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“The Land That We Keep For Us”
An Aboriginal Perspective On Conservation – The Case Of Thaidene Nene/East Arm Of Great Slave Lake

By Stephen Ellis & Gloria Enzoe

Historically, the establishment of National Parks in Canada has often resulted in the alienation of local indigenous peoples from their traditional territories. For this reason, the Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation has resisted the creation of a new National Park in the East Arm of Great Slave Lake since the idea was originally advanced by Canada in the late 1960s. Successive Chiefs have objected to park establishment, fearing a loss of jurisdiction over the traditional homeland, the uncontrolled encroachment of visitors, and an inability to harvest wildlife.

Recently, a number of factors have encouraged the Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation to initiate discussions with Canada regarding park establishment in Thaidene Nene, the “Land of the Ancestors” that forms the core of its traditional territory. These factors include Parks Canada’s improved aboriginal engagement policies, increased industrial pressures around Great Slave Lake, economic diversification needs in the community, and the constitutionally-protected precedence of aboriginal and treaty rights and land claim arrangements. Since initiating a dialogue in 2000, the Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation and Parks Canada have formally agreed to investigate the feasibility of a new national park in the region, and have temporarily withdrawn a large area of interest.

The Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation has specific objectives in the promotion of a National Park in its traditional territory. First and foremost, it desires to protect and maintain control over a landscape that is integral to the continued persistence of the unique Dene way of life. In this sense, the well-being of the Lutsel K’e Dene depends upon the First Nation maintaining stewardship of Thaidene Nene as a cultural and natural landscape. Such stewardship involves protecting the landscape from industrial encroachment, using the land for subsistence and cultural practice, and actively managing park operations. The Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation is investigating different models that will allow it to manage the new National Park in partnership with Parks Canada.

Another objective is to provide for some economic diversification beyond the current dependence upon First Nation governance and mine labour. Lutsel K’e Dene have aspirations with regards to developing tourism operations as well as securing positions within Parks Canada itself. Achieving this objective is dependent upon increasing local capacity at the community level; currently, the Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation and partner agencies are engaged in innovative initiatives (e.g. targeted student upgrading, tourism feasibility studies and business development) to prepare the community to take advantage of new economic opportunities that may come with park establishment.

Despite a history rife with mistrust and injustice, it is in the spirit of renewal and reconciliation that the Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation has opened the door to discussions with Canada regarding the protection of Thaidene Nene. In return, Canada must demonstrate a willingness to explore new and innovative ways to share decision-making power, resolve land tenure issues, encourage maximum socio-economic benefit, and foster the use of Thaidene Nene as a cultural landscape. Thaidene Nene is the lifeblood of a people – Canada needs to be flexible in order to keep it so.