

OPINION

UNESCO delivered a blistering assessment of the state of Wood Buffalo National Park, and the Mikisew Cree First Nation believes there is a path forward for Canada

By PETER POWDER AND MELODY LEPINE AUGUST 18, 2021

The federal government must move beyond the time-limited funds for corrective actions made in 2017 and 2020 and establish a permanent funding mechanism for protection of the Peace Athabasca Delta. Current resources, while welcome, leave critical actions unfunded and the future uncertain.



The World Heritage Committee delivered a blistering assessment, concluding that threats to the Peace Athabasca Delta, pictured, from unresolved jurisdictional issues undermining its primary tributaries, contamination concerns from upstream industries, and other government actions put it at such risk that its outstanding values stand to be lost. Forever. *Photograph courtesy of Wood Buffalo National Park collection*

Natural World Heritage Sites contain the planet's most outstanding natural wonders and Canada has the honour of having one of the largest, Wood Buffalo National Park. The heart of the park is the Peace Athabasca Delta (PAD), one of the world's largest freshwater deltas and a unique area supporting migratory birds, wood bison, and Indigenous communities like ours.

With Canada positioned as a leader in conservation, battling climate change, and advancing reconciliation—and with national parks in our country’s DNA—one would expect Canada to have received praise at last month’s 44th Session of UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee.

That isn’t what happened. Instead, the World Heritage Committee delivered a blistering assessment, concluding that threats to the Peace Athabasca Delta from unresolved jurisdictional issues undermining its primary tributaries, contamination concerns from upstream industries, and other government actions put it at such risk that its outstanding values stand to be lost. Forever.

For Canadians, that is a hard message to hear. For us, it’s devastating. A future where Canada doesn’t halt the deterioration of the Peace Athabasca Delta is a future where our people are taken away from the place that holds our history and sustains our culture.

With the World Heritage Committee correctly confirming the magnitude of the threats facing the Peace Athabasca Delta and the challenges that hamper nascent efforts to save it, what gives our community hope?



Peter Powder is the chief of the Mikisew Cree First Nation. *Photograph courtesy of Peter Powder*

For one thing, saving the park is a once-in-a-century opportunity for federal and provincial governments and major drivers of Canada's economy to simultaneously "walk the walk" of reconciliation, climate action, protection of freshwater resources and restoration of a cherished conservation area. The opportunities that come with moving forward together, in partnership, are huge. And the consequences of inaction are unacceptable. It's a situation crying out for action.

Momentum to turn the tide for the Peace Athabasca Delta is starting to build. The 2019 Wood Buffalo National Park action plan outlines important actions that are part of the path forward, Canada has made initial investments and Parks Canada is working hard. The creation of a buffer around the Peace Athabasca Delta, the Kitaskino Nuwenene Wildland Park in Alberta, shows how success is achieved when industry and governments partner with us.

The World Heritage Committee's sobering decision is the missing piece—a powerful statement of what Canada, Alberta, and British Columbia must do to create a better path forward for the PAD.

All levels of government—multiple federal departments, British Columbia, and Alberta—must heed UNESCO's call to be fully dedicated to tackling the hard actions in the action plan, not just easy ones. All jurisdictions can do better to fulfil the plan's intent. And they must move faster, making sure the committee's requests are addressed.

Governments must also acknowledge the action plan doesn't exist in isolation. This means breaking the cycle of undercutting the promise of the action plan by regularly making decisions that jeopardize the park.



Melody Lepine is a member of the Mikisew Cree First Nation. *Photograph courtesy of Melody Lepine*

Taking bold action around water governance on the Peace and Athabasca rivers, the lifeblood of the Peace AD, is the most critical missing piece. Before becoming a MP, Justin Trudeau said of Nahanni National Park: “You can’t protect a river without making sure you’re protecting all the tributaries.” That was right then and it’s right for the PAD, where we say: “nipi tapitam” (“water is boss”).

Canada has the political, fiscal, and technical resources to bring partners together to establish a pathway to water governance for the Peace and Athabasca Rivers that puts the health of the PAD at the forefront. It’s beyond time for Canada to get that done.

Enhanced monitoring that informs upstream decisions by governments and industry is crucial for long term success. Indigenous communities of the PAD have a deep understanding, rooted in indigenous knowledge and science, of this dynamic area. Now is the time to strengthen the inclusion of indigenous knowledge with science and link monitoring to decision-making. To that end, Indigenous communities have designed the Peace Athabasca Delta Institute, an Indigenous-led research and monitoring centre, to play that role and serve as a beacon of reconciliation. We are working with Canada to make the institute a reality.

Lastly, the federal government must move beyond the time-limited funds for corrective actions made in 2017 and 2020 and establish a permanent funding mechanism for protection of the Peace Athabasca Delta. Current resources, while welcome, leave critical actions unfunded and the future uncertain.

We brought our concerns to UNESCO in 2014 for a simple reason: save a place vital to our people and special to all Canadians. With UNESCO's help, the path forward is clearer, giving us hope. But new, bolder federal and provincial actions are required now, before we run out of time.

Peter Powder is the chief of the Mikisew Cree First Nation, the largest First Nation in northeastern Alberta. Melody Lepine is a member of the Mikisew Cree First Nation and for the past 11 years she has worked for the Mikisew Cree First Nation, first as the environmental coordinator and now as the director.

The Hill Times