

Photos by: Allan Lissner

# The Fawn River Indigenous Protected Area

A story of courage and sacred responsibility between people and the land

**JULY 2022**

Indigenous Peoples have a reciprocal relationship with the verdant forests, free-flowing rivers, abundant lakes and vast wetlands that make up their homelands. Nature provides healthy food, fresh water, clean air and spiritual well-being; in return, the people show their gratitude by cherishing and protecting their homelands. For the people of Big Trout Lake, known as Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI), life in this remote community 600 km north of Thunder Bay comes with the responsibility to look after the lands and waters so it can sustain future generations. KI Chief Donny Morris says these sacred instructions to protect the environment come from community Elders, and ultimately serve as “a gift to the world.”

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Northern Waterthrush,  
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For Morris and his community, a proposed Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) encompassing Big Trout Lake and the watershed of the Fawn River will safeguard the clean water and abundant fish and wildlife that have supported the people of KI since time immemorial. The 1.3-million-ha IPA also protects globally significant ecosystems with benefits extending far beyond the region. Central to the IPA, which is jointly supported with the Wapekeka First Nation, is the largest lake in the region and the headwaters of the Severn River, which act as corridors for nutrients, fish and animals through an intact landscape at the transition of the boreal forest and the Hudson Plains. Massive peatlands, known to Elders as the “breathing lands”, are a persistent long term store of carbon as a result of the wet conditions that slow the decay of vegetation creating peat soils rich in carbon. These large, intact areas are natural carbon sinks storing carbon and contributing to climate regulation.

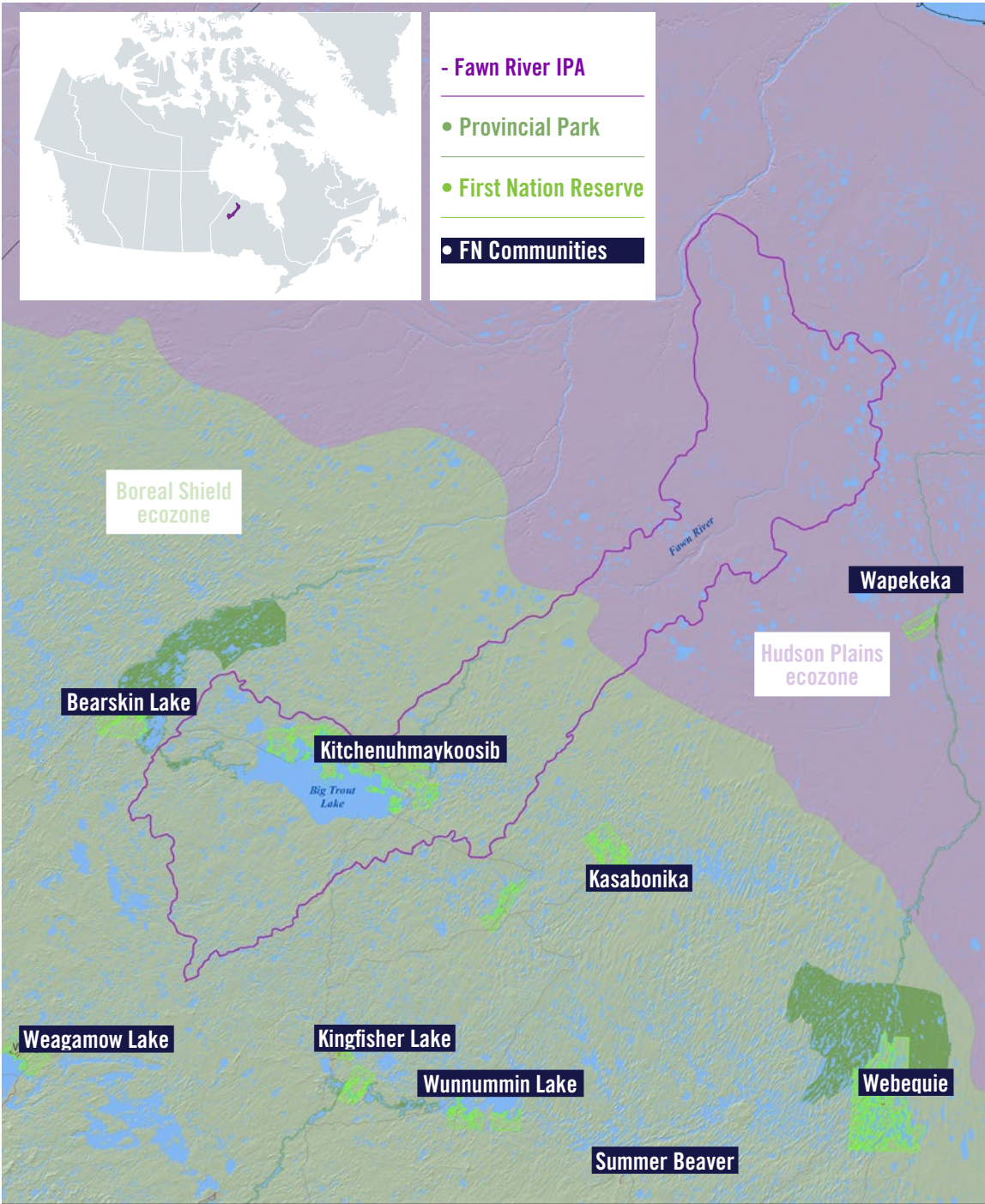


CHERYL CHETKIEWICZ

“Kitchenuhmaykoosib and the Fawn River watershed is part of a large, interconnected region,” says Cheryl Chetkiewicz, a conservation scientist with Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Canada. The amount of water is phenomenal. The headwaters of the Fawn River start in the forests of the Boreal Shield in the south and flow northeast into Kitchenuhmaykoosib before heading north across the Hudson Plains. At almost 300km, the Fawn River is one of the longest tributaries of the Severn River, which is in turn one of the longest free-flowing rivers remaining in Canada.”

Chetkiewicz has been collaborating with KI since 2013 and together with colleagues at WCS Canada, are creating an ecological atlas of the Fawn River watershed. The IPA includes a diversity of terrestrial and freshwater habitats, and supports incredible northern biological diversity, she explains. The IPA also overlaps with several ranges of woodland boreal caribou and migratory caribou populations. Female polar bears den in the northern peatlands. To the south, in the Boreal Shield portion of the area, Chetkiewicz describes predator-prey systems with keystone species like caribou, moose, wolves and wolverines. “The IPA is part of the single-largest block of boreal forest left on the planet with no large scale human impacts like forestry, mining, or roads,” she adds.

However, KI leadership has been embroiled in a long and sometimes bitter battle with outside forces who’ve failed to recognize the community’s authority in protecting its homeland. Chief Morris was one of six community leaders jailed in 2008 for defending his homeland from mineral exploration in the watershed. The leaders became known as the “KI SIX” in the media. Their plight and case, along



with leaders from the Ardoch Algonquins in southern Ontario, exposed the destructive, colonial perspective of Ontario’s antiquated *Mining Act*.

KI’s courage in exercising its sovereignty and responsibility to their homeland garnered national attention and got the support of unions, churches and conservation groups like Wildlands League. More than 1,000 people rallied at Queen’s Park in support of the Indigenous leaders facing an unjust *Mining Act*. The Ontario Court of Appeal commented on the law’s sweeping nature. Eventually the Ontario government relented, bought out the mining claims and enacted reforms. A few years later, it withdrew 2.3 million ha of lands in the KI territory from mining, an area three times the size of the Greenbelt. KI had won the day.

The nation didn’t waste any time though. Leaders and Elders quickly began designing an IPA and declared the entire watershed permanently protected under KI law.

Steven Chapman, a KI manager who has been developing the IPA in his role with the community’s lands and environment unit, recalls the unique experience of interviewing Elders on their traditional lands to reclaim place names in the local KI Anishinabemowin language. Nearly 100 participants shared their intimate knowledge of the region, describing weather patterns, wildlife interactions and other natural dynamics. “We did everything possible to get the Elders out on the land,” says Chapman. “We learned about where they hunted, where they gathered food, and where they stayed. They

have such strong memories of the land and water. I was amazed at their knowledge of the smallest details.”

The federal government’s support of the Fawn River IPA was a “huge moment” for the local community, Anna Baggio, conservation director of Wildands League says. The important milestone provided funding to KI’s efforts to establish an IPA as part of the initiative to meet the goal of protecting 25 percent of Canada’s protected land base by 2025. Chapman and Jacob Ostaman, Director of the Lands and Environment Unit, have been documenting the values that locals want to see protected in the watershed. This ensures the IPA will reflect “Indigenous principles on governance and traditional ecological knowledge,” says Ostaman, who hopes that federal funding will be renewed so the community can continue its work.

Support for the IPA is widespread in both KI and the neighbouring community of Wapekeka First Nation, Ostaman adds, with the eventual goal of working with additional communities to protect all 3.5 million ha of KI traditional lands. (In comparison, central Ontario’s Algonquin Provincial Park spans about 750,000 ha.) But the biggest hurdle remains the provincial government, which has ignored the Nation’s requests to discuss a protected area and has repeatedly failed to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty of homelands. In March, it announced a new critical minerals strategy that KI and Wildlands League fear may lead to another race to claim minerals and more conflicts with Indigenous Peoples in their ancestral lands.





ANNA BAGGIO

“There’s been an obvious resistance on the part of Ontario,” notes Baggio. “The province seems afraid to make any signal in support of conservation. That’s unfortunate, because if you care about clean air and water and healthy people and land, you have to care about nature. You can’t pretend Indigenous peoples don’t exist. It takes courage and leadership to do the right thing.”

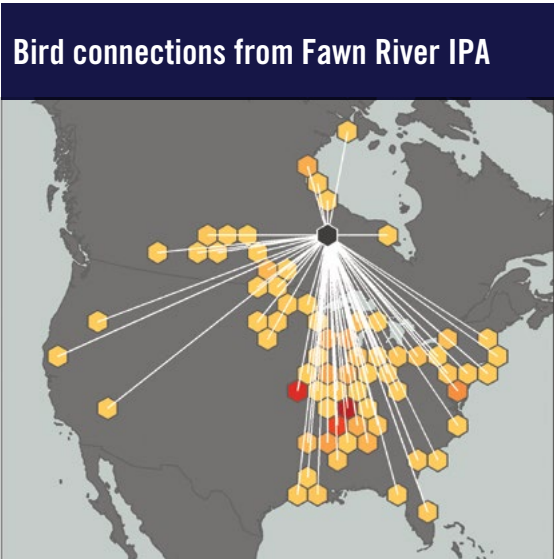
For his part, Chief Morris maintains that nation-to-nation dialogue is integral to Treaty 9, the agreement his ancestors signed in 1929. The Treaty was a pledge from the Crown to “live together, share together, and to support us,” Morris says. “When I was growing up and went out on the land with my uncles, never once did I hear them say we gave all this up. This land, this water—it’s for us to protect.”

Researchers like Cheryl Chetkiewicz and Jeff Wells, the vice president for boreal conservation with the National Audubon Society, meanwhile, are thrilled to have the opportunity to learn more about this globally significant network of lands and waters from local experts as they support the community’s conservation goals. Wells says scientists have only scratched the surface of the IPA’s rich biodiversity, alluding to “literally millions of breeding birds,” with boreal standbys including Blackpoll Warbler, Northern Waterthrush and Canada Jay, as well as species of conservation concern like Rusty Blackbird, Connecticut Warbler, and Olive-sided Flycatcher, in the area.

More important for Wells, though, is for non-Indigenous scientists to appreciate the Indigenous knowledge systems of KI and other northern communities. “They’ve learned through immersion and spending time on the land,” says Wells. “The result is a rich, deep knowledge that’s far more holistic than Western science. It’s been developed over thousands of years of living, thinking, watching and sharing the information.”

For example, soil scientists are just beginning to reveal the potent effect of northern peatlands in mitigating climate change. “Carbon is the next shiny thing for science and governments,” says Chetkiewicz. “But Indigenous communities knew about this already. Their ways of knowing, being and doing reveal that everything is connected. It’s very clear that protecting the ‘breathing lands’ is in the best interest of the planet. The people of KI have a profound understanding of how those systems are connected. They recognize that carbon is the building block of all life.” The Fawn River IPA is estimated to hold more than 1 billion tonnes of carbon making it a powerful global nature-based climate solution.

After all the inequities and indignities his community has suffered at the hands of the province and exploration mining companies, Morris says he’s looking forward to the opportunity for a respectful discussion. Baggio hopes Canada will play a role in bringing Ontario to the table.



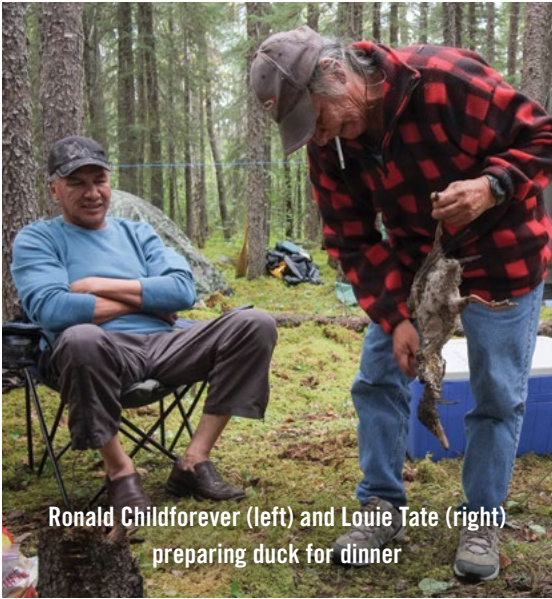
**More birds**    **Fewer birds**  
Map created by the National Audubon Society, with data from the USGS Bird Banding Lab



Elder Rebecca Hudson preparing moose meat



Louie Tate\* with eagle feather \*Since the KI expedition, Louis Tate has passed away



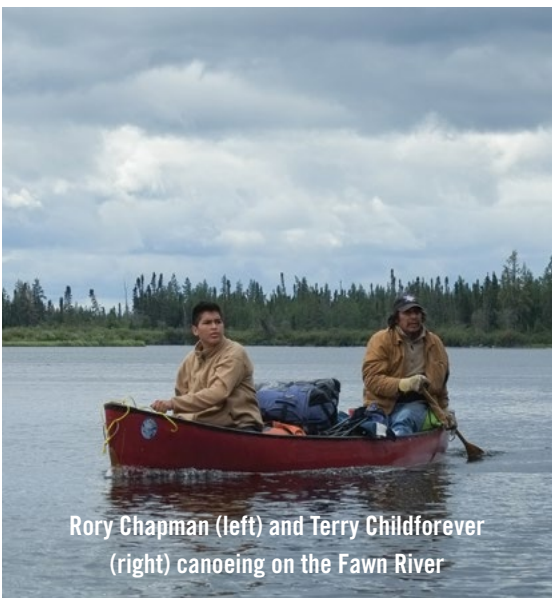
Ronald Childforever (left) and Louie Tate (right) preparing duck for dinner



Brandon Crowe portaging



The KI 6, Bruce Sakakeep, Jack McKay, Cecilia Begg, Chief Donny Morris, Darryl Sainnawap and Samuel McKay, on the steps of Osgoode Hall after victory at the Court of Appeal in 2008. Photo by: KI



Rory Chapman (left) and Terry Childforever (right) canoeing on the Fawn River





CHIEF MORRIS

“These lands are being set aside not only for our community, but for the public at large,” Chief Morris says. “We want to be able to preserve them under our own system of governance.”

Orion McKay fishing on the Fawn River

Wildlands League is a not-for-profit charity working to protect public land and water since 1968. We are policy experts, negotiators and communicators standing up for wildlife and standing with communities. We tackle irresponsible development that threatens precious rivers, lakes and wildlife habitat. We create solutions and hope. We give voice to Canada’s irreplaceable nature to make sure at least half of the country is protected for all children, the climate and for the planet. Our work with KI is one such story.



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