

## New national park for North a step closer

Harper government signs pact with Dene to set aside Nahanni mountain wilderness for five years

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EDMONTON - The federal government surprised conservationists Monday with a plan to create a Banff-Jasper-like system of national parks near the southwest corner of the Northwest Territories.

If all goes according to plan, Nááts'ihch'oh (pronounced naah-tseen-cho) National Park will be connected to the north end of Nahanni, the United Nations World Heritage site that is among the most famous mountain wilderness parks in the world.

Altogether, 7,600 square kilometres of wilderness in the Mackenzie Mountains have been temporarily set aside for the next five years. The memorandum of understanding signed with the Dene of the Sahtu region and the government of the Northwest Territories also provides for \$500,000, which will go towards an impact and benefits plan.

This is the fifth northern conservation initiative the Harper government has launched in the past year. Since last August, the government has announced plans for a new national park on the east arm of Great Slave Lake, a national wildlife area for the Ramparts River and wetlands (Ts'ude niline Tu'eyeta) in the Mackenzie Valley, funding for the Sahoyúé-şehdacho National Historic Site of Canada on Great Bear Lake and an expansion plan for Nahanni.

Jennifer Morin, interim executive director for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society in the Northwest Territories, was thrilled with the announcement made by Environment Minister John Baird and Sahtu leaders.

She said it's now time for the government to move forward on its promise to expand Nahanni so the entire watershed of the river is protected. That plan has been in the works for more than a decade.

Nááts'ihch'oh is a Slavey name that refers to Mount Wilson, a major landmark along the headwaters of the South Nahanni River. It means "pointed like a porcupine quill."

The new park will also include the legendary Moose Ponds, used as a staging point for expert paddlers capable of canoeing the challenging whitewater along the upper regions of the river.

As stunning as the mountain scenery is, the new park will not likely attract many visitors. Not only is this portion of the river extremely challenging, it is also difficult and

expensive to get to. A two hour-plus float plane flight from Fort Simpson or Norman Wells is the only practical way to get there.

Monday's announcement was a surprise because most expected the new protected area to be part of an expanded Nahanni national park.

It was the Dene of the Sahtu region who got Parks Canada and Baird to change their minds. With a claim to the upper portions of the famous river, they successfully lobbied for a protection plan that would make their side of the Nahanni distinct from that claimed by the Dene of the Deh Cho to the south.

The idea of creating a new park and connecting it to an established one is not new. The federal government's decision to create Jasper in 1907 effectively expanded the area that was already protected by Banff. More recently, the federal government created two connected parks -- Ivvavik and Vuntut -- in the northern Yukon.

Maligned as the Harper government has been by critics who say some of its environmental positions are weak, conservationists were not shy about heaping praise on this occasion.

"Canadians can be proud of the fact that our government has recognized the importance of protecting this entire region, and is taking steps today to establish not one but two of these world-class conservation areas in the Nahanni region of the NWT," said Larry Innes, executive director of the Canadian Boreal Initiative.

"I think that future generations will come to consider the Nahanni National Park and the future Nááts'ihch'oh National Park in much the same way as we now look at Banff and Jasper."