



# Canada's Heart of the BOREAL FOREST



## A Wilderness Treasure Like No Other



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A few months ago, I was wandering in the wintry forest just a few hours from my home in Winnipeg. Camera in hand, I was looking for woodland caribou. Suddenly, I found myself amongst a family of lynx padding silently through the bright snow, intent on scaring up a snowshoe hare. As I stared in wonder, they paid my presence little heed. I was able to have this extraordinary, rare experience because of the incredible natural treasure we have east of Lake Winnipeg – Canada’s “Heart of the Boreal”.

The vastness of this natural treasure that

spans large swaths of Manitoba and Ontario is hard to grasp or explain. It covers 399,512 square kilometres, reaching from the east shore of Lake Winnipeg well past Lake Nipigon in Ontario, and from near the Trans Canada Highway in the south all the way to the treeline in the north.

There are 175 countries on the planet that are smaller than Canada's Heart of the Boreal region. You could drop the entire country of Germany, or nearly two of the United Kingdom, into the Heart of the Boreal with room to spare.<sup>1</sup>

Its sheer size is incredible, but the area’s most significant attribute is its intact and undisturbed nature. Thousands of square kilometres of forests are free of roads, and hundreds of rivers are not bridged for their entire length. The Heart of the Boreal is a treasure trove of healthy, functioning forest ecosystems, a collection

Photo top:  
**The east shore of Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba**  
(WC files).

Right:  
**Blackburnian warbler**  
(Robert McCaw).  
Photo far right:  
**Boreal chickadee**  
(Pbonenfant).



greater than any other found in the northern hemisphere. Globally, only the Amazon rainforest offers a larger intact forest.<sup>2</sup>

The boreal is an idyllic, iconic piece of Canadian wilderness. Rock ridges with struggling evergreens thrusting through the cracks are interspersed with clean flowing rivers and sparkling clear lakes. Songbirds flit through the forest – a forest not yet desecrated by industrial advance – where lynx, caribou, moose and wolves all make their homes. This is a part of our natural heritage that is rapidly vanishing from many parts of our country, but that is alive and well here.

The most biologically diverse and culturally rich boreal forests in North America occur in the Heart of the Boreal. The region is home to dozens of First Nations communities and their culture is tied directly to its lands and waters.

The Heart of the Boreal is a wilderness jewel like no other on Earth: an unparalleled source of fresh water, a haven for First Nations culture,

a rare intact habitat for diverse wildlife. It is even a positive force for combating climate change – its forests serving as one of the key ‘carbon sinks’ on the planet. Despite all these reasons to protect a special place like the Heart of the Boreal, government and industry continue to push for logging, mining and hydro development which imperil the region.

When I was growing up in the 1980s and ‘90s, I took tremendous joy in traveling through the east side, on the Wanipigow River and points north, marvelling at the wilderness around me. I didn’t yet understand the significance of the area I was in, but my time spent there endeared this region to me forever. This educational report is meant to help Canadians understand what an extraordinary opportunity we have east of Lake Winnipeg. Read on and get to know a bit more about Canada’s Heart of the Boreal region – you may just fall in love with it too.



Photo: **Canadian lynx in the Heart of the Boreal** (Eric Reder).

# Look Inside Canada's Heart...

The Heart of the Boreal is a unique, diverse wilderness area. To introduce you to this wilderness treasure, we have outlined some of the remarkable ecological benefits it provides as well as some of the most serious threats it faces. We also share several case studies, because solutions don't come 'one size fits all' in the Boreal.



Photo: Great grey owl (Roberta Olenick).

## Jurisdictions: Who's the Boss?

The Heart of the Boreal may be an intact forest, but it is divided by the people who control it. With dozens of First Nations, two provincial governments, and a federal government all having a say in the various plans and projects, the specifics of a solution for one community may not work for another community.

In Manitoba, the East Side Traditional Lands Act is intended to support individual First

Nations to protect their traditional territories through legislation. Ontario's provincial government has passed the Far North Act, an imperfect framework that decrees 50 per cent of the northern boreal forest is to be protected, but doesn't offer a simple framework for communities to establish land use plans. Any comprehensive protected area plan for the Heart of the Boreal may be hampered by jurisdictional divisions.

## Protecting Freshwater, Combating Climate Change

Protecting the Heart of the Boreal is of global importance because of its ability to mitigate climate change – boreal forests contain nearly one-quarter of the world's carbon stocks.\* Old-growth and undisturbed boreal forests not only store carbon and continue to absorb carbon, but they are also slowing permafrost melt caused by rising temperatures. As the forests are cleared, permafrost melt speeds up, and melting soils release a

great deal of carbon.<sup>10</sup> And in these forest areas, you can't go far without getting your feet wet. Canada's boreal region is home to half of the world's lakes larger than a square kilometre, and is the **greatest source of freshwater on Earth.**<sup>11</sup> Much of the freshwater flowing out of the Heart of the Boreal feeds Lake Winnipeg, which is in need of this pure, clean supply to offset the muddy, polluted waters flowing in from the rest of its watershed.



Photo above: Bufflehead duck (Arlene and Robin Karpan). Right: Rock paintings are found throughout the Heart of the Boreal (Eric Reder).

## Case Study: KI First Nation Stands up to Mining Interests

The Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwig (KI) First Nation in Ontario has become a flagship community for the problems and injustices of mineral exploration. The community was sued for \$10 billion by Platinex Corporation, and its Council members were jailed in 2008 by the Ontario government for not allowing mineral exploration in their territory. Eventually the Councilors were released, and the Ontario

government removed Platinex's mining claim and made minor revisions to their antiquated Mining Act. Elsewhere in the Heart of the Boreal, in both Manitoba and Ontario, mining claims continue to be staked in First Nations territory without consultation or consent. Mining exploration has also had an incredibly destructive impact on the landscape, resulting in fragmented forests and compromised watersheds.

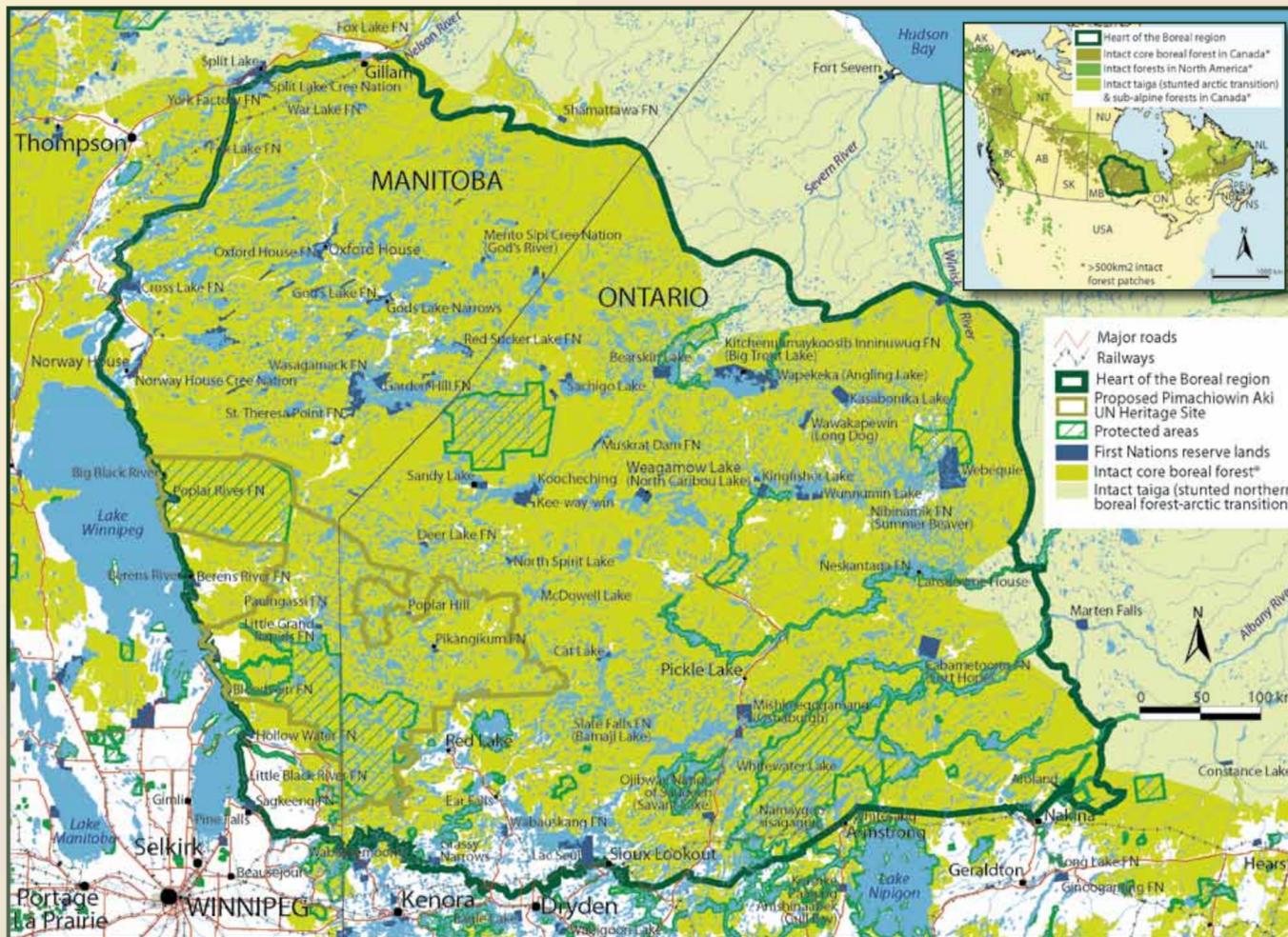
## In Search of World Heritage Site Status

In 2002, several First Nations joined together to pursue United Nations Environment, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site status for their traditional territories due to their outstanding cultural and natural heritage values. Bloodvein, Pauingassi, Little Grand Rapids, Poplar River, and Pikangikum First Nations, together with the governments of Manitoba and Ontario, have partnered to submit the application to UNESCO.

Now, years later, Pimachiowin Aki (the organization set up to submit the UNESCO bid) is completing the application towards this ambitious plan. Successfully receiving designation as a World Heritage Site will be a tremendous benefit to ecotourism opportunities for these communities. The designation, however, does not protect the area from development; for that, federal and provincial legislated protection is essential.



Photo above: Paddling at Poplar River (Ron Thiessen). Right: Wanipigow Community Garden Project at Hollow Water (Robin Bryan).



## A Safety Net For Species

Canada's boreal forest is world famous for its great abundance and diversity of animal life, but its reputation as a haven for these animals is rapidly changing. Woodland caribou, a sensitive species in decline throughout Canada, still have a stronghold in the Heart of the Boreal. However, they live in small, secretive groups in suitable undisturbed boreal forests, and have been shown to relocate more than 5 kilometres away from clearcuts in the forest, meaning that any development greatly

shrinks their home habitat. About half a billion songbirds nest in the Heart of the Boreal,<sup>3</sup> and scientists have confirmed that many of these bird populations have decreased dramatically – some by over 90 per cent – due to habitat loss and climate change.<sup>6</sup> Given that nearly half of North American birds north of Mexico rely on Canada's boreal forest for their survival, we owe it to the world to act now.<sup>7</sup>



Photo: Woodland caribou (Art Wolfe).

## Case study: Protecting Grassy Narrows' Forests

Grassy Narrows First Nation took a stand in 2002 to preserve what remained of the forests in their traditional territory from logging, starting what became the longest running blockade in Canadian history. Insisting on consent and consultation in all activities on their land, known as the Whiskey Jack Forest, the community has

maintained a peaceful protest camp, which has so far kept logging out.

Since 2006, three logging corporations agreed to halt logging in the region. Despite years of protest and international attention on this issue, there are reports that the Ontario government has a plan to authorize logging in 27 parcels of the Whiskey Jack Forest.\*

# A Natural Treasure That Needs To Be Guarded...

## Case Study: Poplar River Leads the Battle for Land Preservation

For more than a decade, the award-winning work of the Poplar River First Nation (PRFN) has been a leading example of community-based land preservation. The interim Poplar/Nanowin Park Reserve protects their traditional territory until 2015. Manitoba's

new East Side Traditional Lands Act created a mechanism for the PRFN and other First Nations in the Heart of the Boreal to get legislated recognition for their community land use plans, and the PRFN's territory is finally expected to get permanent protection in 2011.

## Roads Threaten to Open the Heart to Harmful Industries

Historically, access to the majority of First Nations in the Heart of the Boreal has been through winter roads. Right now, much of the Heart is roadless, but an all-weather road to provide community access is being planned and constructed right

now. The new road brings with it serious threats to the region. With easier access, destructive mining exploration is exploding, and all-terrain vehicle trails and their associated impacts will also expand. Plans to temper these looming threats must be made before road access is completed.

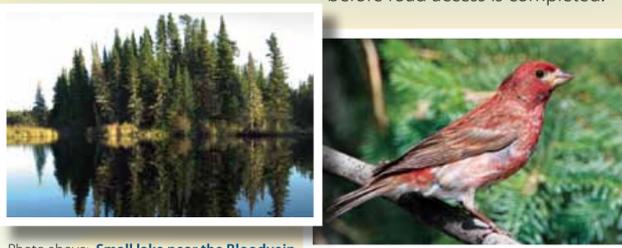


Photo above: Small lake near the Bloodvein River (Eric Reder). Right: Purple finch (Arlene and Robin Karpan).

## Case study: Community Gardens & Trail-Building in Hollow Water

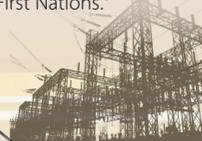
Hollow Water (Wanipigow) First Nation lies at the beginning of the road to Manitoba's remote Heart of the Boreal region. Community members, including the late Garry Raven, have long advocated for protection of their lands and waters. The Kookums (which means grandmothers in Ojibwa), a community group working on preserving culture,

have recently been leading that push. The Wilderness Committee has worked to help establish community gardens and trail building projects as part of our 'Healthy Communities' mandate. The Manitoba government has begun work on a visitor and interpretive centre here, in order to showcase the millennium-long stewardship of this boreal region by First Nations.<sup>3</sup>

## Threat From Hydro Corridor Lingers

In Manitoba, a planned 1680-kilometre hydro transmission corridor, known as BiPole III, poses a lingering and significant threat to the Heart of the Boreal. The Manitoba government examined the impact and difficulties of running a hydro line through this area, and concluded in 2007 that

it was best to route the hydro line elsewhere. Opposition politicians, however, have chosen to turn this decision into political fodder, by perpetuating a flagrant campaign of misinformation.<sup>4</sup> Details of the BiPole III myths are examined and debunked on the website heartoftheboreal.ca



# Action Needed to Keep the Heart of the Boreal Healthy

Laying out a vision and path for the Heart of the Boreal, for the preservation of its cultural and natural heritage, is something that can and must be done. We owe this to the communities that make their home in the Heart of the Boreal and to the world.

The first guiding principle for preserving this globally important ecosystem is to protect at least 50 per cent of the biologically rich and culturally vital lands and waters in the region. For many communities, the solution will be to create tribal parks. In BC, tribal parks like the Stein Valley Nlaka'pamux Heritage Park and several tribal parks in Haida Gwaii have been successfully established. The core tenets of tribal parks

are that traditional community use of the land continues, and that community members are operators and trail guardians (local First Nations community members providing guide and interpretive services to visitors), as well as maintenance staff, to ensure the park is kept in good shape. The strength of the community is based upon the protection of the land, and vice versa.

The second guiding principle is that all developments must be ecologically sustainable, and locally owned and operated. The colonial 'gold rush' of resource extraction corporations exploiting resources to enrich shareholders is not a model that preserves ecological services or creates healthy communities.

Majority local ownership must be part of the economic equation.

The economic tools that First Nations can wield to ensure a healthy community are varied.

Photo: **Volunteers working on the Wanipigow Community Garden Project at Raven's Creek** (Eric Reder).



Ecotourism opportunities that include guiding, hunting and fishing, as well as birdwatching, canoeing, hiking and aboriginal culture courses can be a part of every community's plan. Harvesting and marketing of non-timber forest products, such as herbal remedies and teas, or wild blueberries, are other ways to build a diverse economy. Local community-scale greenhouses and gardening adds employment opportunities, improves nutritional options, and reduces the reliance on unhealthy outside food sources. Localized energy production and installations will have a positive impact on communities, providing jobs for locals while reducing outside reliance. A single management plan that blankets the entire Heart of the Boreal is not desirable, as such a plan would undermine the needs of local

communities to determine their own future. Healthy communities can be enabled by empowering the people living and working in the area. Initiatives that establish large locally managed protected areas while also ensuring diverse, localized ecologically-sustainable economies can provide means for healthy communities. To carry out our global responsibility to protect the Boreal, we must support local solutions.



Photo: **First Nations drumming in BC's Stein Valley** (WC Files).



Photo: **Northern lights over the Rice River** (Eric Reder).

## TAKE ACTION

Canada's Heart of the Boreal can and must be saved, and with your help we can do it! Please let the premiers of Manitoba and Ontario know you want them to:

- Issue an immediate moratorium on industrial activity in the Heart of the Boreal until the most biologically rich and culturally important forests — totaling at least 50 per cent of the area — are identified and permanently protected.
- Allow only development that is ecologically sustainable and locally owned, ensuring local First Nations community benefits.

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Photo: **Logging is still a threat to the Heart of the Boreal** (Creative Commons - Binks).

## Citations

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# Yes! I want to help protect Manitoba's Heart of the Boreal

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