

Preliminary Screening of a Proposal to Establish Thaidene Nene National Park Reserve of Canada

This preliminary screening is being conducted under section 124(2) of the *Mackenzie Valley Resources Management Act*. The Act states that developments proposed by federal agencies, including “measures ...leading to the establishment of a park subject to the *Canada National Parks Act*” are to be screened to determine whether the development might have a significant adverse impact on the environment or might be a cause of public concern.

Establishment process

The proposed Thaidene Nene National Park Reserve of Canada (hereafter Thaidene Nënë) is situated in the East Arm of Great Slave Lake of the Northwest Territories and is comprised of approximately 14,000 km². The proposed national park reserve is north east of the community of Lutsel K'e and within the territory under land and resources negotiations of the Akaitcho First Nations and the Northwest Territory Métis Nation. The Mowhi Gogha Dè Nùtleè of the settled land claim of the Tlicho Government overlaps the proposed Thaidene Nënë. The proposed national park reserve is also claimed by the North Slave Métis Alliance. Parks Canada is in the process of completing an Establishment Agreement with Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation and an Impact and Benefit Agreement with the Northwest Territory Métis Nation. Parks Canada is also consulting and engaged with the Deninu K'ue First Nation, the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, the North Slave Métis Alliance and the Tlicho Government.

To legally establish Thaidene Nënë, agreement must be reached with the Government of the Northwest Territories to transfer the administration and control of the lands to Parks Canada. This will be achieved with the completion of the *Memorandum of Agreement for Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve* under negotiation between Parks Canada and Government of the Northwest Territories.

At the discretion of Parliament, a bill to establish Thaidene Nënë would be passed and the national park reserve subsequently listed under Schedule 2 of the *Canada National Parks Act*. It will remain under Schedule 2 as a national park reserve until all claims with respect to aboriginal rights that have been accepted for negotiation by the Government of Canada are settled. This designation recognizes that Indigenous land title has not been resolved and land claim rights are yet to be finalized. Once all the claims are settled, Thaidene Nënë may be listed under Schedule 1 of the *Canada National Parks Act* and would become Thaidene Nënë National Park of Canada.

Thaidene Nene will represent the Northwestern Boreal Uplands Natural Region, heretofore unrepresented in the National Parks System Plan.

Supporting Research

As part of the feasibility assessment for Thaidene Nene, studies were conducted on topics including:

- Thaidene Nënë State of Knowledge Report

- Preliminary Area of Interest for a National Park in the East Arm of Great Slave Lake
- Ecological Values of the Proposed Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve
- Migratory Tundra Caribou Seasonal and Annual Distribution
- Assessment of Landscape Values (Our Landscape Values) Study - Proposed Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve
- Mineral and Energy Resource Assessment (MERA) - Proposed Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve.

The mineral and energy resource assessment was completed under the direction of scientists from the Geological Survey of Canada. This assessment informed the decision making on the boundary with areas with the highest mineral potential left out of the proposed protected area. The results are available to the public as open files at the following website:

<https://geoscan.nrcan.gc.ca/starweb/geoscan/servlet.starweb?path=geoscan/shorte.web&search1=R=292448:292476>.

Land withdrawal

The *Northwest Territories Lands Act* allows for land withdrawals to ensure that no new dispositions on Crown Land are registered. The Northwest Territories legislature enacted a land withdrawal of 33,690 km² that will be in effect until April 1, 2019 for the purpose of establishing Thaidene Nene. All of the proposed area for the national park reserve is withdrawn for both the surface and subsurface estates. However, existing third party leases in the area will be respected. A renewal of the land withdrawal for the proposed area was put into place by the GNWT on April 1, 2019 with a separate order for the national park reserve lands.

Public Consultations

Consultations with the Canadian public and residents, special interest groups and stakeholders of the Northwest Territories regarding the proposed Thaidene Nënë national park reserve spanned from January 2015 to January 2017. This information was compiled in a consultation report produced by an independent consultant entitled “Proposed Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve Consultation and Engagement Report”. The report is available on the Parks Canada website at <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/cnnp-cnnp/thaidene-nene/apprendre-learn/consultations>. The results of the consultations have informed the negotiation of the Memorandum of Agreement for Thaidene Nënë (Land Transfer Agreement) with the Government of the Northwest Territories.

Description of proposal

Parks Canada is working to establish a national park reserve of 14,000 square kilometres. The proposed national park reserve is located in the very picturesque East Arm of Great Slave Lake and highlights the transition from boreal forest to tundra. It is very rich in water features including not only parts of Great Slave Lake, but also, numerous rivers (Lockhart and Snowdrift), lakes (Whitefish, Eileen) and numerous bays (Christie, Maufelly, McLeod and Wildbread). The Lady of the Falls (Tyrell Falls) is not only spectacular but also of great spiritual importance to the Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation. The

variety of habitats within Thaidene Nënë supports diverse species of mammals, birds, fish and amphibians. Wildlife species projected to occur in the proposed Thaidene Nënë national park reserve study area include 42 mammals, 171 birds, 28 fish and 1 amphibian.

Mammal species of particular note include: barren ground caribou, moose, muskox, grey wolf, black and grizzly bear, red and Arctic fox, lynx, wolverine, otter, beaver, muskrat, and snowshoe and Arctic hare. The proposed Thaidene Nënë national park reserve would protect parts of the annual ranges of all three barren-ground caribou herds in the area, one herd of which may soon be listed as “endangered”. Ten species of hawks and falcons, two eagle species, osprey and six owl species also occur in the Thaidene Nënë study area. Islands and cliffs in the area are known to be important nesting habitat for breeding birds and many rocky islands host colonies of gulls and terns.

Importance of the Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve

- The proposed Thaidene Nënë national park reserve has provided sustenance and been travelled by Indigenous peoples since time immemorial and includes numerous areas of spiritual and cultural importance to Akaitcho First Nations and the Northwest Territory Métis Nation.
- The Thaidene Nënë area was also part of the early fur trade and exploration activities. Fort Reliance, built for an 1833 British military expedition across the Arctic led by George Back, is now recognised as a National Historic Site. An RCMP detachment and a weather station were also located at Reliance, within Thaidene Nënë.
- Despite human use and development pressures, the proposed Thaidene Nënë national park reserve has remained a large, relatively intact wilderness area.
- The proposed Thaidene Nënë national park reserve will be part of a matrix of land designations supporting conservation and ecological integrity. The matrix includes approximately 12,000 km² of adjoining lands and waters within several territorial protected areas and a wildlife management zone. The 55,000 km² of the Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary are also within close proximity.

Potential outcomes of establishment and assessment of potential impacts

Potential outcomes of the establishment of Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve of Canada include: natural and cultural resource protection; improved ecosystem monitoring; co-operative management with Indigenous partners; visitor access; and facilities and Parks Canada expenditures. The area protected will contribute 0.14 percent towards the Canada Target 1 goal of protecting 17 percent of Canada lands and freshwater by 2020.

1. Natural and cultural resource protection

The proposed Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve of Canada will be managed under the *Canada National Parks Act (CNPA)*. The CNPA protects natural and cultural resources while prohibiting forestry, hydro-electric development and mineral and oil and gas activity.

Hunting and traditional activities

Curtailing non-Indigenous hunting will lead to positive effects on wildlife populations in the national park reserve area. The Government of the Northwest Territories manages hunting across the territory to ensure that, if hunters move their activities to other areas of the NWT, populations remain sustainable. The significant decline of the barren ground caribou herd populations led to the closure of all guided big-game hunting in the area in 2009 so the establishment of the national park reserve will have no new impacts on this business sector. Similarly, there will be no impact on commercial fishing, which has been prohibited for years.

Within the proposed park reserve First Nations and Métis people will continue their traditional use of the area. Hunting and other traditional activities carried out by Indigenous people will be managed cooperatively to minimize the possibility of conflicts between visitors and traditional users and to ensure the sustainability of harvesting. Any environmental interactions resulting from Indigenous camps, or resource harvesting would occur irrespective of the establishment of the park.

Mineral and oil and gas exploration and development

The establishment of Thaidene Nënë will also lead to a prohibition of mineral and oil and gas exploration and development in the area. There is no known hydrocarbon potential in the proposed park nor are there any existing mining operations. Therefore, there will be no impacts on any existing extraction industry.

The final boundary of Thaidene Nënë excluded all areas of high mineral values and most of the areas of medium to high mineral values. There have been concerns raised by the mining industry that the Mineral and Energy Resources Assessment (MERA) was insufficient for determining the full potential of the area. Parks Canada has responded that the MERA, completed in 2013, entailed two years of new field work and incorporated those results with work done in the 1980's and an extensive review of known occurrences, deposits and other sources of geological information. It was also peer reviewed.

The other issue that has arisen from the mining industry is a request for a process for a potential corridor through the national park reserve. Parks Canada has responded that, with the reduction in size from a 33,690 km² land withdrawal to 14,000 km², there is both more urgency for Thaidene Nënë to remain intact and more options outside the park for any potential corridor. A corridor for industrial use is not permitted under the *Canada National Parks Act*. In addition, with the smaller configuration, the north shore of Great Slave Lake has been removed from the national park reserve to facilitate access to existing and potential mineral areas north of the park. Industrial corridors bisecting critical habitat for caribou, such as the habitat of the severely diminished Bathurst herd, is inconsistent with the purpose of a national park. Thaidene Nënë promises to protect an important northern landscape while offering unique visitor experiences and ensuring Indigenous peoples are integral to its management. Investments to promote that vision would be continually at risk if the prospect of industrial corridors were an on-going possibility,

2. Facilities

In keeping with the wilderness character of the proposed park, outside the Reliance area, there are no current plans for infrastructure within the national park reserve. In the future and subject to management planning activities, structures of modest facilities such as primitive campgrounds, patrol cabins or mooring buoys may be considered.

Any facilities have the potential to cause minor disruption or loss of wildlife habitat, minor disruption of movements, minor changes to drainage patterns and damage of vegetation in small areas around operational facilities, and increased risk of wildlife-human interactions. Environmental assessments of physical works will be conducted before any facilities are built in the park and these would provide direction in mitigation measures.

A number of existing facilities will continue to be located at Reliance. Among these facilities is Trophy Lodge, an operating fishing and tourism camp, and two leasehold residential properties. A fee simple property at Reliance will remain outside of the national park reserve unless this property is acquired on a willing seller – willing buyer basis. There is also a fuel cache accessed by aircraft and boat traffic. The establishment of the national park reserve will not increase the existing environmental impacts of existing facilities and in the case of the fuel cache, Parks Canada will bring this facility up to environmentally sound standards.

The former Fort Reliance weather station site is located approximately 270 km east of Yellowknife on the eastern end of Great Slave Lake, within the proposed Thaidene Nënë. Since 1993, the site has been vacant except for a small automated weather station operated by Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC). The site contains abandoned buildings and infrastructure which are remnants from the Department of National Defence's (DND) occupation between the 1940s and early 1970s and from Atmospheric Environment Service's (AES) occupation starting in the late 1950s and ending in the early 1990s. In 2019, ECCC has launched the Fort Reliance Remediation Project to clean up the site.

Most of the buildings on-site are in poor condition and are no longer suitable for future beneficial use. Foundations of the historically significant DND buildings will be left in place for future acknowledgement, potentially through the erection of plaques on-site. ECCC is currently working with the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office (FHBRO) to confirm a plan to record the legacy associated with those buildings that have a designated heritage status. It is anticipated that the successful contractor will mobilize equipment to the site by barge as early as open water conditions will allow during the spring of 2019 and remediation activities should be complete by the end of the summer, 2019, at which time all equipment and waste material will be removed from site by barge.

3. Visitor access

From a 2013 study, it was estimated that the visitor pattern is approximately 500 visitors to the Thaidene Nënë area each year.

It is expected that these numbers may increase following park establishment. Increases in park visitation numbers should be expected as a result of new types of service offers from tourism outfitters and the increased profile of Thaidene Nënë. Visitor registration will allow for collection of visitation statistics.

As in many remote northern national parks aircraft access will be available in all water bodies. Currently in the East Arm of Great Slave Lake, apart from boat access, air is the only method of access to the area. For visitation, Parks Canada recognises that maintaining this access is essential. During consultations, aircraft pilots, both recreational and commercial, confirmed that the vast majority of them accessed the area either on skis or floats and therefore water access will accommodate them. An alternative process will be available for any planes on tires. However, increased tourism and Park management activities may increase air traffic which could have a negative impact on wildlife due to noise or visitor-wildlife encounters. The impacts are not expected to be substantially different from the current use and if too many aircraft landing in one location becomes an issue for wildlife or visitor enjoyment, mitigation measures will be considered by the cooperative management body, and implemented.

4. Visitor activities

Visitors to the national park reserve will be able to participate in a variety of activities including sailing, kayaking, canoeing and motor-boating, backcountry and front-country hiking, snowmobiling, berry picking, dog-sledding and cross-country skiing. If visitation is increased with the national park reserve, these activities may lead to increased, but minor, disruption of wildlife habitat and movements and minor damage to vegetation in commonly used areas and increased risk of wildlife-human interactions. Visitation will be managed according to the *Canada National Parks Act*, impacts are therefore not expected to be substantially different from current levels. If adverse impacts from visitation are foreseen mitigation measures will be considered by the cooperative management body, and implemented.

Increased opportunities for tourism may lead to an increase in employment and contracting opportunities in the regional tourism sector.

5. Parks Canada expenditures

Parks Canada has agreed that the administration and visitor reception centre will be constructed in Lutsel K'e leading to new jobs in the community related to the establishment and operation of Thaidene Nënë. Employees of Parks Canada will have increased training and career development, and the potential for stable, long term employment. Also, direct requirements for Parks Canada operations will increase expenditures on services in the community of Lutsel K'e and have a positive effect on the local economy.

In addition to the direct economic benefits from Parks Canada operations in the community of Lutsel K'e, Parks Canada is also making financial contributions for operations carried out by Lutsel K'e in Thaidene Nënë. Parks Canada is also engaged in discussions with other Indigenous governments and the Northwest Territory Métis which could support gateway services. This investment in the communities around Great Slave

Lake will have local as well as regional benefits from the economic stimulation and promotion of employment opportunities.

Also, the anticipated increase in tourism will benefit the local and regional economies, not only in Lutsel K'e, but in order for tourists to travel to the proposed Thaidene Nëné, they will also make use of accommodation and transportation services in the gateway communities of Yellowknife and Deninu K'ue. Spin off effects in all these communities will aid Indigenous residents in building a sustainable conservation economy.

6. Mitigation

Potential negative effects on the natural environment from facilities, visitor activities and visitor access will be primarily mitigated through the park management plan and environmental assessments for individual developments.

A park management plan is required by the *CNPA* to be completed within five years of formal establishment under the *CNPA*. It is expected that the management plan will direct that the park be managed with special emphasis on the protection of wilderness values. Cultural resources will also be managed to ensure a high level of protection and in a manner consistent with the Indigenous agreements, *CNPA* and the Parks Canada Cultural Resource Management Policy. To the extent possible, no new development will take place before completion of the park management plan. In that way, the ability to make informed planning decisions will not be compromised. The park management plan can also address broader issues such as cooperation with First Nations and Métis in management of traditional uses of the park and air access. Once completed, the park management plan will be assessed for adverse environmental effects as required by Parks Canada policy and the *Cabinet Directive on the Environmental Assessment of Policy, Plan and Program Proposals*.

Any particular development will be subject to a preliminary screening under the *Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act (MVRMA)*. The required mitigation, surveillance and follow-up will be developed while the proposals progress from the conceptual phase to the design and implementation phase.