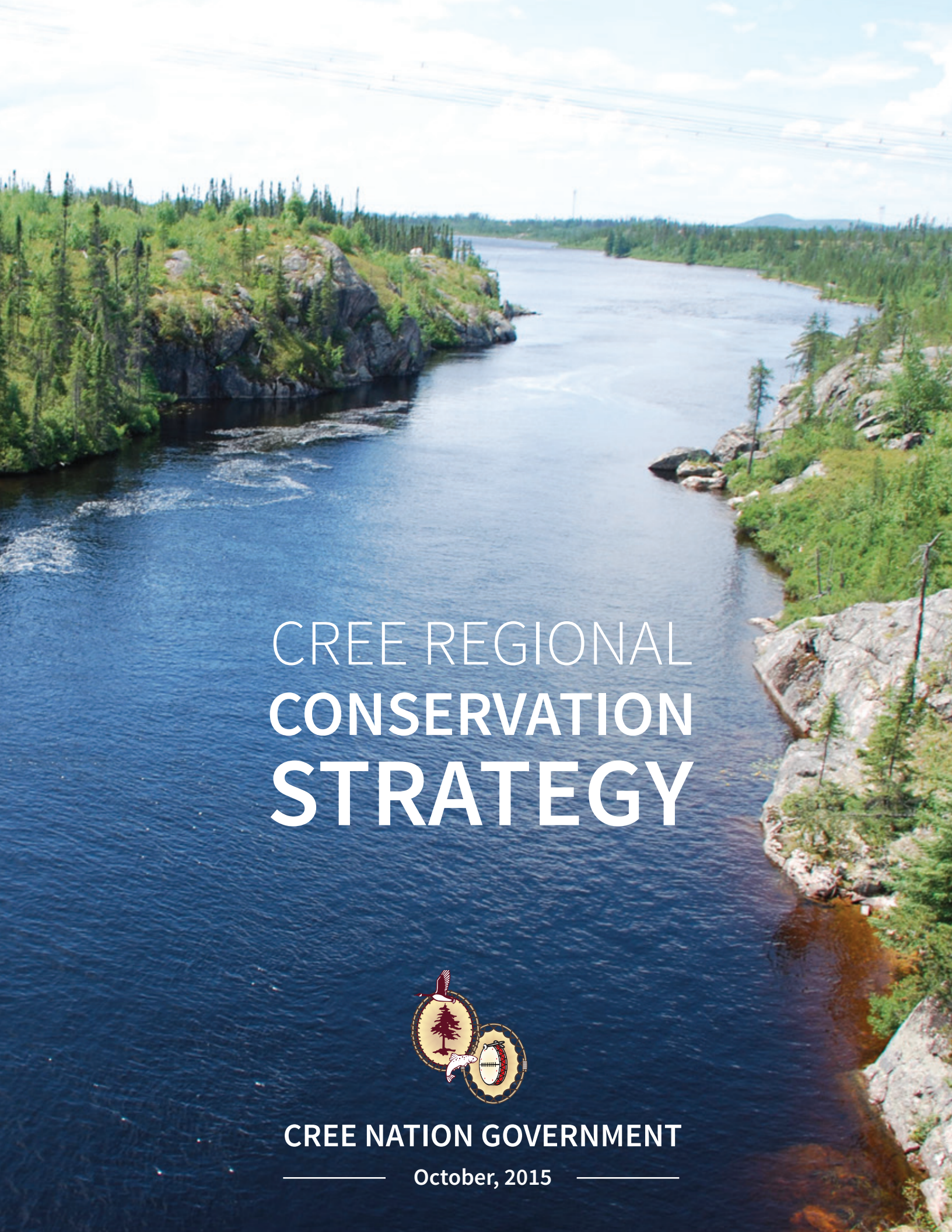


CREE REGIONAL **CONSERVATION STRATEGY**

CREE NATION GOVERNMENT

October, 2015

PURPOSE OF THE STRATEGY

The Cree Regional Conservation Strategy (hereafter the Strategy) is a Cree Nation initiative, developed by the Eeyou Protected Areas Committee. This Committee is comprised of representatives from all 10 Cree communities, along with members from the Cree Trappers Association (CTA), Cree Nation Youth Council (CNYC) and the Cree Nation Government (Environment and Remedial Works Department and the Culture and Language Department.). The Strategy provides a framework for the development of conservation and protected areas initiatives in the Cree territory (Eeyou Istchee). This document outlines the vision, goals, and planning approach for the implementation of the Strategy.

This Strategy is designed to ensure respect for Cree rights[1] and protect Cree lands, waters and resources for today and tomorrow. Generally these are the rights of the Cree under the Constitution of Canada, Cree values and customs such as those codified in the Eeyou Hunting Law and the protection of Cree language and culture. More specifically, this includes Cree rights that stem from a number of agreements and treaties including the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement (1975), Cree-Quebec New Relationship Agreement, more widely known as the Paix des Braves (2002), the Cree-Canada New Relationship Agreement (2008), Eeyou Marine Region Land Claims Agreement (2010) and the Governance Agreement (2013). Furthermore, it is consistent with the rights related to conservation that are enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as Article 8j (and others) in the Convention of Biological Diversity.

This Strategy is built using Cree traditional knowledge and western scientific knowledge to ensure that the best of both of these knowledge systems inform our planning and decision-making. The Strategy is also designed to provide a guiding framework for the establishment and maintenance of effective partnerships between the Cree and other governments (both public and aboriginal), as well as with non-Cree residents of Eeyou Istchee, environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs), researchers and other interested stakeholders to achieve the vision and goals set out in this Strategy.

[1] *Cree JBNQA beneficiary rights for hunting, fishing and trapping rights in protected areas supersede any other*

ABOUT EEYOU ISTCHEE

“Eeyou Istchee” is the traditional territory and homeland of the Crees of northern Quebec. The term means “the land of the Eeyou/Eenou” (the “people”). The Cree, have used and occupied all of Eeyou Istchee for thousands of years, from time immemorial, and continue to do so today.

Eeyou Istchee covers some 400,000 square kilometers (see map Appendix A) with over 300 traplines that continue to be occupied and used for traditional practices. It includes the lakes and rivers that drain into eastern James Bay and south-eastern Hudson Bay, as well as significant portions of both those marine areas. This enormous territory embraces a wide range of environments, from the marshes, estuaries and islands and waters of the coastal zone to the upland areas far inland, and from the dense, coniferous forests in the southern areas to the sparsely-treed tundra further north. For the Cree, all of it - the lands and waters, the plants and animals – is sacred.

There are more than 18,000 Crees, with almost 16,000 residing in ten Cree communities. The five communities located along the east coast of James Bay are Waskaganish, Eastmain, Wemindji, Chisasibi and Whapmagoostui. The five inland communities are Waswanipi, Washaw-Sibi, Nemaska, Oujé-Bougoumou and Mistissini. The southern part of the Eeyou Istchee territory is shared with non-Cree residents, who reside in the towns such as Chibougamau, Chapais, and Matagami.

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement solidified the rights of the Crees and set up regimes for the protection of these rights such as the Environmental and Social Regime of Section 22 and the Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Regime of Section 24.

More specifically concerning conservation, the JBNQA describes the principle of conservation in section 24.1.5 as “the pursuit of the optimum natural productivity of all living resources and the protection of the ecological systems of the Territory so as to protect endangered species and to ensure primarily the continuance of the traditional pursuits of the Native people, and secondarily the satisfaction of the needs of non-Native people for sport hunting and fishing.”

These two regimes in the JBNQA are essential in addressing the conservation of biodiversity along with the 2002 adapted Forestry Regime found within the Paix des Braves Agreement.

The categorization of Cree land plays an instrumental role in the level of conservation performed by the responsible governments:

- Category 1 lands surround local Cree communities and are for the exclusive use of Cree individuals
- Category 2 lands are public lands where Crees have the exclusive right to hunt fish and trap
- Category 3 lands are public lands which Cree can use for their traditional activities

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement covers the Hudson Bay drainage basin in Québec. Eeyou Istchee is predominantly found within this drainage basin; however some Mistissini and Ouje-Bougoumou traplines are located within the St-Laurent drainage basin. Eeyou Istchee is located within four administrative regions: Mauricie, Nord du Québec (James Bay and Kativik Regions), Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Saguenay-Lac Saint-Jean. The area is dominated by the Central Shield Forest Ecoregion, with the Southern Hudson Bay Taiga Ecoregion to the northwest and the East Forest/Boreal Transition Ecoregion to the south.

Eeyou Istchee is not limited to terrestrial boundaries; the coastal communities are connected to the shores and water of James and Hudson Bays. The Eeyou Marine Region Land Claims Agreement recognizes the rights of the Crees in the offshore region of Eeyou Istchee. Under federal jurisdiction, this agreement provides for the creation of marine protected areas within the offshore area. This conservation strategy is therefore designed to assist in the development of protected areas in both the terrestrial and marine regions of Eeyou Istchee.

OUR VISION

Is to maintain strong ties to the Cree cultural heritage and way of life, and sustain biodiversity by creating a large, interconnected network of conservation areas in **Eeyou Istchee.**

This will be achieved through Cree leadership in conservation planning.

OUR GOALS

1) To create an interconnected network of conservation areas of cultural and ecological importance for the safeguarding of biodiversity

These areas will serve as the building blocks for an interconnected network of protected areas and conservation areas, and assist in the planning and evaluation of proposals for industrial development.

2) To conserve wildlife populations and enhance food security for present and future generations

As a hunting society, the Cree culture is grounded in hunting, fishing and trapping. A key driver for conservation planning is therefore the sustainable use of key wildlife species. Protecting key habitat areas and facilitating the free movement of these species will help them thrive. Healthy and abundant wildlife populations in turn ensure food security for the Crees. Food security is a key concern as the Cree population is growing rapidly and the nutritional and cultural contribution of traditional food is highly valued. Particular wildlife species that have been classified “at risk” - such as the forestry dwelling Woodland Caribou - will require particular attention.

3) To ensure full Cree participation in conservation planning and management

Crees need to be fully engaged in decision making and planning for all conservation initiatives in Eeyou Istchee. This will require the building of effective working relationships and partnerships with provincial, federal and regional governments, academia, environmental groups, stakeholders and neighboring aboriginal nations.

4) To ensure that Cree knowledge, culture and land management systems play a central role in conservation initiatives

Cree knowledge, cultural values and land management systems must play a key role in conservation planning and management initiatives. This includes the Cree trapline management system and the important role of the tallyman within this system, incorporating the knowledge of Elders, the use of Cree place names , culturally-adapted protected area management approaches, and the development of Cree tourism and outfitting opportunities.

5) To build Cree capacity for conservation planning and management

Planning and managing a regional network of protected areas and conservation areas will require training and capacity building, so that Crees are well positioned for opportunities related to this work. It will be important to further build this capacity at the community and regional levels.

6) To ensure that Cree Youth are engaged in all stages of the Strategy.

The involvement of Cree Youth is essential to the continuation of Cree knowledge and practices. This knowledge is the foundation upon which this Strategy and related management initiatives will be built. The transmission of knowledge and learning how to act responsibly will be introduced in the activities related to the implementation stages of the strategy. Young Cree men and woman need to be active participants in the development and implementation of conservation approaches.

7) To integrate conservation science principles and build in resilience to climate change

Some of the key conservation science principles include: 1) Representation of the full range of ecosystem types; 2) Maintenance of populations of all native species (including species at risk); and 3) Maintenance of ecological processes and naturally functioning ecosystems. Resilience to climate change can be addressed by creating protected areas large enough to buffer natural disturbances, and to accommodate shifts in wildlife species ranges. Conservation areas can also help prevent carbon - which is stored in the ground and the trees - from being released into the atmosphere, which helps mitigate against global warming.

8) To ensure that the Strategy is adaptive and based on the best available knowledge

The Strategy needs to be adaptive. This requires it to respond to the best available knowledge and to provide for regulation, monitoring, reporting, review, as well as opportunities for reflection and feedback. Dedicated efforts will be made to draw on best practices from elsewhere, experiment where possible, foster social learning, and maintain openness to revising and adjusting plans and decisions.

THE PLANNING APPROACH

Conservation planning: Opportunities and constraints

Eeyou Istchee can be divided into distinct sub-regions in terms of impacts from industrial development. Below the northern limit for commercial forestry, the majority of the landscape has already been transformed by forestry, roads, and mining activity. In this sub-region, the principal approach taken for conservation planning is to focus on protecting “what’s left” (areas that remain intact or undisturbed by industrial activities) and areas of high cultural importance.

Above the commercial forestry limit, the situation is quite different. This more northern part of Eeyou Istchee has been very heavily impacted by hydroelectric development and by some mining related development. However in much of the northern portion there still exists the opportunity to build a conservation areas network focused on “the best” habitats, and ecosystems and areas for maintaining cultural and ecological integrity.

This strategy will be implemented as a whole, both above and below the commercial forestry limit. However particular attention will be given to areas where the development pressures are high, in order to try to achieve some balance in conservation and development goals before the opportunity to do so slips away.

PLANNING SCALES

There are three key scales for conservation areas planning in Eeyou Istchee: the trapline (or family hunting areas), the community level and the regional level. The planning of a conservation and protected areas network requires that work at all three of these levels is coordinated. Most Cree decisions related to conservation currently take place at the trapline level, given the central role of the tallymen and the Cree trapline management system. The trapline management system provides the foundation upon which the Strategy can be built.

Several parks and protected areas projects in Eeyou Istchee have resulted from collective initiatives at the community level, with the support of the tallymen and the local Cree communities. These Cree led trapline and community level protected area and conservation initiatives can be seen as the building blocks of a regional conservation areas network.

The regional "big picture" planning scale is critical to ensure that the conservation areas network covers the whole of Eeyou Istchee, and that the goals of large intact areas, connectivity, ecosystem processes, and species habitats are maintained across the region in a way that works as a whole. Achieving this requires regional leadership and coordination in conservation, which will be achieved through the implementation of this Strategy.

WATERSHED APPROACH

Eeyou Istchee is located mainly in the Hudson Bay drainage basin. There are roughly a dozen watersheds within Eeyou Istchee. Using a watershed based planning approach provides an interesting opportunity, as a way to manage the wellbeing of the ecosystems for both conservation and development planning.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CARBON STORAGE

The forests, wetlands and peatlands of Eeyou Istchee store large amounts of biotic carbon, both in the trees and in the ground. Industrial activities remove the forest cover, damage the soils and change hydrology, all of which lead to increased carbon emissions. When this carbon is disturbed and released into the atmosphere, it has the impact of accelerating climate change. Creating conservation areas and protected areas networks (where no industrial development is permitted) can therefore help to mitigate against the negative impacts of climate change, by keeping carbon reservoirs undisturbed and intact.

PARTNERSHIPS

As mentioned above, many administrative boundaries have been superimposed on Eeyou Istchee. The region is not limited to the land but also extends out to encompass significant marine areas. These boundaries create some jurisdictional complexities for achieving the conservation goals. However the establishment and maintenance of good relations with our neighbors and other parties can allow us to achieve common trans-boundary conservation objectives.

Partnerships and collaborations will be built to facilitate the coordinated and effective implementation of this Strategy. In particular, collaboration with public governments (such as the Québec Government, the Eeyou Istchee James Bay Regional Government and the Kativik Regional Government), environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs), academic institutions and researchers, and other stakeholders will be encouraged.

TYPES OF CONSERVATION AREAS AND TOOLS

The Cree Regional Conservation Strategy envisions the creation of different types of conservation areas and tools, which as a whole will form a large scale conservation areas network. The principal conservation designations and tools are outlined below.

CORE CONSERVATION AREAS

Core Conservation Areas refer to areas which will be selected and managed for conservation purposes and for maintaining the traditional Cree way of life. These areas will provide for large scale wildlife habitat protection and/or the preservation of cultural heritage sites. No industrial activities will be permitted in these zones.

CONSERVATION CORRIDORS AND CONNECTIVITY

Fragmented conservation areas will limit the goal of achieving strong and thriving biodiversity by restricting its interchange with other areas. The conservation areas established in Eeyou Istchee should therefore ideally be linked to promote movement of wildlife and the flow of healthy ecosystems downstream. The Strategy therefore aims to ensure that initiatives at the community level are connected with other community level initiatives, and that wildlife habitats and ecosystems are protected and connected across all planning scales.

Conservation corridors and conservation “stepping stones” are areas that are used to create connectivity and promote the movement of wildlife between the core conservation areas. This technique has been in practice for several decades around the world with positive results in wildlife conservation.

SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREAS

Special management areas will be designed to meet both conservation and resource development goals. Development activities would be subject to certain conditions or rules to minimize ecological and cultural impacts. Tools such as road density analysis and development thresholds could be used to help in the planning and management of these areas. The goal for the special management areas is for them to contribute to the overall effectiveness of the conservation areas network. Special management designation and implementation will be achieved by working collaboratively with the Government of Québec and with Regional Government structures.

BUFFER AREAS

Buffers applied around the core conservation areas will also be important for maintaining the integrity of ecological and cultural values and to ensure that these values are not compromised. The size of buffer zones will be influenced by the threats within the surrounding area (ex. upstream areas will be bigger than downstream areas or a function of the proximity of industrial development). Buffer areas, like special management areas, are managed for both conservation and development purposes. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) protected areas category system may be used to illustrate the level of development allowed in these areas.

MECHANISMS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PROTECTED AREAS AND CONSERVATION AREAS

LEGISLATED

Protected areas refer to areas where no industrial development[2] is permitted. In Québec, there are many different types of protected areas, such as National Parks, Biodiversity Reserves and Aquatic Reserves. Many federal departments promote the protection of the environment and wildlife through various legislations. For example, the Crees have been exploring the National Marine Conservation Area designation under Parks Canada for the offshore area of Wemindji. Other federal tools that may be of importance are: National Parks, Marine Protected Areas, Migratory Bird Sanctuaries, National Historic Parks and others.

NON-LEGISLATED

Non-legislated conservation areas are identified for their importance, but are not protected under government law. Such mechanisms are recognized and implemented on a national or international scale. Although they may not be protected from development under legislation, having an area designated in such a way can build awareness of the importance of an area. Examples of existing non-legislated conservation tools are: Canadian Heritage Rivers, UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, and Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs).

[2] *Industrial development in this document refers to forestry, mining, hydroelectric and energy development*

A VISION WITH INTERNATIONAL RELEVANCE

The implementation of the Cree Regional Conservation Strategy will not only help protect an important component of the Crees and Québec's mutual heritage, it will also help ensure that Québec is meeting its international obligations.

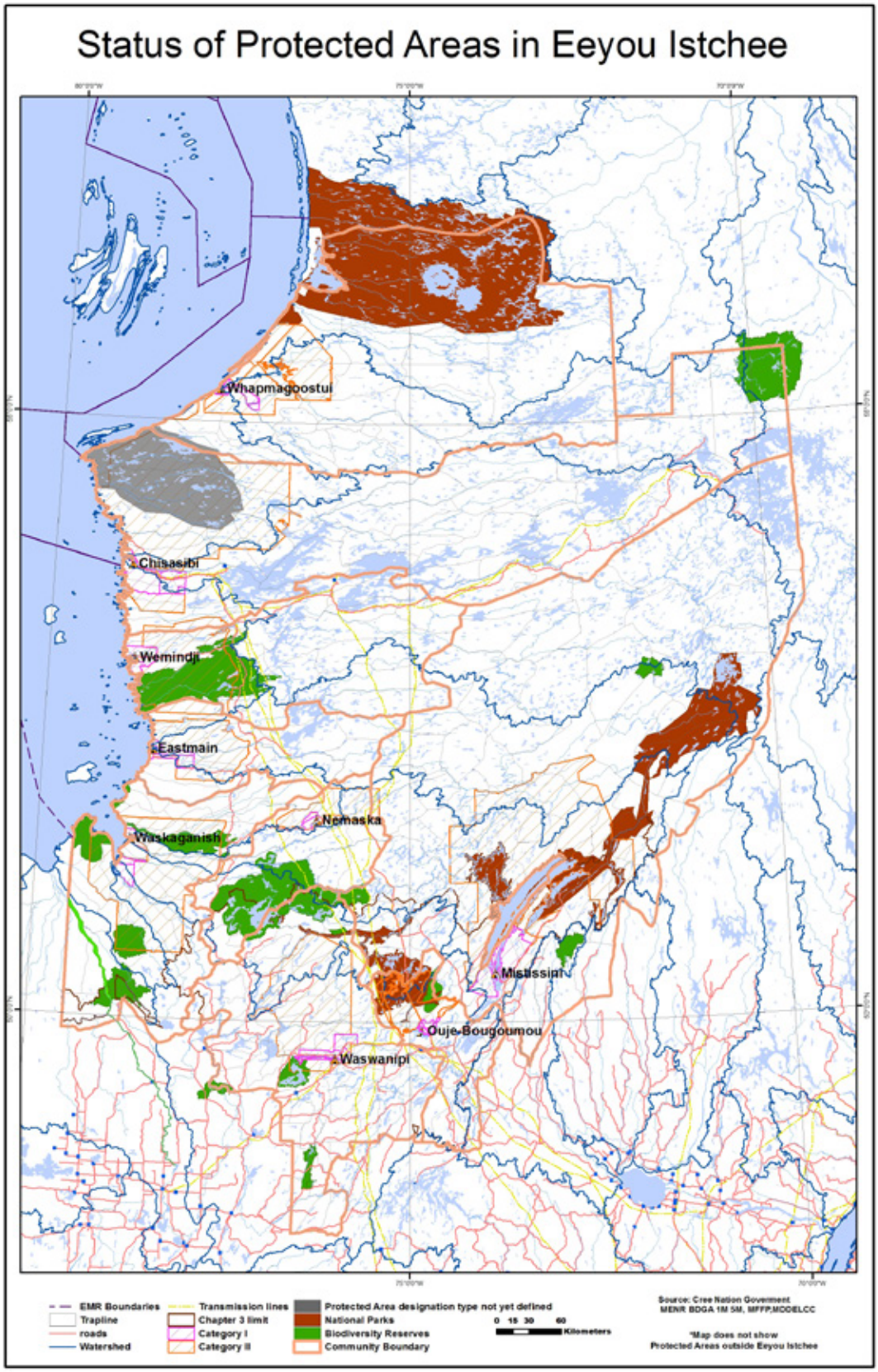
In 2011, under the Convention of Biological Diversity, a 10-year strategic plan was adopted. Known as the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, this strategy establishes 20 key targets for the signatory nations to meet by 2020. Among those relevant targets for the Strategy are the goals of stemming the loss of productive forestlands, preventing further loss of endangered species, and achieving the goal of protecting 17% of lands rich in biodiversity that deliver important ecological services. Implementation of the Strategy can help fulfill these goals.

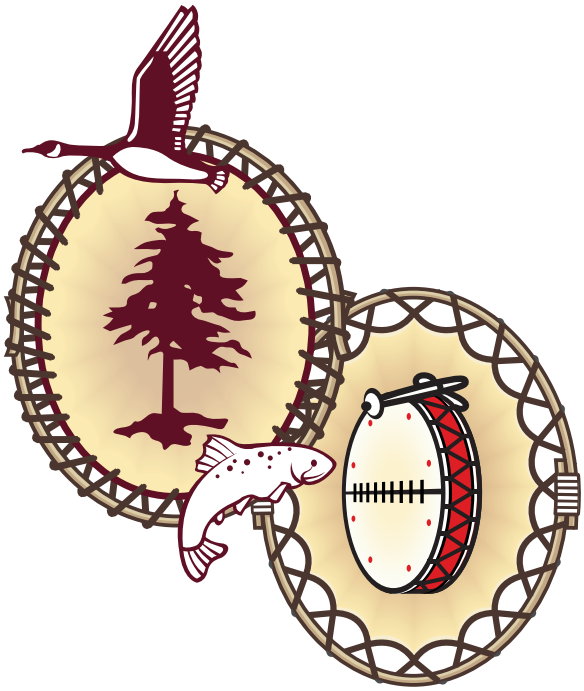
The Crees also see an opportunity to work collaboratively with Québec on achieving the bold vision of protection set out in the Plan Nord. The Strategy provides a framework upon which this collaboration can be built. With the Cree Regional Conservation Strategy, the Cree Nation hopes to restore the momentum for bold protection targets that go beyond the status quo, and inspire a more sustainable vision for Eeyou Istchee.

SUMMARY

This strategy addresses the need for coordinated conservation planning in Eeyou Istchee. The Cree Nation Government will work closely with the community leadership, tallymen and land users, elders, youth and other Cree entities to develop guidelines for protected areas development, provide technical support and expertise, develop community level capacity, and develop effective partnerships to ensure that the vision and goals set out in this Strategy are achieved across all of Eeyou Istchee.

MAP OF PROTECTED AREAS IN EEYOU ISTCHEE





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