

Alberta Parks and the Dene Tha' in Northwestern Alberta

Alberta Parks and the Dene Tha' First Nations have had a positive relationship since the establishment of the Hay-Zama Wildland Provincial Park in 1999. They share a vision of protection and wise use of the Hay-Zama wetlands, of keeping each other informed, and of working together to resolve common issues.

Background

The Hay-Zama wetlands, a 486 km² complex of numerous shallow lakes and streams, is a key waterfowl production and staging site on three of the four major North American migration flyways. Every spring and fall the wetlands provide foraging for thousands of migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. The ecological value of the site has been recognized internationally in its designation as a Ramsar site. The Hay-Zama wetland and surrounding uplands is also the only site in Alberta selected for re-introduction of wood bison, a species listed as "At Risk" in Alberta. The bison herd has thrived in the area, particularly as the wetland sedges and grasses provide critical winter forage.

The Hay-Zama wetland complex is part of the traditional territory of the Dene Tha' First Nation. One of their communities is situated adjacent to the wetland at Chateau.



Hay-Zama Lakes Wetlands,
photo copyright Reg Arbuckle

The committee has sought to address the economic, environmental and social concerns of a variety of groups with interests in the site.

Productive oil and gas reserves under the wetland complex reserve have been tapped since the 1960s, a unique situation given the ecological value of the site.

In 1985 in recognition of the variety of interests in the Hay-Zama wetlands, the Hay-Zama Committee was formed of representatives from industry, government, the environmental community, and the Dene Tha' First Nation. After several years of inactivity, the committee revived in 1994 due to increased concerns from the environmental community and the Dene Tha'. Since then, the committee has sought to address the economic, environmental and social concerns of a variety of groups with interests in the site.

Since the Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Provincial Park was established, Alberta Parks has become an active member in the Hay Zama Committee. This committee is central to the management of the park, and has facilitated the relationship between Alberta Parks and the Dene Tha'.

Initiative

The Dene Tha' and Parks

- In 1999 the Hay-Zama wetland complex was designated as Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Provincial Park, giving it one of the highest degrees of legislated protection in the province of Alberta. The Dene Tha' First Nation and the Hay-Zama Committee endorsed the designation.
- The Dene Tha' participated in the preparation of the management plan by hosting planning meetings and open houses. The plan was endorsed by them and the Hay Zama Committee, and approved by the government in 2001.
- The Area Manager of Alberta Parks and the Chief of the Dene Tha', along with the committee facilitator, are co-chairs of the Hay Zama Committee.
- Although discussions occur about the park at regular Hay Zama Committee meetings, Alberta Parks and the Dene Tha' Council meet periodically to update each other on activities.
- Alberta Parks and the Dene Tha' have worked together on specific issues such as the feral horses in the park, bison, and reclamation of wellsites.
- In order to provide staffing for the park and offer economic benefits, Alberta Parks has proposed a Wildland Guardian position that would be recruited from the Dene Tha' community, a proposal which the Dene Tha' have agreed to.



- The Hay Zama Committee has proposed that Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Provincial Park be twinned with the Dalai Nature Reserve in Inner Mongolia, China. Both sites are internationally significant Ramsar wetlands where local communities are interested in developing cooperative management approaches. The purpose of the twinning is to provide a forum in which information on research, manage-

ment, the local environment and people can be formally exchanged. The Dene Tha' and Alberta Parks are working together to facilitate this relationship.

- Alberta Parks staff have proposed several research studies within Hay-Zama Lakes, which have been endorsed by the Dene Tha' Council. One of them, a study of the potential and limitations to tourism in the park, was proposed and the First Na



Hay-Zama Lakes Wetlands,
photo copyright Archie Landals



Hay-Zama Lakes Wetlands,
photo copyright Archie Landals

Hay-Zama Wildland Provincial Park



tions community has taken the initiative to develop a tourism vision and strategy. Alberta Parks will continue to work with them to develop tourism potential of the park within the environmental constraints of the wetlands, and has proposed biological studies that will help determine the constraints.

- Parks and representatives from other agencies, including the Dene Tha', will be preparing a Wildfire Management Plan for the park. The Dene Tha' have traditionally burned areas in the wetlands, and this will be addressed in the plan.

Lessons Learned

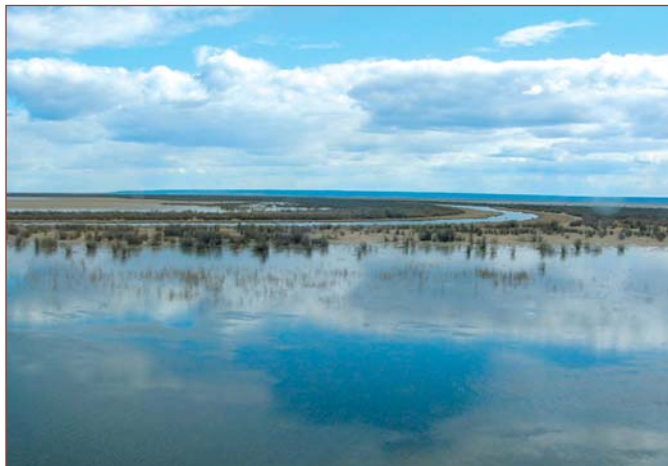
- This co-operative working relationship has been built on many years of demonstrated good will and trust. This has to be continually fostered by everyone and can only be achieved because everyone is willing to work together for the better good.

- The Dene Tha', as with many First Nations, have constant demands on their time and resources. The onus is on Alberta Parks to continue to consult and work with them, and both sides have learned to be patient.

Conclusions

- Working together has created a co-operative, transparent, and friendly atmosphere in which both parties feel comfortable in proposing innovative ways to integrate environmental, economic and cultural management of the Wildland Park.

The Dene Tha', as with many First Nations, is faced with many demands to address many issues.



Omega River runs through the wetlands, photo copyright Ray Gibson

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