

WATER IS EVERYTHING

nipî tapîtam

**AN INDIGENOUS UNDERSTANDING OF THE OUTSTANDING
UNIVERSAL VALUE OF WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK**

Prepared by the Mikisew Cree First Nation for the UNESCO World Heritage Centre



Water is Everything – *nipî tapîtam*:

**An indigenous understanding of the Outstanding
Universal Value of Wood Buffalo National Park**

May 2016

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PHOTO: JENNIFER SCHINE/FIRELIGHT

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INTRODUCTION



**In the 1920s, our
delta's land was
protected.
Its water was not.**

TOP PHOTO: WOOD BUFFALO
NATIONAL PARK, COURTESY
PAUL ZIZSKA, ZIZKA.CA

HISTORICAL PHOTOS
PROVIDED BY
MELODY LEPINE

WE ARE THE MIKISEW CREE FIRST NATION. We are people of the Peace–Athabasca Delta, and since the 1920s, we have lived with Wood Buffalo National Park at the centre of our lands. We were there before it was a park. Our culture is from this area. Our culture is here.

Ayapaskaw, in our Cree language, means a place where all the creeks and waterways join and wind together with grasses and green things to form a living delta.

The delta, *Ayapaskaw*, is precious to us. It is our home, our grocery store, our classroom, our church, our highway, and our photo album. The delta informs our thinking. How we think and how we see the world — that comes from the delta. As Mikisew people, it is the place where our happiest memories live. The delta is what the animals love — muskrat, beaver, moose, bison, fish, birds, and other living things — and in the delta, water is everything. *nipi tapitum*.

This report for the 2016 UNESCO Mission is to introduce you to who we, the Mikisew Cree First Nation, are, how we depend on the delta, and how it depends on us. This submission also summarizes why our delta, and especially its water, is in danger, and what UNESCO and Canada can do to help.





WHO ARE THE MIKISEW CREE?

IN CREE, THE NAME MIKISEW MEANS EAGLE. Mikisew was our chief in 1899 when we signed Treaty 8 with the Canadian government. His name reminds us — and others — about our Cree language, our respect for our elders, and the responsibility passed to us to be wise leaders, stewards, and protectors of Mother Earth, and especially of the globally important freshwater delta, wetland, and cradle of life that we call home.

Our culture and way of life is grounded in a generations-old relationship between Mikisew people and the vast network of wetlands, reed banks, lakes, and waterways that form the delta. The delta is at the heart of our traditional territory in northeastern Alberta, located where the waters of the Rocky Mountains flow through the lower Peace and Athabasca Rivers to join Lake Athabasca, and then continue north as the Slave River. For us, respecting land, life, and water involves being part of the delta. We hunt and trap animals, fish, gather plants and berries, and teach our young people to live as part of the land and waters.

Each year, after a long winter, our men would be out trapping spring beaver. Women, children and elders would be at Hay River, Quatre Fourche or other places in the delta. The old people would watch the buffalo, birds and other animals to know when the water would come. When the spring flood came we would be so happy because high water brings life to everything in the delta. We knew it would be a good year for all living things, including us. Now, with dams on the Peace River, oil sands on the Athabasca River, and climate change everywhere, both the delta and Mikisew people are in danger.

We were all born in different areas out on the land...[in] the delta, that's why I love the delta so much...this is where you're born and it's such a beautiful feeling when you go out there. It's like going home...[Our house out there] was nothing fancy. But...there was such a tremendous amount of connection with Mother Earth and the people living around there, the people of the land. And culture was there, it was just your way of life...It was sacred...We all lived the same life. — Mikisew elder and council member, April 4, 2016



When the spring flood came we would be so happy because high water brings life to everything in the delta.

TOP PHOTO: MIKISEW ELDER ON THE ATHABASCA RIVER, CRAIG CANDLER/FIRELIGHT

BOTTOM: WHOOPING CRANE IN WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK, COURTESY KLAUS NIGGE/PARKS CANADA



This place and our way of life out there is where our pride comes from. Pride is what sustains culture. When you take away our pride, we lose our culture.

TOP PHOTOS: ATHABASCA TRADITIONAL FOOD PREPARATION, CRAIG CANDLER/FIRELIGHT; FIRST NATIONS ON THE ATHABASCA, COURTESY DRU OJA JAY

BOTTOM: STEWARDS OF THE DELTA, CRAIG CANDLER/FIRELIGHT



We are a Proud and Vibrant Community

Despite many changes and government interventions in our lives, and despite the changes in the delta, we are a proud and vibrant indigenous community. With almost three thousand members, our First Nation is one of the largest First Nations in Treaty 8. Cree is still widely spoken in our communities, and many of our elders and younger members are active land users, spending weeks or months traveling, hunting, fishing, and living in the delta in remote cabins, camps, and settlements. We actively govern and manage our lands and waters, we respect our elders, and we take our responsibility to youth and future generations, and to Mother Earth, very seriously.

We are Part of the Delta and the Delta is Part of Us

For generations, the rich lands and waters of the Peace–Athabasca Delta have been a cultural homeland that supports our way of life, and a uniquely Mikisew relationship to the environment. Mikisew histories are kept through the oral tradition — they are passed on from elders to youth through teaching and experience, and they fill the landscape of the delta with names and connections. In many of our camps and hunting areas we can see the remains of our elders’ cabins, the graves of our ancestors, and stone scrapers and tools that show how long our people have been part of the delta. Many of us return each season to harvest resources and live on the land in the same places our ancestors did before us. Over hundreds of years, our relationship to the delta has shaped us, and we have helped shape it through actively managing the flow of water within our lands. Through managing beavers and beaver dams, opening channels, and closing them, Mikisew land users maintain and improve the delta, creating waterways and habitat for migratory birds, muskrat, and other animals, and helping sustain the land and waterscapes of Wood Buffalo National Park.



MAP OF TREATY 8 FROM REPORT OF COMMISSIONERS FOR TREATY NO. 8, SEPTEMBER 22, 1899

We are Treaty People

In 1899, our chiefs and leaders signed Treaty 8 with the Canadian government. Under the treaty, we agreed to allow outsiders to pass through, live in, and make use of our lands as long as the government's actions, or those of newcomers, did not interfere with our traditional rights to hunt, trap, fish, and live our way of life as we always have. The government made these promises and told us that they would last forever – as long as the sun shines, the grass grows, and the river flows. Every summer, during Treaty Days, the Canadian government sends its representatives to Fort Chipewyan and pays each Mikisew member a small amount of money as a token to show that the promises of Treaty 8 live on.

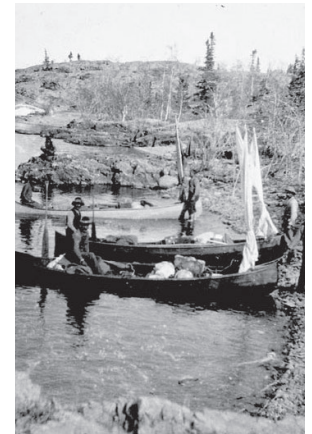


PHOTO: RENCONTRE AVEC DES AMÉRINDIENS SUR LA RIVE NORD DU LAC ATHABASCA, ALBERTA (LAC ARCHIVES 1893)

“We assured them that the treaty would not lead to any forced interference with their mode of life.”

— David Laird, J.H. Ross and J.A.J. McKenna, Report of Commissioners for Treaty No. 8, September 22, 1899



CREE PEOPLE WAITING TO GREET HON DAVID LAIRD, ATHABASCA RIVER (GLENBOW ARCHIVES, 1899)



INDIAN FISH TRAP, ATHABASCA REGION (LAC ARCHIVES, ND)

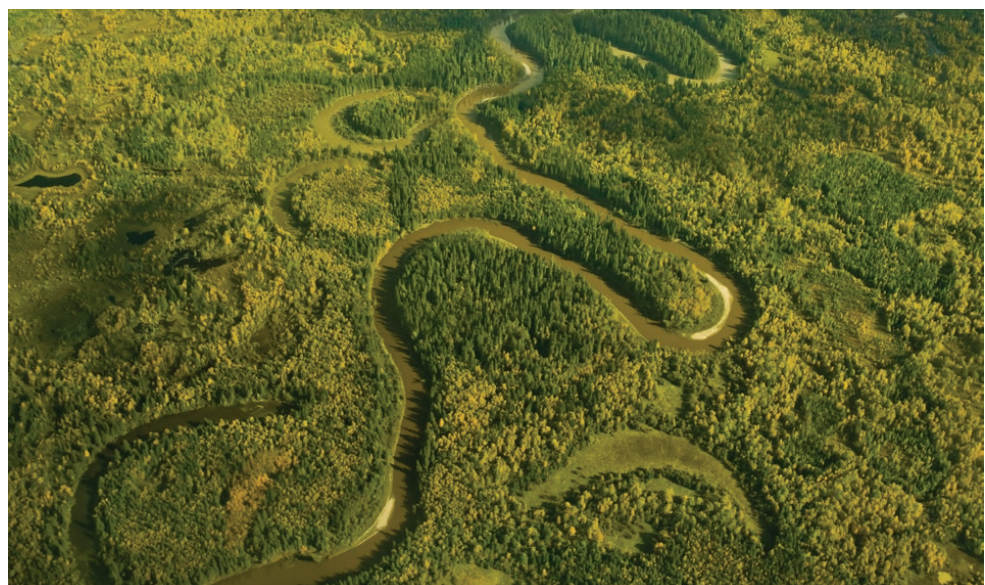
There is such a tremendous amount of connection between the people and the land. You just can't separate them. It's a good feeling when you go out there, you feel good. I just put my hand in the water and...you're back home and it's beautiful. It's hard to imagine that you'd have that kind of feeling just by putting your hand in the water and going on a boat, if somebody didn't know, if somebody didn't have that experience. But because we were raised out there, born and raised out there, that's the feeling we have...it's that connectedness with feelings. It's that beautiful feeling that you're home, that you're connected... The closeness is so close to the heart, it's part of you. That's who we are. That's what I meant by connectedness.

— Mikisew elder and councillor, April 4, 2016

“The closeness is so close to the heart, it's part of you. That's who we are.”

TOP PHOTO: OUT ON THE ATHABASCA, CRAIG CANDLER/FIRELIGHT

BOTTOM: WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK, COURTESY PAUL ZIZSKA, ZIZKA.CA



Some of Our Named Places in and Around Wood Buffalo National Park



DRAFT
Birch Mountains

Mikisew Cree First Nation Indian Reserves
 Other Indian Reserves
 Parks and protected areas
 Water

Map produced by Andrew Thompson of the Firelight Group on Thursday, April 21, 2016.

0 9 18 27
1:750,000 Kilometres

the firelight group



Major Mikisew Places



THE DELTA IS OUR PHOTO ALBUM...



My parents and sister drying white fish in summer, in about 1983. HELGIE MARTIN PHOTO



Family travelling by skiff near Praire River (aka Hay River), 1930s. HELGIE MARTIN PHOTO



Crossing Lake Mamawi, 1989. HELGIE MARTIN PHOTO



This is me and my family during spring high water at the family cabin, Praire River (aka Hay River) in about 1974. This was one of the last years we saw a good flood like this. HELGIE MARTIN PHOTO



HELGIE MARTIN PHOTO



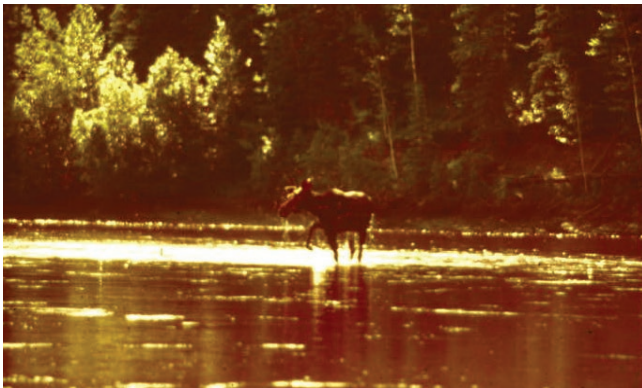
PHOTO: JENNIFER SCHINE/FIRELIGHT



Sweetgrass cabin showing water levels, 1974 (GERALD GIBOT)



MELODY LEPINE PHOTO



MELODY LEPINE PHOTO



MELODY LEPINE PHOTO



MELODY LEPINE PHOTO



MELODY LEPINE PHOTO



EXPERTS ON THE PARK

We are the scientists. We are the specialists. We know what it was and we are the ones who have seen the changes.

Mikisew People are Experts in the Outstanding Universal Value of Wood Buffalo National Park

Sakaw pimacihwin... that's what I've been living on in my young days. I grew up in the bush, this river, up the river. That's where I was born and I'm still here. It's 73 years now so [I've] been here for a long time. Trapping and hunting, and fishing, all those are things that we used to do when young....

— Mikisew elder, 2015

Recognizing and respecting indigenous knowledge results in better understanding of complex ecological and cultural systems and better environmental decisions that are more likely to be trusted by the people who live in and depend on the places where changes occur. Mikisew experience, academic literature, and international standards all support the importance of indigenous knowledge.

Sakaw pimacihwin is what we call indigenous knowledge. It literally means “bush way of life.” Our knowledge and way of life are not separate. Knowing requires living and practicing traditional activities. Indigenous knowledge (IK), traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), and Aboriginal traditional knowledge (ATK) are all similar terms that have to do with the knowledge systems of indigenous communities, and what we call *sakâw pimâcihiwin*.

Through oral tradition, long experience on the delta, and deep connection to lands and waters, our highly respected knowledge holders are experts in the waterways and living things — including bison and migratory birds — upon which the park's *Outstanding Universal Value* depends. Our elders hold specialized knowledge about many aspects of the delta — including water, animals, hunting, medicine, and gathering. They help guide our younger members in how to use and respect the land and water. As scientists come and go, we remain in this place, and retain a deep understanding of how the delta functions, what has gone wrong in recent decades, and how things may be made better.



TOP PHOTO: WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK, COURTESY PAUL ZIZSKA, ZIZKA.CA

BOTTOM: ELDER HOLDING FRAMED HISTORICAL PHOTO OF BOATS FILLED WITH SUPPLIES, CRAIG CANDLER/FIRELIGHT



Our knowledge of the delta is complex and extensive and we are now seeing dangers that have never occurred before.

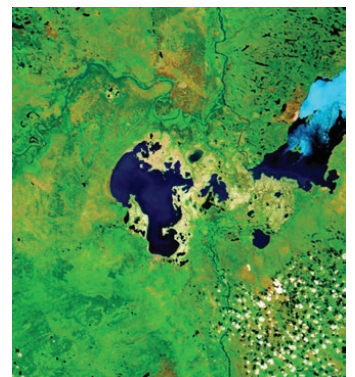
Our delta, Ayapaskaw, is alive and always changing, but the changes we have seen since the late 1970s have been different — they have been rapid and damaging. We have watched the animals decline and the land become dry. We know the delta and other wetlands act like filters to clean the water, and we are seeing signs that industrial contaminants and pollutants are accumulating in delta environments.

Mikisew knowledge holders know that regular flooding — especially in spring — maintains the health of the Peace–Athabasca Delta. Regular spring floods support more stable high water in the delta as lakes and channels away from the main rivers fill and recharge muskegs and peat lands. Like a sponge, the delta slowly releases its water over time when river levels are lower. Regular floods flush fresh water into the delta and old water out and provide fertile ground for sedge and grass habitats.

Within this system, the Peace and Athabasca Rivers are extremely powerful. The magnitude and timing of their flows are the main factors that determine whether a flood will occur. Mikisew elders call the Peace River the *okimaw*, or boss, because its flow is especially important. When the Peace River is high, adjoining rivers reverse direction and flow into the delta instead of flowing away from it. The flow of other rivers, including the Athabasca, are held back by the Peace River's flow and the delta basin floods. While the flow of the Peace itself can be high enough to create this effect on its own, it is often aided by ice damming at particular places that result in localized areas of high water on the Peace. Water returns to nearby lakes, creeks, and sloughs, including Lake Claire and Lake Mamawi. Muskrats, beavers, migratory birds, fish, and other animals, as well as plants, have abundant habitat and flourish.

While Mikisew oral histories recall large scale flooding occurring every few years prior to damming of the Peace River in the late 1960s, the frequency and intensity of spring floods has declined since. When there is not enough water flowing in the Peace River,

As scientists come and go, we remain in this place, and retain a deep understanding of how the delta functions, what has gone wrong in recent decades, and how things may be made better.



TOP PHOTO: *VERS L'EMBOUCHURE DE LA RIVIERE ATHABASCA, A PARTIR DU CAMP*, UNDATED

BOTTOM: PEACE–ATHABASCA DELTA WITH LAKE CLAIRE AND MOUTHS OF PEACE RIVER AND ATHABASCA RIVER, COURTESY VISIBLE EARTH, NASA



Our knowledge of the delta is complex and extensive and we are now seeing dangers that have never occurred before.

TOP PHOTOS: JENNIFER SCHINE/FIRELIGHT

or when ice dams fail to form, the rivers of the delta do not reverse, the flow of the Athabasca and other tributaries isn't held back, and the delta continues to empty. Lakes and channels are not recharged and over successive dry years, the 'sponge' of the delta becomes empty. Sedges and wetland grasses are replaced by willows and other plants that take over lake shores and creek beds. The land dries up. The animals move away. Migratory birds lose their wetland nesting and feeding habitats. Nutritious wetland grasses and sedges preferred by bison are replaced with invasive thistles and other plants that they avoid. Without water, beavers abandon their pools and streams, and Mikisew land users lose boat access to large areas of their territory.

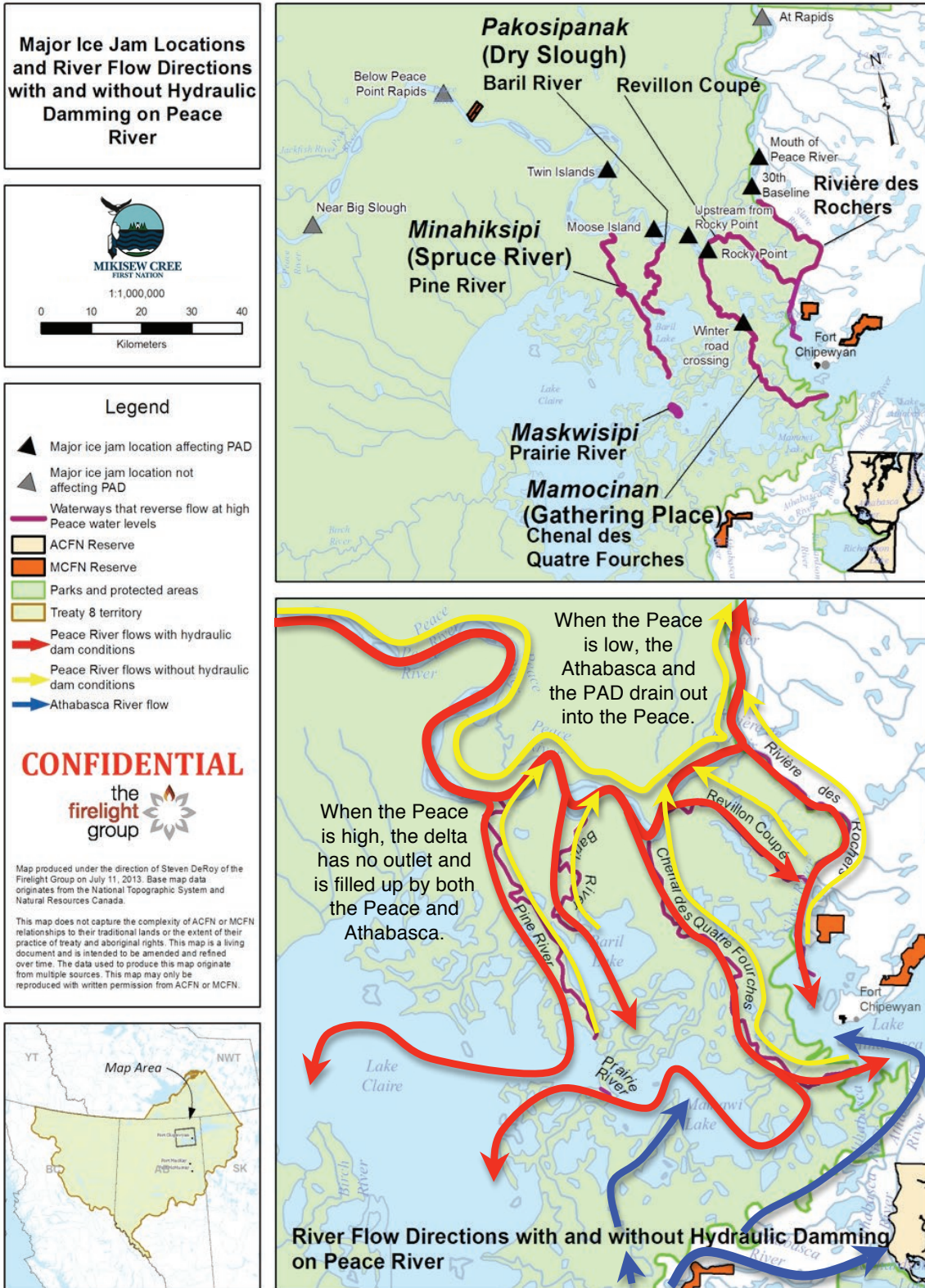
Damming and management of the Peace River for the creation of hydro-power has changed the timing of the spring flood and reduced the frequency and magnitude of flooding in the delta. Oil sand withdrawals from the Athabasca River, and global warming, compound the problem. Without regular spring flooding, the delta stops functioning. Occasional high water years may succeed in temporarily recharging some of the delta's function, but regular high water years are needed to recover from the water deficit created by consecutive low water years.



OIL SANDS PHOTO, AND OIL SANDS TAILINGS POND PHOTO, COURTESY DRU OJA JAY/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS MIKISEW ELDER WITNESSING WATER LEVELS, FIRELIGHT

Diagram of Mikisew knowledge of Major Ice Jam Locations and River Flow Directions With and Without Hydraulic Damming on the Peace River

Note: Hydraulic damming happens when the flow of water in the Peace River is high and blocks the exit of water from the delta and from the Athabasca River. Water flows from the Peace into the delta when hydraulic dam conditions are present, and from the delta into the Peace when absent. A hydraulic dam is very different from a 'hydro dam' which is a human-made dam that produces hydro-electricity.





WE ARE INTERDEPENDENT



The Peace–Athabasca Delta and the Mikisew Cree have shaped each other for centuries. We are linked with and dependent on one another.

TOP PHOTO: WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK, COURTESY PAUL ZIZSKA, ZIZKA.CA

BOTTOM: CHIPEWYANS ON A RAT AND DUCK HUNT, GLENBOW ARCHIVES, 1989

Mikisew Depends on the Park’s OUV and the Park’s OUV Depends on the Mikisew

The Peace–Athabasca Delta and the Mikisew Cree have shaped each other for centuries. We are linked with and dependent on one another.

Mikisew Depend on the Park’s OUV

We call our lands *kitaskino*, meaning “the land that we belong to and are related to.” The way of life of Mikisew — from the harvesting of resources to the family networks that form the basis of Mikisew society — finds its origin and enduring strength in the lands and waters that create the *Outstanding Universal Value* of the park. Mikisew identity and culture are inseparable from the OUV of the park.

All Mikisew members depend on the OUV of the park as a cultural homeland to return to, and as a place where ancestral rights can be practiced and connection with the land and water can be experienced.

I was born here on the land, Gull River [on Lake Claire]. I’m happy when I come to this land in the summer, and also in the winter. In the winter, I eat muskrats and beaver. In the summer, I eat ducks, sometimes fish. Moose sometimes in the summer. I’m really happy when I come to this land because I can eat all the food that I was born and raised on. — Mikisew elder, 2015

The delta is home for Mikisew members and is a major presence in the hearts and minds of Mikisew people. It is returned to year after year, in all seasons, for fishing in summer and winter, hunting moose, bear, caribou and other large game, trapping muskrat, beaver and other fur, harvesting ducks, geese and other birds in spring and fall, and collecting eggs in the spring. The delta is where many Mikisew members want to raise their children, and where



many of our elders want to return to when they retire. Even with changes in water and disappearance of animals, our people return. The ecological diversity and richness of the delta is absolutely unique in our lands, and in the world, and it plays a major role in our cultural practices, our knowledge and our way of being in the world.

...It's the place I was born and raised. This [Gull River, on Lake Claire] is my home. I come from Fort Chip to come over here and all the way around Lake Claire. You know, that's where I've been all my life. To go somewhere else...I think about this place. If I go somewhere else, like let's say north of Fort Chipewyan there. If I go over there and see the lakes and stuff like that, it reminds me I want to come back, I want to come back home, you know. It's very important to people like that, you know. ...The animals are not here anymore. ...But I still feel at home. I still like to come and see that... — Mikisew elder, January 28, 2015

The Park's OUV Depends on the Mikisew

People of [Fort] Chip, when they jump into their boat and go out into the delta they feel good. It's nice, clean, pristine land anyway, though I don't know about the water. But if there's garbage out there it doesn't make you feel good, especially if you're not the cause of it. If you're the cause of it then you can correct it and rectify the problem, but if you don't cause it and it's something by industry, people get stressed out and their hands are tied. They can't do nothing [about what happens] upstream. — Mikisew knowledge holder, 2015

The delta sustains the Mikisew Cree, but as active stewards of land and water, the Mikisew Cree also sustain the delta and the *Outstanding Universal Value* for which it was inscribed in the World Heritage List.

In Cree, we call this helping our lands — *kitaskinaw owicita*. We have an obligation to live responsibly and manage the OUV of the park, including the lands, waters, and the species within it.

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TOP PHOTO: CRAIG CANDLER/FIRELIGHT
WHOOPING CRANE IN WOOD
BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK, COURTESY
KLAUS NIGGE/PARKS CANADA
BISON BISON ATHABASCAE IN
WBNP, COURTESY ANSGAR
WALK/PARKS CANADA





“Me and my brothers, in sloughs, inland lakes...we’d build dams... And then [the beavers] built their own dam above where we built ours... Today that dam we built is still standing there. And the beaver dam is still there. And there’s always water back there. And when there’s water like that, there’s always muskrats...that’s since 1950 we did that... we must have built it pretty good because it’s still standing.”

— Mikisew elder,
April 4, 2016

PHOTO: BEAVER (CASTOR CANADENSIS), COURTESY GORD MCKENNA/FLICKR

In the delta, we help the land and the water in many ways. In other parts of the boreal forest, fire is used as an important tool to maintain and support habitats. In the delta, Mikisew people sometime use fire to maintain prairie habitats around their cabins, but management of water is a more common way of creating and sustaining delta habitat, especially for muskrat. By increasing muskrat habitat, valuable wetland habitat for migratory birds and other animals is also increased. We do this in a number of ways:

- **OPENING CHANNELS TO INCREASE FLOW AND MAINTAIN ACCESS:** In many parts of the delta, including the Birch River and at the mouth of the Peace, Mikisew members dig channels in banks or remove log jams, or beaver dams, to increase flow between an area that has water and another that is lacking. Where no beaver dam is desired, we will trap the beaver in the area so that it stays open.
- **CREATING DAMS IN THE DELTA:** While Mikisew members depend on the flow of the big rivers for large floods, we also actively create dams to manage the flow of water in smaller areas. These small constructions of logs and earth help change the course of water so that it does not flood some areas and reaches others instead. These dams also work to contain water so that it stays in areas for longer periods of time, allowing the growth or return of animal and plant life. In the 1970s several concrete dams or weirs were built in key locations to try to hold the water in the delta. These worked briefly, but they were not flexible enough to work with the seasonal changes of the delta.
- **MANAGING BEAVERS TO HELP CREATE WETLANDS:** Beavers are master dam builders. By managing beavers, and working together with them, Mikisew knowledge holders are able to manage water over large areas and long periods of time with minimal human effort. Expert Mikisew land users will sometimes build small dams to create the sound of flowing water because this will attract beavers from other areas. Once the beavers are in an area, they will build larger dams, and often maintain them for generations, creating stable wetland habitat that can extend for miles. Mikisew elders know of places where they built those dams with their parents, with lasting effects more than 60 years later. Mikisew trappers carefully manage beaver populations in order to encourage long term maintenance of wetland delta habitats that also benefit muskrat, migratory bird nesting, bison and moose browse, and other living things.



- **MANAGING WATER TO SUPPORT HEALTHY PLANTS AND ANIMALS:** Floods allow water and nutrients to reach sloughs, side channels, rivers, creeks, and small lakes. They flush fresh water into these areas, allow for the renewal of nutrients, and maintain rich grass and sedge habitats that support a diversity of plants and animals. Lack of water means that these areas dry out and are taken over by willow bush. When Mikisew land users manage water flow, we not only help beaver and muskrat populations, but also other living things, by helping control invasive vegetation and plant cover in the delta.

Long ago, that [high water] was normal like during break-up, naturally high water. What used to happen was the water just naturally cleaned out all these sloughs. You know all this fresh water goes in and pushes out the old water. Every year, every spring, that's why some of these sloughs, animals were surviving good, whether it's muskrats or beavers... Now...they're just little prairies now instead of sloughs. They're just little prairies. And now a lot of them are getting to a point where they're getting willowed in now...if somebody [who] didn't know all that went on [he] would just think 'wow there's a lot of bush.' — Mikisew elder, April 2, 2016

- **PROTECTING THE DELTA BY MANAGING OURSELVES AND OTHERS:** To ensure the long term health of our lands and waters, we actively manage the number of people who are using the land, and the ways that they use it. Our families control core territories. We have established rules for newcomers, and we follow protocols for crossing into or using another family's territory. This shows respect for this delta and for each other. Respect and sharing are key principles taught by our elders, and they help ensure that the resources in the delta are managed for the future, and that all families have access to the areas they need.
- **TEACHING CHILDREN STEWARDSHIP AND RESPECT:** In addition to physical management of water and delta habitats, Mikisew elders and knowledge holders also see teaching children as a critical component of long term delta stewardship. Through experience and teaching on the land, the next generations of Mikisew leaders and knowledge holders is taught to live within and protect that delta and the Mikisew way of life.

“And now a lot of them are getting to a point where they’re getting willowed in now... if somebody [who] didn’t know all that went on [he] would just think ‘wow there’s a lot of bush.’”

— Mikisew elder, April 2, 2016

PHOTO: ON THE PEACE RIVER, CRAIG CANDLER/FIRELIGHT



“The way I was taught by my grandfather was to respect everything, the animals, the trees, the plants, the water. You’ve got to respect it all, he said, and return it.”

HISTORICAL PHOTOS
PROVIDED BY
MELODY LEPINE

When they killed the moose...they’d bring it home, the head part now, when they’d skin the head, when they’d take out the ears, I remember, they used to take willows. They’d bend the willows, put the head part, the hide, and put that there and leave it up...that’s the respect to the animals, to the Creator, for providing us that. So there was a deep connection, without really know that it was there, but that was the way we did things. Being raised out in the land...that prayer was done, thanking the Creator was done with your everyday life... my family can attest to that, but things like that, they don’t just go ahead and say out loud. It’s sacred. And that’s where I see that connection. And the people lived and respected the land...It was just entwined. — Mikisew elder and councillor, April 4, 2016

The way I was taught by my grandfather was to respect everything, the animals, the trees, the plants, the water. You’ve got to respect it all, he said, and return it. Even fire, he said, how you take care of fire. Don’t throw foreign objects into your fire, garbage, or whatever, and just leave your fire nice and pure, he said that way your fire will take care of you...and even fire, they say treat it with respect and it will treat you the same way. And with everything else: Water, you know, even the wind. Everything you must treat with respect and everything has a purpose. — Mikisew elder, 2015





THREATS TO THE OUV OF WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK

Right now the water's high enough. It makes you feel, feel good to see that. When you go into the lake there, [and] it's dry or water in the middle over there, you know, you don't, you feel lonely like. You've got a sad feeling, you know. I don't know how to explain it, but it don't feel good anyways. You know, you feel lonely, like you lost something. Something important. That's why we keep coming back to this place here. — Mikisew elder, January 28, 2015

WE ARE TRADITIONAL STEWARDS of the lands and resources of the Peace–Athabasca Delta. As stewards, we have witnessed the OUV of the park deteriorate as a result of climate change and industrial activities including hydro dams and massive oil sand mines that have been permitted by Canada and its provinces.

Mikisew knowledge holders have had a difficult relationship with Parks Canada. Within the park, Canada has interfered with our way of life in many ways through administration and enforcement of regulations. By failing to protect the water that the delta and Wood Buffalo National Park depend on, Canada is not keeping its promise to protect our rights and way of life under Treaty 8. Likewise, Canada is not keeping its promise to protect the precious and unique treasure of the Peace–Athabasca Delta and its *Outstanding Universal Value* as a World Heritage Site for all humanity, including future generations of Mikisew Cree, and for the Earth itself.

On the following page, we set out our knowledge of the current status and trends of the attributes of the OUV of Wood Buffalo National Park, which we raised in our petition. From the Mikisew perspective, the OUV of the park is at risk in all of these areas.

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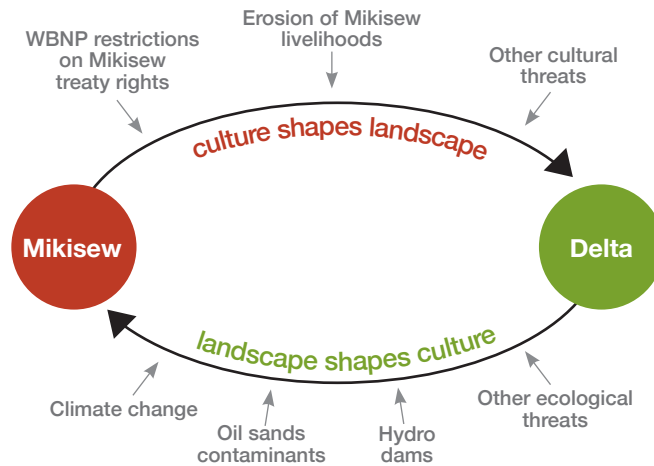
TOP PHOTO: WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK, COURTESY PAUL ZIZSKA, ZIZKA.CA

BOTTOM: OIL SANDS, COURTESY JENNIFER GRANT/PEMBINA INSTITUTE NORTHERN LIFELOOD

World Heritage Value	MCFN Knowledge of Current Status and Trends
<p>(vii): Concentrations of migratory wildlife are of world importance</p> <p><i>Rare and superlative natural phenomena (e.g. large inland delta, salt plains and gypsum karst)</i></p>	<p>We have seen the quantity of wildlife rapidly decline in the delta and have seen disturbing changes in the health of animals, fish, and the land itself:</p> <p>The spring and fall migration of migratory birds decline as wetland areas with quality food and nesting habitat dry and are replaced by willow bush.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birds change their migration patterns to avoid the oil sands area because of noise, pollution, and other deterrents. • Beaver and muskrat – keystone species – disappear, along with other animals, as the delta dries. • Without flooding, water that remains in rivers, wetlands, and muskegs is often “dead” or dirty. There is often oil sheen visible on the surface and strange deposits left on boats. The water from many areas is no longer considered safe to drink. • Large scale fish die offs occur in delta lakes and physical deformities are seen in the Athabasca River. • Many Mikisew members now avoid eating fish because of potential contamination and differences in the taste and texture of the meat. • Our berries and medicines are absent or poor quality in places where they were previously abundant (especially wetland areas). • Woodland Caribou decline as remaining habitat disappears. <p>We have seen large scale landscape changes, including drying of wetlands and muskegs.</p> <p>Seasonal flood cycles have been disrupted. Timing and quantity of floods are no longer able to support the delta.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Springs and summers are often too dry. • Because of hydro dams, more water is released in the winter, and less in the spring, causing problems with ice formation, making the rivers dangerous for humans, and causing animals to freeze or drown, including beavers and muskrats. <p>It’s difficult to fish, trap, hunt, pick berries, enjoy the land, and visit spiritually important places because lower water levels often make it impossible to travel.</p>
<p>(ix): Most ecologically complete and largest example of the entire Great Plains-Boreal grassland ecosystem of North America</p> <p><i>Only place where the predator-prey relationship between wolves and wood bison has continued, unbroken, over time</i></p>	<p>Bison move out of the park, and population declines where former wetlands dry out and are colonized by willow, thistle, and invasive plants.</p> <p>Illnesses in park bison are common.</p> <p>Wolf populations and bison populations are out of balance.</p>
<p>(x): Contains the only breeding habitat in the world for the whooping crane</p> <p><i>Management in the park brought the whooping crane back from the brink of extinction</i></p>	<p>All living things are being impacted by changes in water quality, quantity, and timing of water flow.</p>



Because the Mikisew and the delta are linked and dependent on each other, risks to the delta are risks to us, too. Without protecting the water in the delta, the values that underlie the park's *Outstanding Universal Value* will always be at risk, as will we.



There's one area up on the Peace River that we used to do our annual bird hunting like in the fall. All the birds used to come out of Lake Claire and they'd go feeding, go pick up sand, like on the river, on the sandbars...that's where we used to go hunt...Now I could count the flocks in a couple of days and I could tell you how many birds went south. Used to be you couldn't do that. [Used to be] just like mosquitoes, flocks and flocks...[Now], it's sad to tell your kids, your grandchildren, this is what it used to be like...I thought I was going to continue my traditional way, and I couldn't do it because everything changed...there's places on the river you could see the mark where the water used to be, and the last couple of floods we did have, you could see the marks on the trees...There's a lot of places like along the Peace that we used to hunt, can't even get into those places anymore...because there's just no water...Compared to a few years ago, when you could go places that are way out of the big river, way out in the wilderness, and you could canoe, and lots of water. Now there's nothing. Everything's changed...We used to bear hunt in August, when the berries are ripe. Now the berries that the bear used to hunt aren't even there anymore, so the berries are gone. So is the bear, of course. And same with the moose...all the animals. Even the beavers. — Mikisew Elder, April 2, 2016

The Mikisew Cree and the Peace–Athabasca Delta are linked and dependent on each other. We are the traditional stewards of this area. But changes are threatening the delta and, as a result, our culture and identity.



TOP PHOTO: FRESH TRACKS NEAR LAKE CLAIRE, JENNIFER SCHINE/FIRELIGHT

BOTTOM: MIKISEW BOATS ON THE ATHABASCA, STEVEN DEROF/FIRELIGHT



CONCLUSIONS & KEY MESSAGES



**Our happiness
is out there.
When the delta
is safe, we can
be happy again.**

PHOTOS: CRAIG
CANDLER/FIRELIGHT

I may be alive, but if I can't practice my culture, if I can't enjoy being a Cree, what am I? If I can't enjoy being a Cree out on the land, what am I? And like I said, when we were born, when we were raised out there, it was the most happiest times. Those times, those feelings...never leave you. So how could I be somebody else different when that's who I am? That's my connection there. I never, ever knew I'd be talking like this. Seriously, never. To fight for who you are in this day and age. Never thought that...We're not asking them to change the whole Wood Buffalo National Park. We're not asking them to change the whole Alberta. We're asking them to make sure that you keep our delta clean the way it used to be...It's not like we're asking for the end of the world...It's just maintaining our way of life, that's all. — Mikisew elder and councillor, April 4, 2016

THE MIKISEW DEPEND ON THE PEACE-ATHABASCA DELTA and the delta depends on us. We are both in danger, but there are clear solutions. In the past, our concerns about the delta, our traditional knowledge, or our treaty rights have not been given enough consideration. However, the Mikisew Cree, Canada, its provinces, and UNESCO are all part of these solutions to protect the delta.

Mikisew knowledge holders have said clearly that the key to protecting the *Outstanding Universal Value* of Wood Buffalo National Park is to protect the water flowing into the park — including the quality, quantity, and timing of flow. Many changes are happening in our world, and much of our water — the delta's water — is now held back in the Rocky Mountains by hydro-electric dams. While this is a key source of danger for the park, the power to hold back water is also the power to release it for the benefit of the delta. Impacts to the delta can be reversed through re-establishing ecologically supportive, regular spring floods on the Peace and Athabasca Rivers.

In meeting rooms and at kitchen tables, Mikisew land users have made a number of recommendations for what needs to happen to protect the delta and the park's OUV:

1. ECOLOGICALLY PROTECTIVE WATER MANAGEMENT ON THE PEACE RIVER:

If a small portion of the water held by hydro dams on the Peace is managed for ecological health, instead of economic gain, then regular spring flooding — synchronized with the flooding of the Athabasca and adjacent rivers — can be brought back to the Peace River and the *okimaw*, or boss, of the delta system can again create regular, sustaining floods in the delta basin.

2. FLEXIBLE WEIRS IN THE DELTA: In the 1970s, Parks tried to help hold water in the delta using a series of concrete weirs. The weirs worked, but because they were built too high, and couldn't respond to the seasonal flow of water, they were dismantled. New technology now exists that can create more flexible regulation weirs at key points in the delta. These could be adjusted based on seasonal flows, and managed based on age-old Mikisew water management strategies and knowledge.

3. JOINT MIKISEW – INTERNATIONAL MONITORING: Mikisew members want international support for trusted monitoring and transparent reporting regarding the health of the delta.

4. RESPECT FOR MIKISEW DECISION-MAKING: Mikisew governance and management regarding the delta should be respected and consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including Mikisew management and/or co-management, with careful controls to ensure respect for the land.

5. CREATE BUFFER ZONES to protect adjacent watersheds flowing into the park from the Birch Mountains and the Athabasca River: Canada and the provinces need to work together with the Mikisew to develop a plan, monitored for success, that safeguards Wood Buffalo National Park and the Peace–Athabasca Delta. This plan should pay close attention to the OUV of the park and the delta, for Mikisew people, and for the world, and should include revisions to existing water withdrawal frameworks on the Athabasca River to better protect the delta ecosystem and our rights-based activities. This plan should also include tighter restrictions on oil sands-related pollution in the Athabasca River watershed, including tailings and air emissions. Further industrial development — including dams and oil sands — on the Peace and Athabasca Rivers should not be allowed until this plan is in place.

6. SUPPORT FOR MIKISEW LIVELIHOODS IN THE DELTA: The delta is kept healthy, in part, through Mikisew management and the passing on of knowledge from one generation to another. International support to strengthen the market for a Mikisew fur-based economy, or to support other forms of livelihood that allow elders and youth to work together in the delta, would help the Mikisew tradition of stewardship remain vibrant.

With the support of UNESCO, and the cooperation of Canada and its provinces, the Mikisew are hopeful that the health of the Peace–Athabasca Delta, its *Outstanding Universal Value*, and our rights may be restored.



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PHOTO: JENNIFER SCHINE/FIRELIGHT



WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK PHOTO COURTESY PAUL ZIZSKA / ZIZKA.CA



Mikisew Cree First Nation is a Cree nation whose lands and rights depend on the Peace–Athabasca Delta and surrounding waters. The Mikisew Cree signed Treaty 8 in 1899 at Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca. Today, MCFN members reside in Fort Chipewyan as well as Fort McMurray, Edmonton, Fort Smith, NWT, and elsewhere.