

## Deal set to create a NWT version of Banff, Jasper

Proposed national park around beloved headwaters of the South Nahanni River will be about 7,600 square kilometres

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The area around the headwaters of the South Nahanni River in the Northwest Territories is considered one of the most spectacular sights in the world. It's a landscape made up of an alpine plateau, whose ridges and snow packs support a profusion of grizzly bears, Dall's sheep and woodland caribou.

Now this wilderness area, best known mainly to whitewater-rafting enthusiasts, is on its way to becoming Canada's newest national park.

Federal officials, accompanied by Dene and Métis representatives, announced yesterday that they had signed a deal under their land-claim agreement that will lead to the establishment of a protected area called the Naats'ihch'oh National Park Reserve. It will be about 7,600 square kilometres, about 1½ times the size of Prince Edward Island.

The new reserve will be contiguous with the existing Nahanni National Park Reserve, creating two large, side-by-side protected areas that have the potential to become the Northwest Territories' version of Banff and Jasper in Alberta.

Environmental and land-preservation organizations have been lobbying since the early 1970s for the national parks system to encompass this area, in the southwestern part of the NWT and widely praised for its rugged beauty.

"It's fantastic news. It's now well on track to completing protection of the entire Nahanni watershed, which has been a dream of course for conservationists for about 30 years," observed Larry Innes, executive director of Canadian Boreal Initiative, an Ottawa-based organization that includes environmental, native and industry groups.

Environmentalists have been among the most vociferous opponents of the Harper government, mainly for its record on climate change. Conservatives may be able to blunt criticism from this sector in the next election by pointing to their record on park creation. In the past year, the government has announced five major parkland expansions in the North.

"As a conservation community, we can only applaud the action," said Julie Gelfand, president of Nature Canada. She said that for her, the government's action in agreeing to preserve land counts more than "the motives."

Under the agreement with the Dene and Métis, the government still must negotiate an impact and benefit plan, whose completion will lead to the formal establishment of the national park reserve.

National park reserves are created where land has been set aside for conservation purposes, but not all aboriginal claims have been resolved. In the meantime, Ottawa has protected the area through an interim land withdrawal that will prevent prospectors from staking new mineral claims. Existing claims will be respected.

Environment Minister John Baird said in a statement that the new parkland shows "we are once again taking action to protect Canada's North for future generations."

The Northwest Territories is likely to face pressure in coming decades for industrial development, including pipelines, mines, and oil and gas wells.

Environmentalists want the territory and the federal government to preserve the most ecologically important wilderness areas now, while they are still relatively unspoiled. This could allow companies to sidestep the often bitter disputes that have erupted elsewhere in the country when development is proposed for land that has high conservation value.

"That is where we have been suggesting the middle ground has been lying for some time," Mr. Innes said, "so it's good to see them moving in that direction."