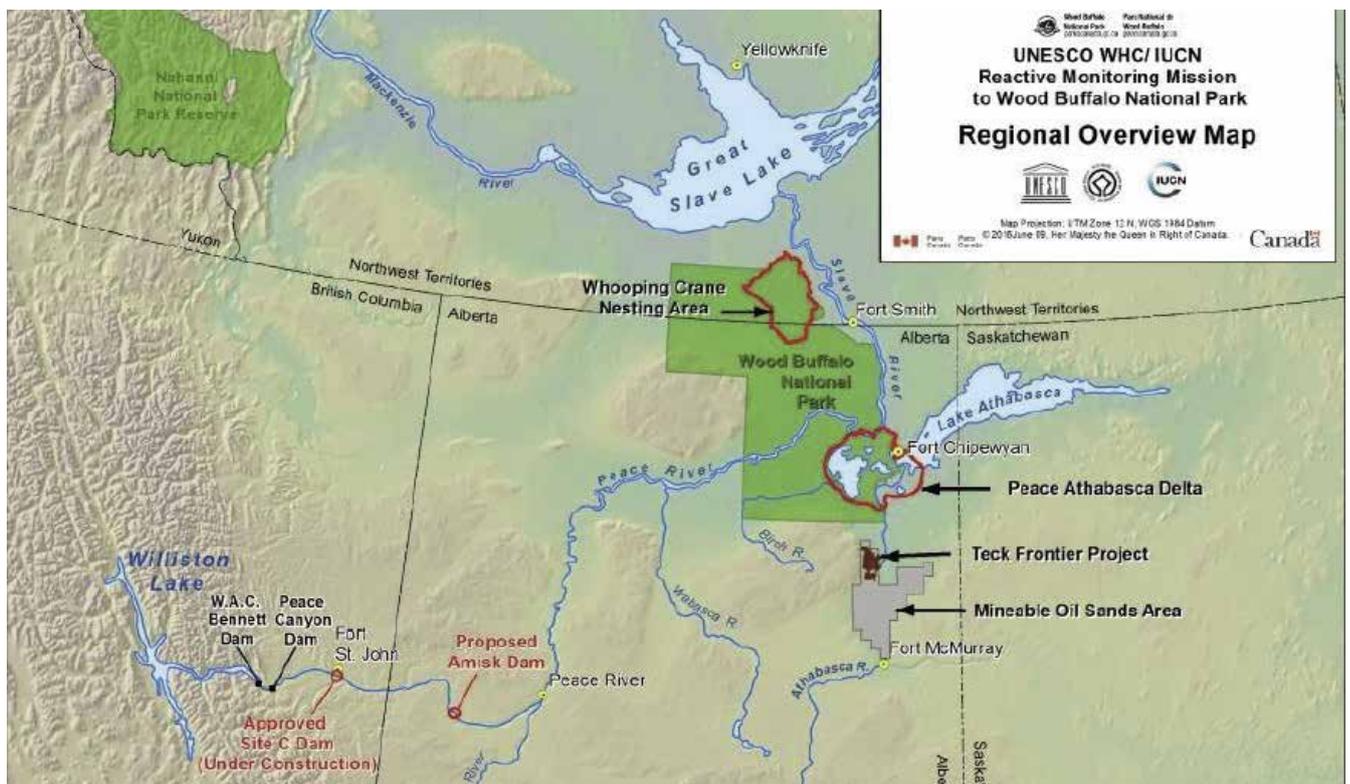


Fig. 1: Map of threats to Wood Buffalo National Park.

Source: UNESCO WHC/IUCN Reactive Monitoring Mission Report

construction, despite significant concern with deficiencies in its permitting process. Upstream on the Athabasca River is the oil sands region of Alberta, where an ever-increasing number of oil sands mines and large tailings ponds are located adjacent to that river. The largest oil sands mine ever to be proposed, and the first to be partially within a watershed that flows directly into the Peace-Athabasca Delta, has now gone through a hearing, where its impacts to Wood Buffalo National Park were considered, but no decision has yet been rendered.

Even though some of the largest industrial projects in North America are upstream of this World Heritage site and are known to have downstream effects, necessary legal safeguards and management measures for the Park's OUV are lacking. Weak regulatory protections, deficient information, problematic land use planning outside the Park and a lack of meaningful consultation with Indigenous peoples undermine protection of the Peace-Athabasca Delta.

Because of the ongoing failure of governments to respond to our requests for credible actions to manage the threats to the Peace-Athabasca Delta, in 2014 we turned to the World Heritage Committee, filing a petition to have Wood Buffalo National Park inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Our petition gained support from former Parks Canada officials, former park wardens, leading scientists and multiple indigenous groups and civil society organizations.

In 2015 the WHC requested that Canada invite a joint World Heritage Centre / IUCN Reactive Monitoring mission to review the impacts of development on the property. The first ever reactive monitoring mission took place in the fall of 2016, and the report was released in March 2017.

The Reactive Monitoring Mission confirmed that our concerns about the integrity of the Peace-Athabasca Delta are not "overstated" as Canada originally suggested. The mission characterized the scale of the threats to the natural and cultural heritage of the Peace-Athabasca Delta as "exceptional." The report identified concerns in three areas: longstanding and unresolved conflicts between Aboriginal Peoples and governmental and private sector actors; governance deficiencies, including but not limited to water management across jurisdictions, impact assessment and environmental monitoring; and the effects of observable and anticipated climate change.

The mission concluded that Canada should be given one opportunity to develop a structured and adequately funded response to 17 recommendations, in effect amounting to "major operations." Canada has drafted an Action Plan to restore Wood Buffalo National Park's ecology, which it will present to the World Heritage Committee in February of 2019.

Despite an early reluctance to accept the findings of the Reactive Monitoring Mission, Parks Canada has drafted an Action Plan that proposes actions that address the major requests of the RMM. We commend Canada for putting creative solutions forward. However, the Plan lacks significant details and commitments that will ensure that Actions will be implemented, and that ongoing scientific work will inform the current policies that have led to WBNP's decline. We remain cautiously optimistic but are well aware of Canada's history of proposing grand actions that are not implemented. The Action Plan lacks clear details on implementation and resourcing, and despite the creation of some creative solutions, we are concerned that this Action Plan will remain more of a "plan to plan" with action pushed ever farther into the future.

The key issue affecting the Park is water management. Canada's federal structure and the transboundary nature of the issue mean that decisions regarding water management require coordination between several jurisdictions. The Action Plan outlines a proposed governance structure that will involve each of these jurisdictions and the affected Indigenous communities. If this governance body is to make decisions about water management, it must be empowered to do more than simply study issues and make recommendations to unnamed decisions makers. This governance body must have clear lines of communication to relevant decision-makers, and requirements for these decision-makers to report back to the committee and to the World Heritage Committee if they do not implement one of the committee's recommendations. This body must be able to make recommendations on water quantity and quality, particularly for major challenges that arise outside of the Park.

One of these major challenges is management of oil sands tailings. Currently, there are roughly 250 km² of tailings ponds in the Athabasca Oil Sands region, an area more than twice the size of Paris. Mikisew remain concerned that these massive industrial developments have significant impact on water quality and quantity, through potential leaking of the ponds into the Athabasca River, through altering the water balance of the River by replacing wetlands, and by the draw on water quantity when end pit lakes are filled towards the end of mine life. Provincial policies to manage tailings are insufficiently proscriptive, and don't consider the cumulative impact of several tailings impoundments on the Outstanding Universal Value of the Park.

Provincial jurisdictions have proposed several studies, including a cumulative risk assessment of tailings ponds, to inform their water management policies and their impacts on the OUV of WBNP. However, it remains unclear how these findings influence policies. Canada's implementation plan must stipulate when learnings from these studies will inform management.

The Action Plan represents a crucial opportunity for provincial and federal jurisdictions to collaborate amongst themselves, and most importantly, with the eleven Indigenous communities who have deep cultural and historical ties to the Park. A key mechanism for achieving this is the creation of an institute to support local environmental monitoring, cultural transmission, and stewardship of the landscape. With Environment and Climate Change Canada, we have developed the concept for the Peace Athabasca Delta Institute; a collaborative centre of excellence for environmental monitoring and community-based monitoring. This innovative centre will be operated by the three Indigenous communities of the Peace Athabasca Delta: Mikisew Cree First Nation, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, and Fort Chipewyan Métis. It will support crucial scientific monitoring and research to support the Action Plan, as well as monitoring that addresses the information needs of the community. It will support community members' access to the land, cultural retention and empower them to make informed decisions about the landscape.

Given the new attention on the issues facing the Peace-Athabasca Delta and the fresh recommendations from the reactive Monitoring Mission for how to improve the management of these issues, 2019 is a potential turning point for Wood Buffalo National Park. Ultimately, to address the serious situation facing the Peace-Athabasca Delta, Canada must commit to fully implementing the Actions outlined in the Action Plan. They must work with jurisdictional partners to ensure delivery of Actions. They must work with Indigenous communities to improve relationships, understanding

of the Park, and support implementation. They must maintain the momentum gained over the last four years of intensive work to ensure that once the focus of the world moves away, the commitment to change doesn't wane. The World Heritage Committee's decision in 2019 regarding Wood Buffalo National Park will be important for determining whether this comes to pass.

We call for the World Heritage Committee to

- instill a sense of urgency for the implementation of the action plan for Wood Buffalo National Park by requiring a status update and updated implementation plan by the 2020 session of the World Heritage Committee
- commend the State Party for its commitment to the Peace-Athabasca Delta Institute and encourage its implementation by requesting a status update in three years
- confirm that the State Party must fully and effectively include the Mikisew Cree First Nation in the implementation of the action plan for Wood Buffalo National Park, via effective governance arrangements that involve indigenous partners and the relevant decision makers

We also call on Canada to

- develop memoranda of understanding between provincial jurisdictions who have roles in supporting the Action Plan
- establish a trust to support ongoing implementation of the plan.

Spain, she completed her Bachelor's in Archaeology in Complutense University in Madrid in 2017, but has also a background in Cultural Anthropology. She was granted with an ERASMUS scholarship to attend the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, where she focused her studies on cinema and commun-



ication. She has followed the path of heritage and community engagement not only at university, but also with the undertaking of several internships, not only in her home country, but also in France, Mexico and Cuba. During the summer of 2018 she was granted with a DAAD scholarship to attend Helwan University in Cairo, helping her specializing on heritage and conflict, which she hopes can help her resolve community conflicts in the future.

Contact: andreamf9@hotmail.com

Louise Matthiesson

Louise Matthiesson is Director of the Queensland Conservation Council has been involved in environmental and climate campaigns for around 20 years, working for a range of community groups in Victoria and Queensland. Most recently she was the Queensland Campaigner for Solar Citizens and prior to that played a lead role in the Fight for the Reef campaign against new coal mines in the Galilee Basin and port expansions along the Great Barrier Reef Coast. Louise has also worked as a journalist for ABC radio and a science communicator with the CSIRO.

Contact: director@qldconservation.org.au

Kreshnik Merxhani

Kreshnik Merxhani (1982) graduated in architecture studies at the Polytechnic University of Tirana in Albania. Since 2008 he has focused on traditional architecture, restoration projects and artistic photography, particularly in Gjirokastra. From 2008-12 he was trained in restoration by Cultural Heritage without Borders. In 2012-14 he was the project manager of a restoration project of the Hammam (turkish bath) in Kruja, another historic city in Albania. From 2014-16, he was head of the



Technical Department at the Regional Directory of National Culture in Gjirokastra, serving as chief architect for the design of several restoration and revitalization projects. He carried out a risk assessment of all the listed monuments in the region of

Gjirokastra and since 2016, he has been the group leader and architect for restoring the city's old Bazaar.

Contact: ark.kreshnik@gmail.com

Mikisew Cree First Nation

The Mikisew Cree First Nation is an indigenous nation in Canada whose lands and rights depend on the Peace-Athabasca Delta in Wood Buffalo National Park and surrounding waters. The Mikisew Cree signed Treaty 8 in 1899 at Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca. Today, Mikisew members reside in Fort Chipewyan as well as Fort McMurray, Edmonton, Fort Smith, NWT, and elsewhere. The Mikisew Cree filed a petition with the World Heritage Committee in 2014 for the Wood Buffalo National Park World Heritage Site to be inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger as a result of threats to the Park from upstream hydro-power and oil sands projects and climate change.

Contact: [Contact: melody-lepine@mcfnjir.ca](mailto:melody-lepine@mcfnjir.ca)

Elena Minchenok

Elena Minchenok, born in St Petersburg (Leningrad) in 1983, graduated from St. Petersburg State University as a Slavist. She



was a co-founder of the NGO "Living City" (2006), one of the most influential civic organizations of the 2000s in St. Petersburg. In 2007 she joined the Russian National Heritage Preservation Society, and currently is a project manager within the organization. In 2009 she became a member of ICOMOS, and in 2011-2012 was editor and author of a bilingual

book "Saint Petersburg: Heritage at Risk", a project that involved an international team of contributing authors. She has led a project of bilateral conferences between the St. Petersburg heritage preservation expert community and the one of the WHS Val di Noto (Sicily) in collaboration with CUNES (Coordinamento Città UNESCO Sicilia), ICOMOS St. Petersburg and the Likhachev Foundation.

Contact: e.minchenok@gmail.com

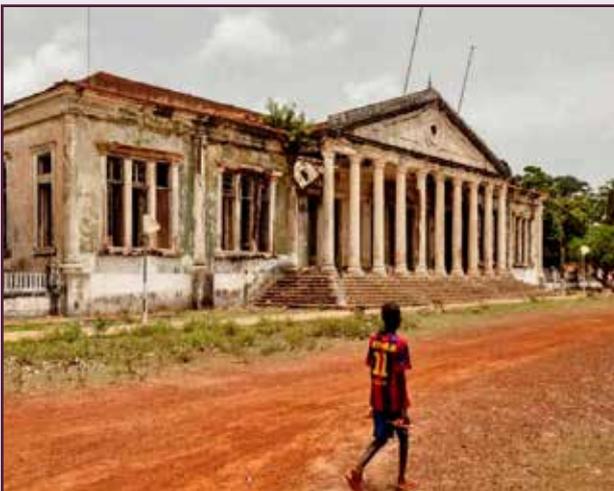
Hartmut Müller



Hartmut Müller was born 1945 in Meiningen/Thuringia, Germany. From 1965 to 1972 he studied biology at the University of Greifswald where he also received his PhD. Hartmut has a lifetime interest and professional commitment in nature conservation, and is a specialist in ornithology. He was in charge of setting up the Lower Oder National Park

in Brandenburg/ Germany and became its founding director from

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Upper left: Katz Castle and the Rhine river, with the disturbing roof of the new Loreley concert hall in the background (Stephan Doempke); Upper right: A mud volcano in Azerbaijan (Hartmut Müller), Lower left: Former Town Hall of Bolama, Guinea-Bissau (Francisco Nogueira), Lower right: An orangutan rescued from a destroyed rainforest in Sumatra (Katie Cleary / Orangutan Information Centre)

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