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The Seal River Watershed

Proposed Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area and National Park Reserve

Parks Canada Public Engagement Summary

2024

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A photograph of two moose swimming in a calm lake at sunset. The moose are in the foreground, partially submerged, with their heads and antlers visible above water. The water is still, reflecting the colorful sky. In the background, a dark line of trees marks the far shore under a sky with soft orange and pink hues and scattered clouds.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Background

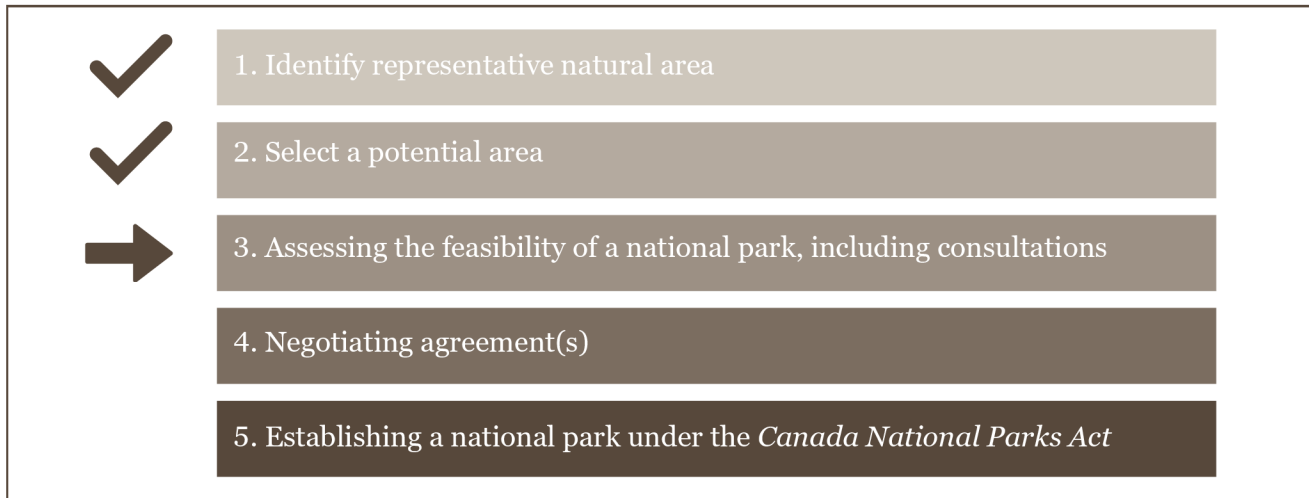
Located in northern Manitoba, the Seal River Watershed is one of the world's largest ecologically intact watersheds. Covering approximately 50,000 km², the watershed is home to wolverines, polar bears, grizzly bears, barren-ground caribou, and olive-sided flycatchers. It is the ancestral territory of many Indigenous nations and communities whose cultures and languages are rooted in their relationship to the land and water of the Seal River Watershed.

Parks Canada, along with the Seal River Watershed Alliance (SRWA) and the Government of Manitoba, are assessing the feasibility of establishing a protected area including a possible national park reserve and Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) in the Seal River Watershed. As part of the feasibility assessment, Parks Canada reached out to the public through an online survey to gather feedback to better understand the common interests, concerns, and potential impacts of designating the Seal River Watershed under federal protection. The public was invited to provide input on a proposed IPCA and potential national park reserve during a consultation period that took place between July 22 and August 23, 2024. This report summarizes the feedback received through the Parks Canada online survey.

An IPCA and a potential national park reserve presents an opportunity for the governments of Canada and Manitoba, and Seal River Watershed First Nations to strengthen their relationships and contribute to Canada's growing network of protected and conserved areas. Establishing a protected area in the Seal River Watershed could help safeguard Canada's biodiversity and mitigate climate change by preserving large wetland areas that act as a carbon sink.

There is no rigid process for establishing new national parks. Each proposed project is unique and reflects local circumstances. The standard sequence, however, is framed by five steps.

Parks Establishment Infographic:



Data Collection

Parks Canada developed, coordinated, and facilitated the data collection for this public consultation survey. The survey was designed and built internally by Parks Canada's Social Sciences department. Parks Canada completed public consultations over a 4-week period, in addition to in-person community engagement and stakeholder meetings, to gather insight and feedback on the perceptions, concerns, and interest in a potential new national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed.

The survey was promoted on the Parks Canada website, through partner and stakeholder networks, on local radio stations, and social media. Respondents submitted the surveys electronically.

A survey was administered by Parks Canada online through July and August 2024 and was available in both official languages. Contributors were given a 9-question survey; 5 of the questions were open-ended to invite contributors to express opinions and concerns about the creation of a national park reserve. There were 1,427 responses to the survey.

Respondents included Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, 63% of whom reside in Manitoba.

Method of Analysis


The full data response set was analyzed by Parks Canada using Microsoft Excel spreadsheet software. The open-ended survey responses (questions where respondents could reply in their own words) were grouped into common themes based on the number of people with similar answers. The major themes summarized in this report are supported by charts created using the raw data and enhanced by a selection of quotations from survey respondents.

Summary of Conclusions

Overall, there was significant public support for a potential national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed based on the findings of the online public survey.

Respondents emphasized the importance of conservation, with high priority given to biodiversity, protecting species at risk, and mitigating climate change. The need to protect the area from negative human impacts like resource development was a consistent theme. Many saw the project as an opportunity to advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and support the ongoing protection of Dene and Cree heritage, as well as Indigenous stewardship.

The top concerns regarding the creation of a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed were the ability to protect species and habitats and to monitor and enforce regulations, particularly in relation to tourism impacts. Some were also concerned about restrictions on activities like hunting and fishing if the area became a national park reserve. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of meaningful engagement with the public, stakeholders, and Indigenous communities.

An aerial photograph of a mountain peak covered in dense evergreen forest. Below the forest, a thick layer of white clouds or fog fills the valley, creating a 'sea of clouds' effect. The sky above is a pale, hazy blue. The overall tone is serene and majestic.

SURVEY RESPONSES - DEMOGRAPHICS SUMMARY

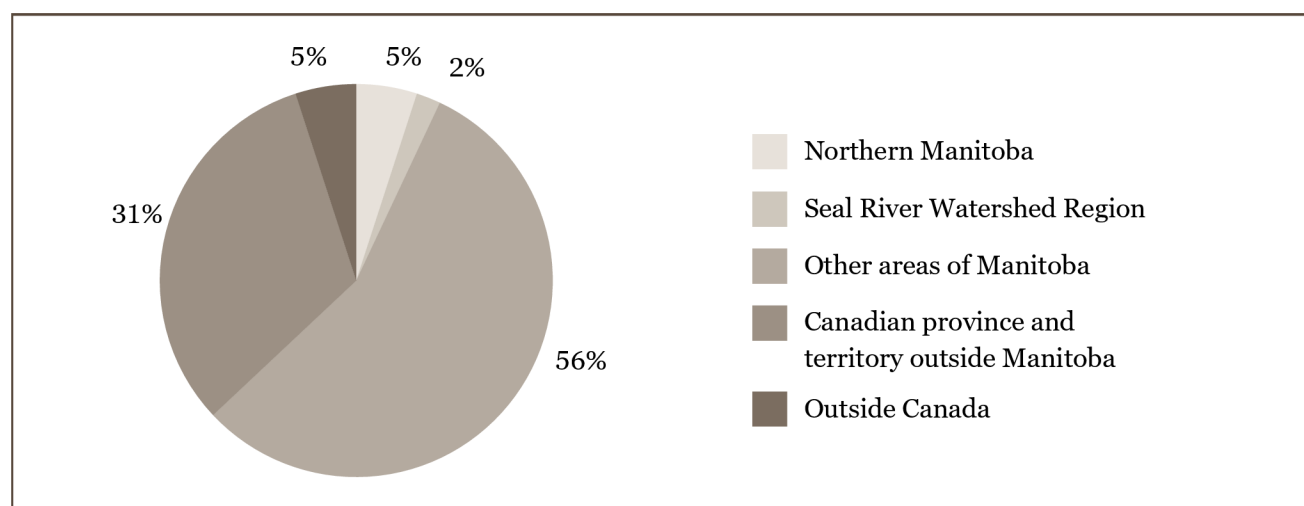
There were 1,427 responses to the survey.

Respondents included Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, 63% of whom reside in Manitoba. The following is a summary of the responses including summary text, charts, and a selection of relevant quotations.

Residence

Most respondents were residents of Manitoba (63%). A portion of respondents reside in northern Manitoba (5%) or more specifically, the Seal River Watershed region (2%). Almost a third of respondents were from a province or territory outside of Manitoba (32%).

Respondents' Current Residence



Connection to the Watershed

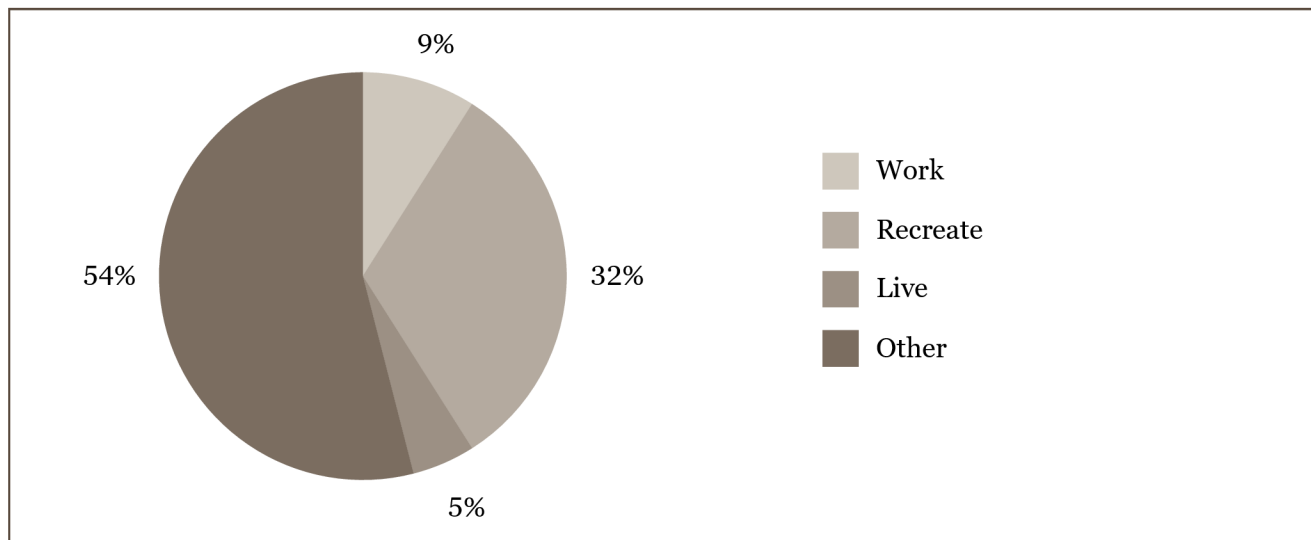
Most respondents do not live, work, or recreate in the Seal River Watershed.

Nearly a third of respondents recreate in the Seal River Watershed.

Respondents in the “Other” category are mostly represented by Manitoba residents who are interested in the protected area proposal and/or see benefits to or have concerns about protecting the Seal River Watershed as an

IPCA or a potential national park reserve. It is also represented by Indigenous people, former residents of the Seal River Watershed or individuals who have friends/family that reside in the Seal River Watershed.

Respondents' Connection to the Seal River Watershed

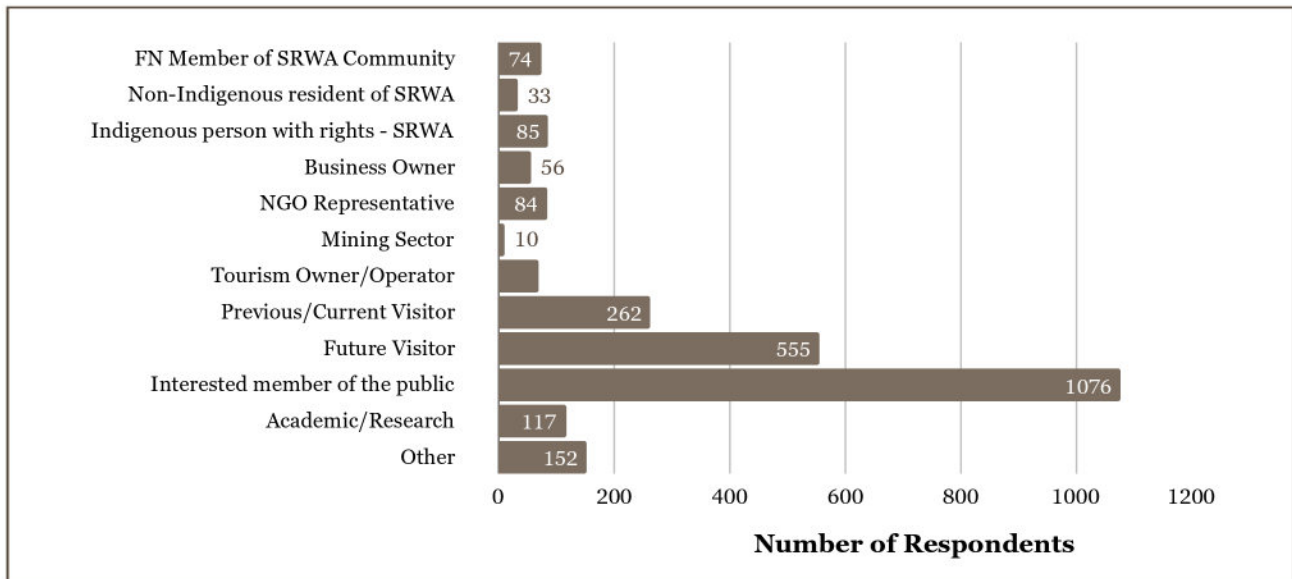


Interest

Survey respondents came from a wide variety of interests in the proposed IPCA and potential national park reserve. Many respondents are interested members of the public and/or considered themselves to be future visitors to the Seal River Watershed. Respondents also included First Nation members of a Seal River Watershed community, and non-Indigenous residents of the Seal River Watershed.

Respondents in the “Other” category are represented by hunters, anglers, environmental/conservation organizations, artists, persons from the media, and Indigenous peoples with traditional a territory outside of the Seal River Watershed.

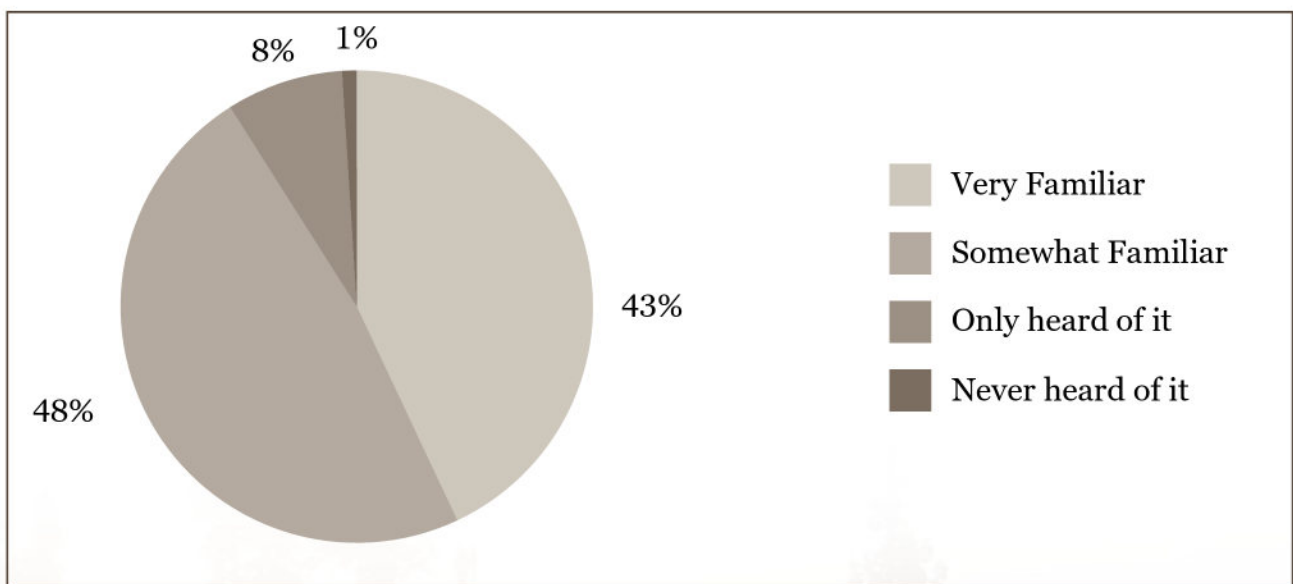
Origin of Respondents' Interest in the Seal River Watershed



Knowledge Base

Respondents were familiar with the topic of conservation and protected areas, with most respondents (91%) being very familiar or somewhat familiar with the topic.

Respondents' Familiarity with the Topic of Conservation and Protected Areas





SURVEY RESPONSES - THEME SUMMARY

A series of fixed choice and open-ended questions invited respondents to express opinions and concerns about the creation of a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed. Of the 1,427 survey responses, not every respondent answered every question. The key themes summarized in this report are gathered from both the fixed choice and open-ended responses. A representative sample of quotations is provided under each theme.

Benefits:

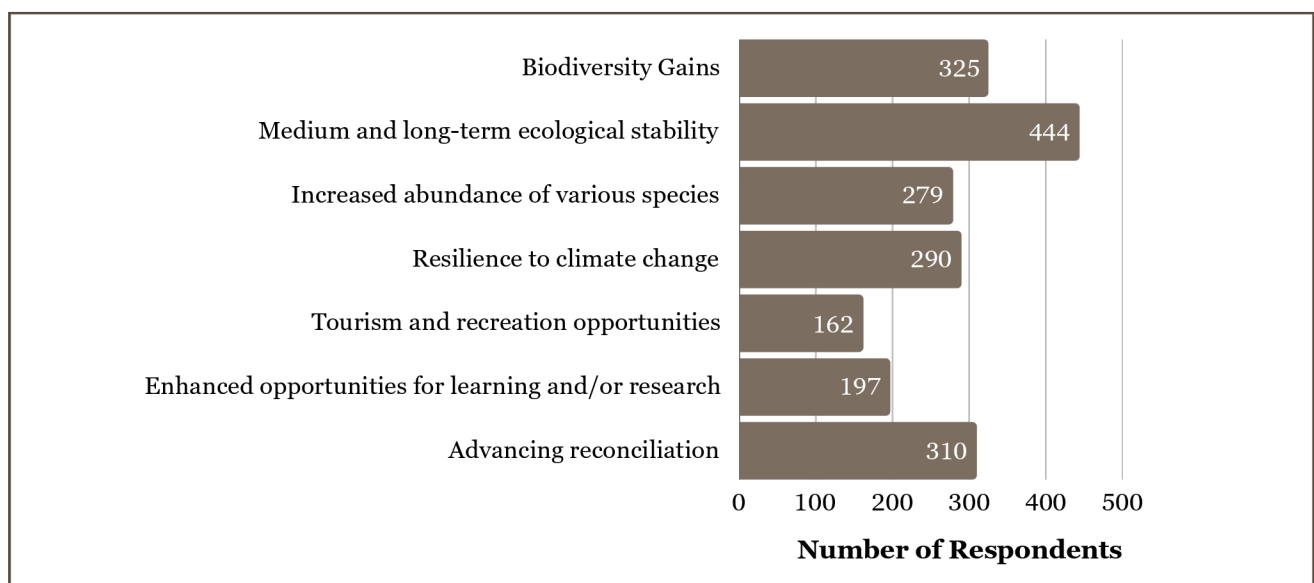
Respondents were asked to answer, **“Do you see any potential benefits of creating a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed?”**.

1,162 of 1,427 respondents (81%) agreed that there would be benefits to creating a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to identify benefits (maximum of 3) from a predetermined list of benefits. The most selected benefits (excluding “other”) were:

- Medium and long-term ecological stability
- Biodiversity gains
- Advancing reconciliation

Benefits of Protecting the Seal River Watershed



538 survey respondents elaborated in their own words on their response and shared more details about the specific benefits that they identified. The strongest common theme that received the most frequent mentions in respondents' own words was the benefit of 'Environmental, conservation, and protection (wildlife, landscape, etc.)'.

In addition to the benefit of "Advancing Reconciliation", another key theme that emerged from the written responses was 'Indigenous stewardship and governance'. Finally, survey responses mentioned that a benefit of creating a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed would be 'protection against resource, industrial, and/or commercial development' and 'tourism and other economic opportunities'.

Selection of Quotations:

Environmental, conservation and protection

"Intact watersheds with minimal impacts are rare in the world today, particularly those with such substantial wetlands. The watershed is ecologically significant and will help support ecological diversity and buffer against climate change."

"Protecting native species of plants and animals."



Photo©: Seal River Watershed Alliance

“Protecting habitat is the key action required to allow species at risk to recover.”



Advancing reconciliation and Indigenous stewardship

“I’m supportive of a national park if the local nations agree and are firmly involved in design, location, and running of it as well as sustainable careers.”

“Canada needs more Indigenous-led conserved and protected areas.”

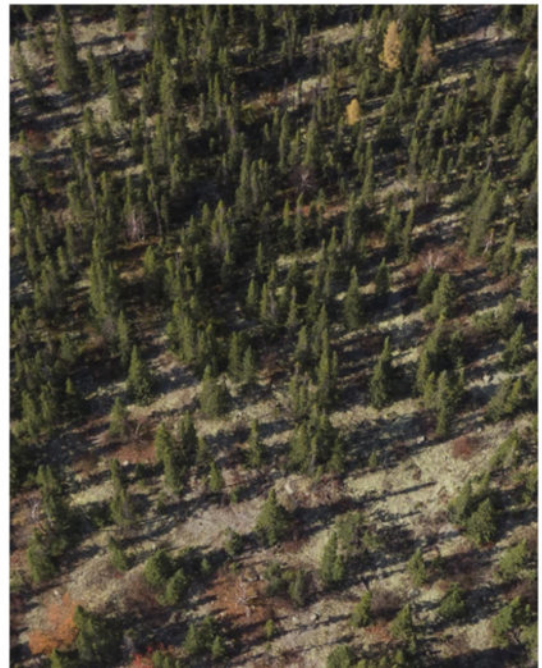
“This initiative seems to also aim for reconciliation by integrating traditional knowledge with modern conservation practices, fostering a collaborative approach.”



Protection against resource, industrial and/or commercial development

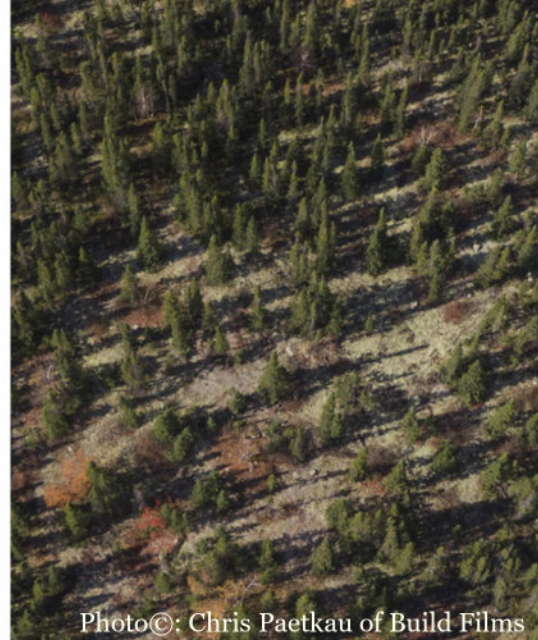
“Once these gems are lost, they are gone forever, especially if mining interests are allowed.”

“Major rivers across Canada have been dammed for hydro-electric power. The



downstream effects on wildlife, people and culture have been profound and far-reaching.”

“The boreal region is under pressure from significant resource development. The creation of a full watershed-based national park is key to expanding protected areas in the boreal region.”



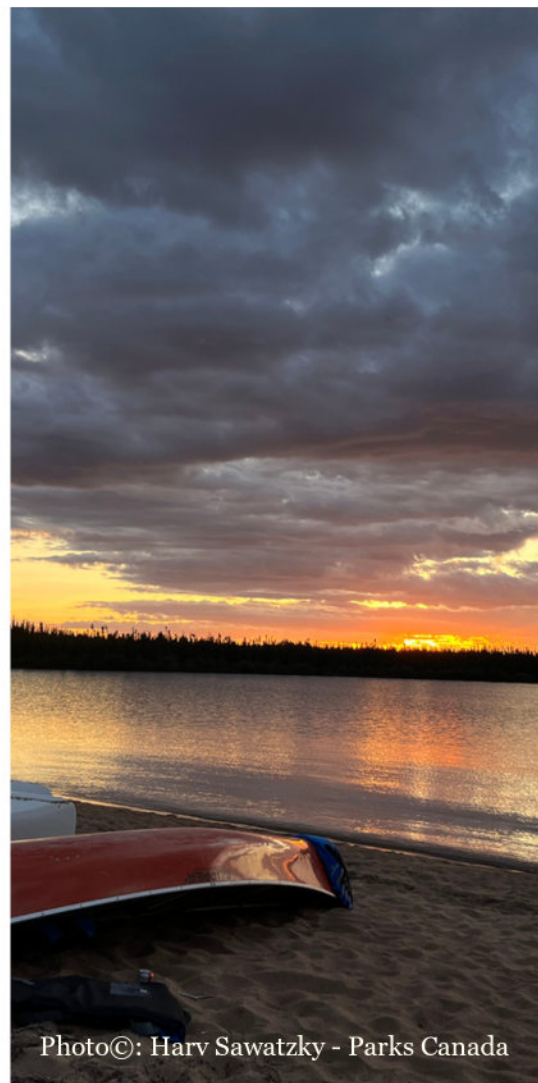
Photo©: Chris Paetkau of Build Films

Tourism and other economic opportunities

“This initiative will create long-term, good paying jobs for the local community.”

“Protecting the area will [...] advance opportunities for Indigenous tourism and teaching initiatives.”

“Supporting eco-cultural tourism opportunities for local First Nations communities - building conservation-based economies.”



Photo©: Harv Sawatzky - Parks Canada

Other

“I like the idea of protecting the environment and creating new opportunities for Manitobans to learn /experience the North.”

“Such a pristine watershed is a potential place for world class research.”

“Protecting the watershed will provide water security (both quality and quantity) to not only the surrounding area, but down stream as well.”



Concerns

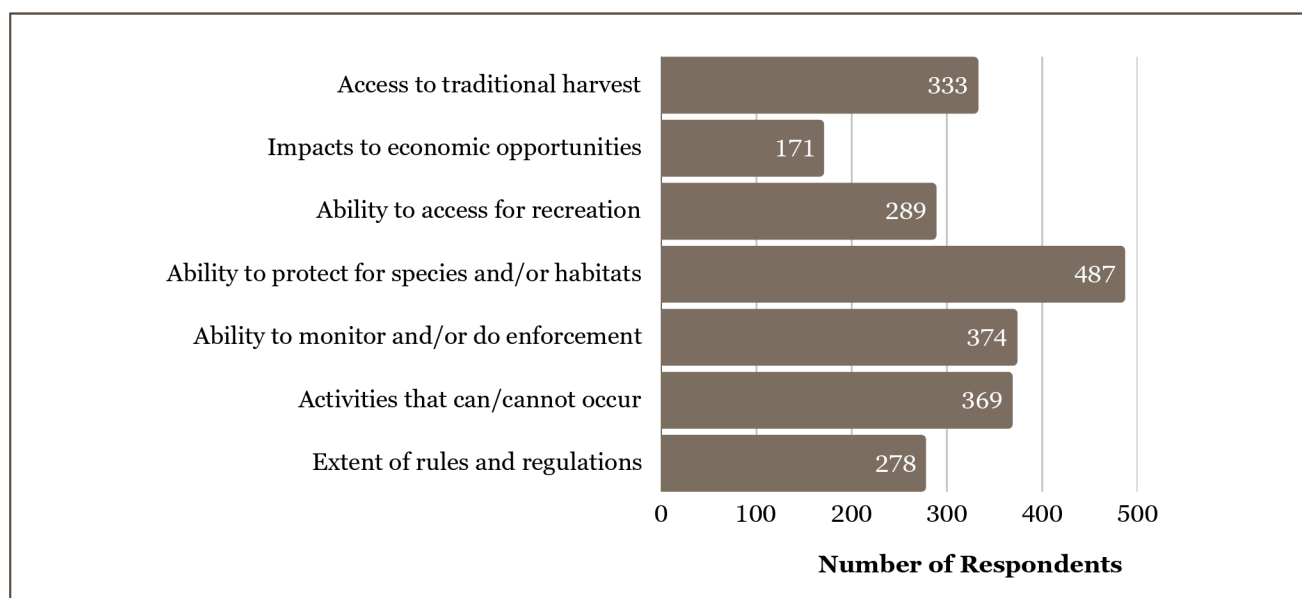
Respondents were asked to answer, “**Do you have any concerns with the creation of a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed?**”.

596 of 1,427 respondents (42%) had concerns with the creation of a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to identify concerns (maximum of 3) from a predetermined list of concerns. The most selected concerns (excluding “other”) were:

- Ability to protect for species and/or habitats
- Ability to monitor and/or do enforcement
- Activities that can/cannot occur

Concerns About Protecting the Seal River Watershed



469 survey respondents elaborated in their own words on their response. They shared more details about the specific concerns that they identified or why they had no concerns. The most common concern that was received was regarding the ability for a national park reserve to “protect species and/or habitats”. This feedback was mainly concerned with the impact of potential increased access and tourism on the environment.

Survey respondents were also concerned with “monitoring and/or enforcement” of the area, with respect to the size and remote nature of the Seal River Watershed. ‘Activities that can/cannot occur’ was also identified as a primary concern especially regarding hunting, fishing, and other forms of harvesting by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Finally, the ‘economic impacts’ to potential mineral resource opportunities and hydro-electric infrastructure projects was present in several comments by survey respondents.

Selection of Quotations:

Protecting Species and Habitats

“Access and use must be controlled. People will damage and exploit the areas.”

“I’ve recently seen an increase in tourists being disrespectful of wildlife, their habitat and regulations in national parks.”

“National Parks draw people from near and far. There must be rules set out to provide security for the park and ensure wildlife stability.”

“My instinct is that national park status would help preserve the wilderness and protect it from over-development, but I would also be concerned that too many visitors and easier access might cause problems.”



Photo©: Chris Paetkau of Build Films

Monitoring and Enforcement

“I do hope it will be a partnership with Parks Canada though, that they can help with resources, share knowledge



both ways, and to monitor and enforce shared concerns, rules, and regulations, mainly in concern to visitors.”

“Don't set up the protected status and then forget about it. There needs to be work put in to ensure it remains protected.”

“I'm curious what sort of rules/regulations will be put in place to ensure adequate protections for the ecosystem.”



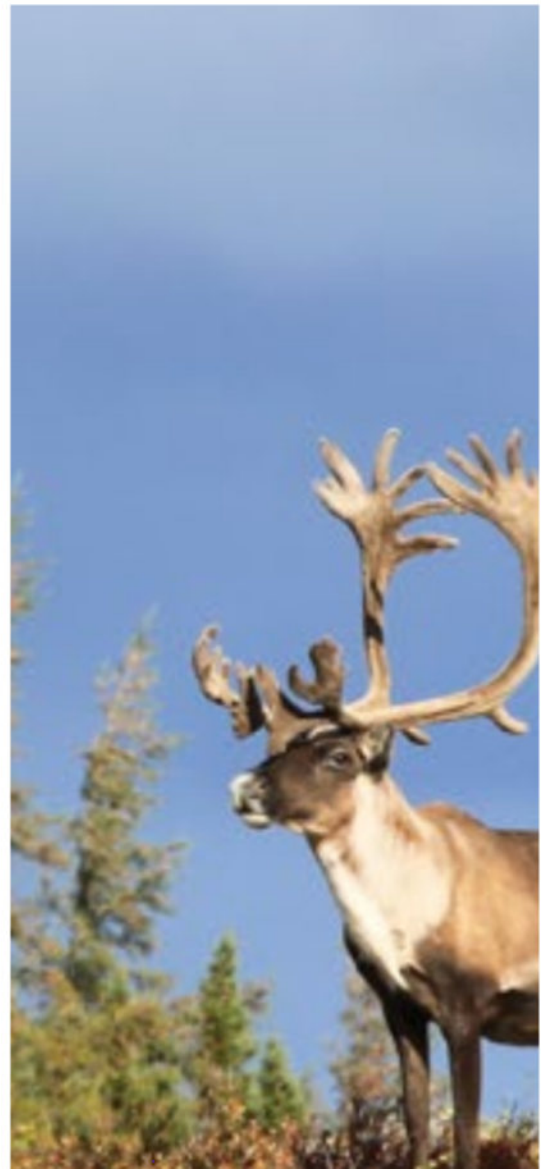
Photo©: Seal River Watershed Alliance

Activities that can/cannot occur

“I like the idea of having a wild area preserved from industrial mining and development but also value access to it as a hunter, angler and conservationist.”

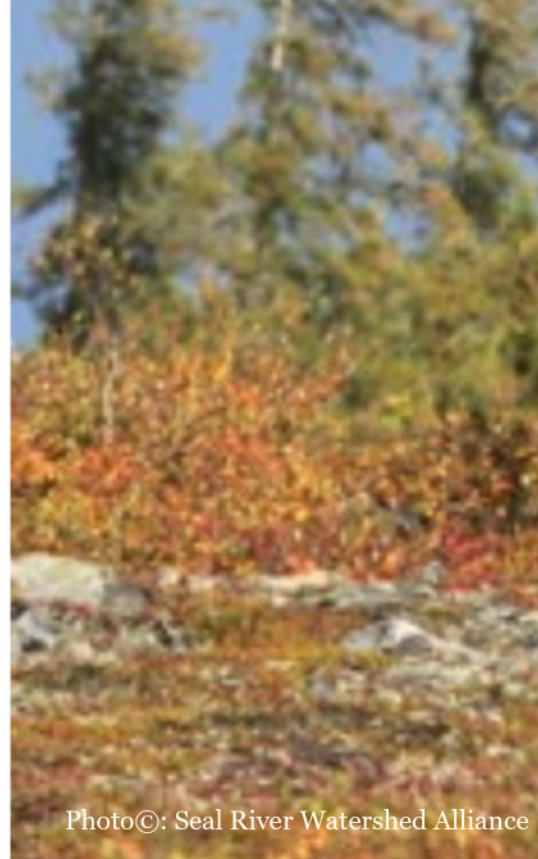
“My main concern is limiting, or outright removing the availability of hunting and angling opportunity for non-Indigenous Manitobans in the region.”

“I would like to see hunting opportunities for non-Indigenous users, who also have a connection to



the area and to the resource, to remain available and be allocated democratically.”

“Sustainable use activities, such as hunting and fishing, can coexist harmoniously with the conservation objectives of protected areas. These activities, guided by the principle of adaptive management, can play a critical role in managing fish and wildlife populations and maintaining ecosystem balance.”



Photo©: Seal River Watershed Alliance

Letter Campaign – “Opposition to the proposal to designate the Seal River Watershed as a national park under the Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) initiative.”

During the public consultation period, Parks Canada received approximately 249 emails that opposed the potential creation of a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed. In the emailed letters, individuals expressed that the protected area proposal “risks excluding licensed hunting and angling”.

“Hunting and fishing in the Seal River Watershed are long-standing traditions that not only provide for many Manitobans but also contribute significantly to local economies through tourism and outdoor recreation.”

The letters showed general support for conservation in the Seal River Watershed, however, some recommended using other designations that would allow non-Indigenous hunting to continue such as provincial Wildlife Management Areas (WMA).

Economic Impacts

“Hydro electric projects will possibly be affected which has an economic impact.”

“It's a very, very large area and needs to be studied for economic potential before restricting activity.”

“The proposal will significantly reduce economic opportunity and will result in a marked decrease to tourism; specifically for those who hunt / fish / guide in the area.”

“This would impact negatively on the mineral resource opportunities in the province by sterilizing a large area that is under-explored for mineral potential.”



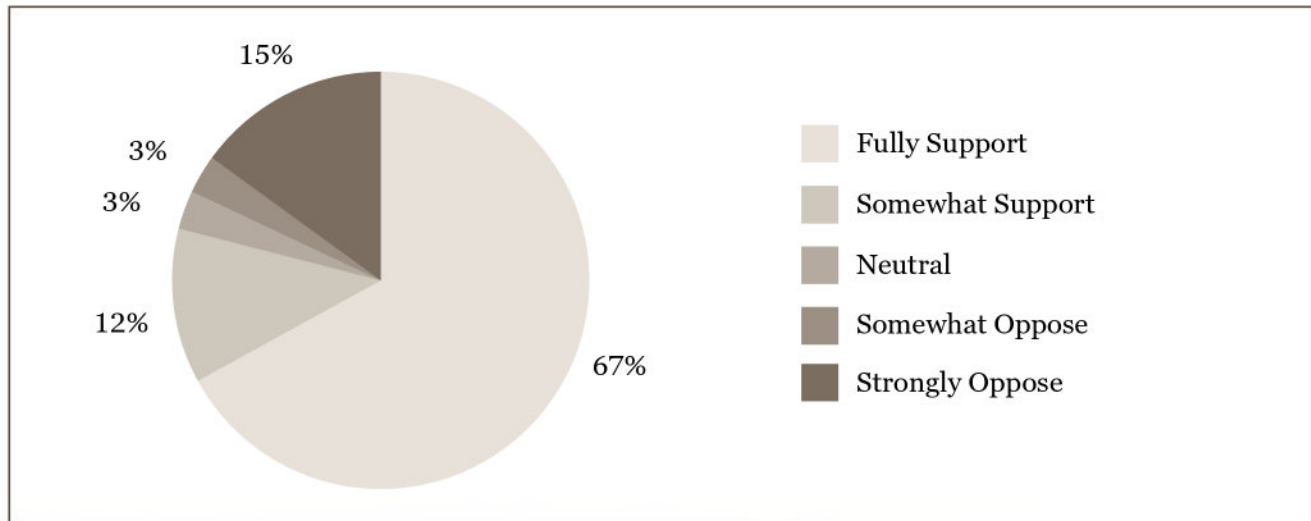
Photo©: Ernie Bussidor (Seal River Watershed Alliance)


Support Level

Survey respondents were asked “**How would you rate your current level of support for a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed of northern Manitoba?**”.

1,322 of 1,427 respondents provided an answer to this question. 79% fully or somewhat support the potential establishment of a national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed and 18% somewhat or strongly oppose.

Respondents' Support of the Project



An aerial photograph of a vast body of water, likely a lake or a wide river, during a golden hour sunset. The sun is a bright, glowing orb in the upper right corner, casting a long, shimmering reflection across the water's surface. The sky is filled with soft, horizontal clouds, some of which are illuminated from below by the sun. The water is dark, with numerous small, forested islands and peninsulas scattered throughout. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, golden-yellow and orange tones, with the dark silhouettes of the land providing a strong contrast.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Conclusions

Overall, there was strong support for a potential national park reserve in the Seal River Watershed based on the findings of the public engagement survey.

The importance of conservation and future environmental protection was strongly represented throughout the public engagement survey. Respondents rated ecological values, such as biodiversity, protecting species at risk, and mitigating climate change, of the highest importance. Throughout the public consultation, the importance for conserving and protecting the Seal River Watershed from negative human impacts such as resource and commercial development was a strong theme. In addition, survey respondents saw the protection of the area as an IPCA and a potential national park reserve as an opportunity to advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Ongoing protection and preservation of Dene and Cree heritage, along with continued accessibility to the land, and Indigenous stewardship was strongly supported.

Most survey respondents indicated they had no concerns about the creation of a national park reserve in the area. Of the respondents who expressed concerns, the “ability to protect species and/or habitats” and “ability to monitor and/or do enforcement” was brought up most frequently. This was often related to the potential negative impacts that tourism may have on the area if not effectively managed. Another common concern was related to activities that can and cannot occur if the watershed were designated as a national park reserve. The primary activities of interest were hunting, fishing, and other forms of harvesting by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Feedback also highlighted the importance of meaningful engagement and consultation with the public, stakeholders, rights-holders, and communities throughout the process.

Next Steps

Parks Canada along with the SRWA and the Government of Manitoba are currently working together on a feasibility assessment for a protected area including a possible national park reserve and IPCA in the Seal River Watershed. The public opinions and feedback will be represented in a feasibility assessment report. The public consultation process is not intended to build consensus, but to identify challenges and opportunities associated with the proposed protected area that require ongoing efforts to address.

In addition to public consultation, Parks Canada began consultation processes with Indigenous rights-holders and worked together with the SRWA and the Government of Manitoba to organize meetings with interested stakeholders and participate in local community engagement sessions. Feedback from these other forms of consultation will also be represented in the Seal River Watershed feasibility assessment.

Following the feasibility assessment, if all parties agree that establishing a protected area including a possible national park reserve and IPCA in the Seal River Watershed is feasible and desirable, the next step will be to negotiate an establishment agreement. Parks Canada will continue to consult the public at each step of the process.