

# Canada's Northern National Parks: Unfragmented Landscapes, Unforgettable Experiences, Wilderness, and Homeland

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## Introduction

THE NORTH IS A BIG PART OF CANADA. It is big in area and in the Canadian imagination. Over half of the country could be considered to be in the Arctic and northern themes echo through Canadian culture, from the poems of Robert W. Service and Robert Flaherty's film "Nanook of the North" to books by Pierre Berton and Farley Mowat. While most Canadians live in the southern part of the country, the North is important to them, it is part of the Canadian identity, and a land that is deeply cared for.

The Inuit, First Nations, Métis and non-native people live in communities dotted across the northern landscape. The Aboriginal peoples are familiar with almost all of the northern land, the taiga and tundra, much of which we would call wilderness. This is *de facto* wilderness, distant from roads, towns and significant infrastructure. Some of the most extensive areas of intact ecosystems on the planet are in the Canadian North.

As a northern country, it is somewhat surprising that it took so long before national parks were established in the North. While Wood Buffalo was established in the 1920s, it was nine decades after the creation of Banff National Park before there was a concerted effort to create new national parks in Canada's North. After this slow start however, northern parks became a priority and Parks Canada now manages 13 northern national parks and national park reserves, with more planned.

## Northern Canada

There are many measures of what is "the North" and where the Arctic starts. These measures may be biological (e.g., treeline), physiological (e.g., permafrost), climatological (e.g., 10°C July isotherm), political, cultural, or simply latitudinal (e.g., Arctic Circle).

In Canada, the three territories—Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut—provide a political definition. Unlike in the provinces, the federal government has a significant management role in the territories. Another definition comes from the Committee on the Conser-

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vation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF), a committee of the Arctic Council of the eight circumpolar nations. The circumpolar boundary used by CAFF follows a roughly biological line that includes just over half of the land area of Canada, taking in the northern parts of several provinces but not the southern Yukon. This paper will refer to these two definitions and the national parks and national historic sites that fall within these areas.

The three northern territories amount to 40% of the country and 4,000,000 square kilometers of area, but have just 100,000 inhabitants. Much of this area and many of the communities are not accessible by road. Most of the area is considered to be wilderness, one of the greatest extents of remote wilderness anywhere. There is an area straddling the Northwest Territories–Nunavut boundary where one could draw a convex polygon, about 600,000 square kilometers in area, containing no communities, mines, roads, or infrastructure. It would be difficult to find a similar area elsewhere in the terrestrial world outside Antarctica. Unlike Antarctica, this area is teeming with life, home to hundreds of thousands of caribou, thriving populations of muskoxen and wolves, and millions of nesting birds.

### **Systems of protected areas**

Protected areas in northern Canada are managed under several programs administered by the federal, territorial, and provincial governments. Federal programs include the national park system managed by the Parks Canada Agency and migratory bird sanctuaries and national wildlife areas administered by Environment Canada. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans manages marine protected areas, Environment Canada has marine national wildlife areas, and Parks Canada has a program of national marine conservation areas. The Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut territorial governments each have programs to protect areas of importance for the conservation of natural and cultural resources and for recreation or tourism. Similarly, the provincial governments have a variety of protected areas in their northern regions.

In total, the various protected areas in northern Canada cover more than 500,000 square kilometers, or about 10% of the Arctic land area. Northern national parks are larger than those in the southern Canada, in part to protect the habitat of wide-ranging wildlife, in part because land is less developed and less of it privately owned so more is available, and in part because national parks are a predominant option among the various types of protected areas. About 3% of Canada's land area is in national parks, about one-quarter of the total for protected areas. In the North, however, 4.5% of the land is in national parks, just under half of the protected area total. Another measure of the size of Arctic national parks (as identified using the CAFF boundary) is that they amount to 80% of the area of Canada's national parks system.

### **Global and circumpolar context**

As one of the eight circumpolar nations, Canada is an active participant in the Arctic Council, including CAFF. The area of the globe defined as "Arctic" by CAFF encompasses 32 million kilometers. Of this, about 14 million square kilometers is land area. Over 5 million of that is in the Canadian Arctic.

All of the circumpolar countries have significant protected area programs. Greenland's North-East Greenland National Park is the largest national park in the world at 972,000 square kilometers. Many new parks and protected areas have been established in recent years. The recent CAFF report *Arctic Biodiversity Trends 2010* states that 11% of the Arctic is in protected areas (CAFF 2010; Figure 1). The roughly 240,000 square kilometers within Canadian northern national parks protect 4.5% of Canada's Arctic and 1.7% of the circumpolar terrestrial region.

### National parks in Canada's North

National parks are relatively new in northern Canada. Wood Buffalo National Park was established in the 1920s to protect bison, but it was another fifty years before the next northern parks were established, in the 1970s (Table 1). There may be several explanations for the slow pace of establishing parks in the North, but probably the most important one is that these areas are difficult to access and therefore expensive to visit. The potential for visitor use and enjoyment was a dominant consideration in the early years of park establishment.

The development of the national parks system plan in the 1970s set the goal of representing each of the 39 natural regions of the country. Changes to the National Parks Act in 1988, and reinforced with the Canada National Parks Act of 2001, put a stronger emphasis on the maintenance of ecological integrity for national parks. These policy and legislative

**Figure 1.** Protected areas in the circumpolar North.



1920s: Wood Buffalo National Park was created to protect bison—the first park to extend north of the sixtieth parallel.

1930s–1960s: No new northern national parks were created.

1970s: Kluane, Nahanni, and Auyuittuq were established.

1980s: Ivvavik (originally called Northern Yukon), Quttinirpaaq (originally called Ellesmere Island) and the Pingo Canadian Landmark were established.

1990s: This decade was significant, with five new national parks created: Vuntut, Aulavik, Tukturnogait, Sirmilik, and Wapusk.

2000s: Two more parks were created and one was expanded significantly in the 2000s. Ukkusiksalik and Torngat Mountains national parks were established and Nahanni, one of the early northern parks, was expanded to 30,000 square kilometers.

2010s: As the 2010s are just beginning, there are more parks on the horizon. Work is well underway for Naáts'ihch'oh (Northwest Territories), Thaidene Nene (Northwest Territories), Mealy Mountains (Labrador), and Bathurst Inlet (Nunavut).

**Table 1.** Establishment of northern national parks by decade.

changes provided rationale that allowed for parks to be established where few visitors could be expected.

Parks Canada began to establish parks to represent these northern natural regions and to protect the landscapes, wildlife habitat, and ecosystems. National parks provide for the conservation of Arctic biodiversity and functioning ecosystems, including key seasonal areas of calving, nesting, migrating, and other areas of critical habitat. Northern parks can be globally important for some long-range migrants, such as birds and marine mammals. Through maintaining ecological integrity and protecting wildlife habitat, parks support Arctic Aboriginal peoples in maintaining their traditional lifestyles and relationship with the land.

While northern parks receive fewer visitors than parks with road access, those that are able to spend time in these parks come away with extraordinary and memorable experiences. Parks Canada is also working to facilitate ways for more visitors to experience these remote parks.

Parks Canada strives to develop a deeper understanding of the northern environment, and to this end manages research and monitoring programs, including extensive work with traditional knowledge. Arctic parks provide undisturbed benchmark areas for environmental research. Through establishing and managing national parks, Parks Canada works to generate and share a deeper knowledge of the North.

### **National park reserves**

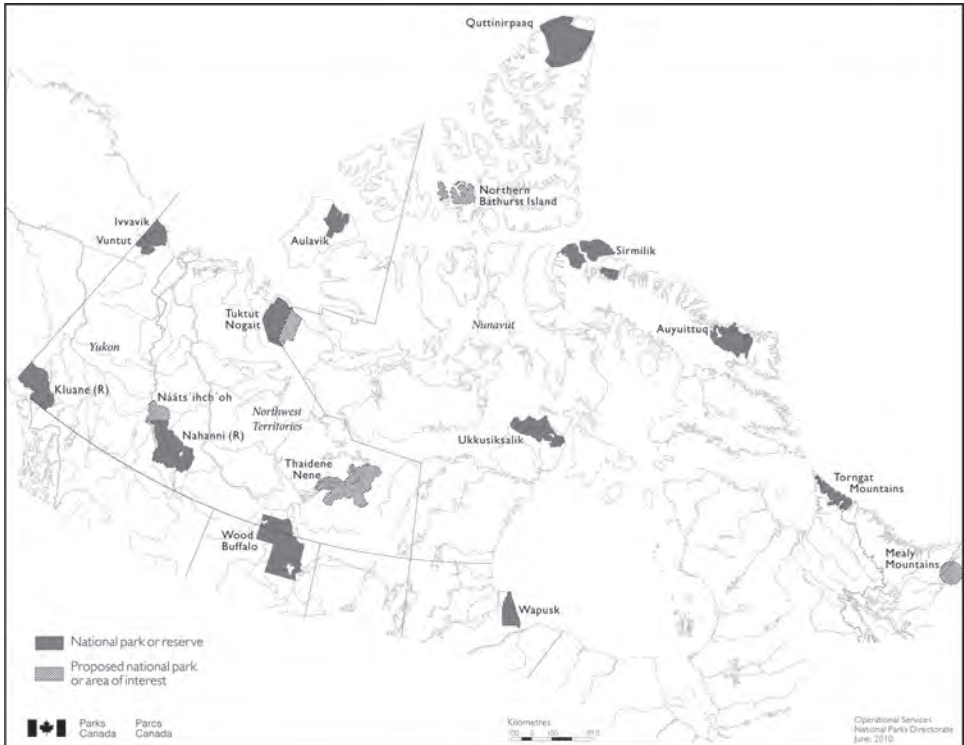
The three national parks created in the 1970s were the first to be established as “national park reserves.” The distinction is in recognition that the park area is subject to a claim, or claims, by Aboriginal people that the federal government has accepted for negotiation. National park reserves are protected under schedule 2 of the Canada National Parks Act, and local Aboriginal people may continue their traditional hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering, and spiritual activities. As land claims are being settled in the North, many of the national

park reserves have become national parks listed in schedule 1 of the CNPA. Kluane National Park and Reserve is unique in that just part of the park is still subject to a claim.

### Cooperative management and agreements with Aboriginal peoples

Northern national parks (Figure 2) are established within the traditional territories of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal land claim agreements remain a key factor in the establishment of parks and other protected areas in Canada. Where a national park has been established through a land claim process, the claimant group continues to exercise its traditional harvesting activities within the protected area. As well, a management board may be established, with representation from the Aboriginal community and government, to advise the minister on the management of the national park. Finally, the land claim agreement sets out what economic opportunities associated with the park will be enjoyed by the claimant group. These may include employment provisions and contracting opportunities. Ivvavik National Park was the first national park in Canada to be established through a land claim agreement, under the Inuvialuit Final Agreement of 1984. All northern national parks have some form of cooperative management board that provides advice to Parks Canada on park planning and operations. Most of these cooperative management regimes have strong mandates and a vital role in the northern national parks. Following is an annotated list of Canada's northern national parks and national historic sites.

Figure 2. National parks in northern Canada.



## Nunavut

In Nunavut, the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (1993) requires Inuit Impact and Benefit Agreements (IIBAs) to establish national parks, territorial parks, and conservation areas. The government of Canada and the Inuit concluded one IIBA for three national parks in 1999 and another IIBA for Ukkusiksalik National Park in 2003.

*Auyuittuq National Park of Canada* covers 19,090 square kilometers on the Cumberland Peninsula of southeast Baffin Island. This rugged mountain tundra park features active glaciers, deep valleys, spectacular fjords, and many species of Arctic mammals and birds. It attracts adventure seekers from all over the world to hike and to climb its challenging peaks.

*Quttinirpaaq National Park of Canada* protects the most remote, fragile, rugged, and northerly lands in North America (Figure 3). Natural features include high mountains, deeply cut plateaus, polar desert, and Arctic tundra landscape. At 37,775 square kilometers it is Canada's second largest national park. Canada's most northerly national park was established more than 100 years after the first national park in the country.

*Sirmilik National Park of Canada* covers 22,200 square kilometers and protects a representative part of the Northern Eastern Arctic Lowlands Natural Region. Sirmilik National Park comprises three separate land areas. Bylot Island is a spectacular area of rugged mountains, icefields and glaciers, coastal lowlands and seabird colonies. Oliver Sound is a long, narrow fjord with excellent opportunities for boating, hiking, and camping. The Borden Peninsula is an extensive plateau dissected by broad river valleys.

*Ukkusiksalik National Park of Canada* represents the Central Tundra Natural Region, and encompasses approximately 20,560 square kilometers. At the heart of the park is Wager Bay, an inland sea that extends 100 kilometers westward from Hudson Bay. The park area

**Figure 3.** Glacier in Quttinirpaaq National Park. Photo Parks Canada/David Murray.



includes a wide range of habitats supporting such wildlife as caribou, muskox, wolf, Arctic hare, peregrine falcon, gyrfalcon, polar bear, beluga, and ringed and bearded seal. Inuit from communities in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut continue to travel to the area to hunt and fish.

## Northwest Territories

*Aulavik National Park of Canada* is on Banks Island. Established through an agreement with the Inuvialuit, it covers 12,200 square kilometers of rolling tundra and is home to a thriving population of muskoxen. Features include deeply cut river canyons, rugged desert-like badlands, and numerous archaeological sites. Visitors can experience wilderness rafting and canoeing on the Thomsen River, Canada's most northerly navigable river.

*Tuktut Nogait National Park of Canada* protects the calving grounds of the Bluenose caribou herd. This park also contains one of the highest densities of birds of prey in North America. The park was established through an agreement with the Inuvialuit and expanded through an agreement with the Sahtu Dene and Métis of Deline, Northwest Territories. It covers 18,180 square kilometers in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region and the Sahtu Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories.

*Nahanni National Park Reserve of Canada* is in the Mackenzie Mountains in the southwest corner of the Northwest Territories (Figure 4). In 2009, with the support of the Dehcho First Nations, Nahanni was expanded from 4,766 to 30,000 square kilometers and is now Canada's third-largest national park. One of North America's wildest and most spectacular rivers, the South Nahanni, rushes through this large park. Four great canyons line this Canadian Heritage River, and at Virginia Falls the river plunges twice the drop of Niagara Falls. Hot springs, alpine tundra, mountain ranges, and forests of spruce and aspen are some of the other natural highlights. The park is home to grizzly bears, woodland caribou, and Dall's sheep. Nahanni was one of the first World Heritage sites to be designated.

*Wood Buffalo National Park of Canada* covers 44,800 square kilometers in northern Alberta and southwestern Northwest Territories. Canada's largest national park offers a rich variety of landscapes. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, Wood Buffalo is an excellent example of boreal forest with meandering streams, shallow lakes, and large gypsum cliffs with one of North America's most extensive landscapes of sinkholes, underground rivers, caves, and sunken valleys. The park holds the world's largest inland delta, located at the mouth of the Peace and Athabasca rivers. It is also the natural nesting place of the whooping crane and is home to 2,000 bison, the largest free-roaming herd in the world.

*Pingo Canadian Landmark* protects 16 square kilometers of pingos (mounds of ice-covered earth) and other periglacial phenomena, including the largest pingo in Canada, near Tuktoyaktuk. Pingos are conical hills formed by water pressure when permafrost invades saturated sediments.

*Saoyú and ʔehdacho National Historic Site* recognizes a cultural landscape with a protected area of 5,565 square kilometers on two peninsulas in Great Bear Lake, the largest national historic site protected by Parks Canada.

## Yukon

*Ivvavik National Park of Canada*, covering 9,750 square kilometers in northern Yukon, has



**Figure 4.** The karst area of Nahanni National Park Reserve. Photo Parks Canada/Mike Beedell.

a unique non-glaciated landscape. The Firth River gives visitors an exciting rafting adventure. Features include abundant wildlife, and significant archaeological and historical points of interest. The Porcupine caribou herd uses Ivavik and the neighboring Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as its calving area.

*Vuntut National Park of Canada* covers 4,350 square kilometers of Old Crow Flats, a huge plain interspersed with more than 2,000 shallow lakes. The park derives its name from the Gwich'in word meaning "Crow Flats." Vuntut National Park was established under the Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation Final Agreement. The productive wetlands of the Old Crow Flats are the seasonal home for thousands of nesting ducks and a vital staging and feeding area for more than a million migrant waterfowl in late summer and fall. The Ramsar Convention lists the area as wetlands and waterfowl habitat of international importance

*Kluane National Park and Reserve of Canada* in the southwest corner of the Yukon has Canada's highest peak, Mount Logan, and some of the most extensive icefields outside the polar region. Kluane's 22,010 square kilometers include mountain lakes, alpine meadows, tundra, and swift cold rivers. Activities include hiking, guided walks, flying over the Icefield ranges, and rafting on the Alsek River. This vast wilderness has been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site (along with Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska and the Tatshenshini–Alsek Wilderness Park in British Columbia). Kluane National Park and Reserve is within the traditional areas of more than one First Nation: the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations Final Agreement covers the eastern portion of the park, while the Kluane First Nation Final Agreement includes the western part of the park.



The National Historic Sites in *Dawson City* commemorate both the 1896 Klondike Gold Rush and the role of large corporation gold mining in the Klondike. The discovery of gold on a tributary of the Klondike River in 1896 sparked off the largest gold rush in Canadian history. During that time, thousands of miners descended on the region in hopes of striking it rich in the Klondike Goldfields.

The *S.S. Klondike National Historic Site of Canada* pays tribute to an era of riverboat transportation. The site brings to life the history and the challenge of moving freight along the Yukon River. The *S.S. Klondike* was the largest and last of the sternwheelers. Today it is the only sternwheeler in Yukon that is open to the public.

### **Northern British Columbia**

The *Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site of Canada* commemorates the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898. The trail winds its way through Pacific rainforest through alpine and then boreal forest. Gold Rush artifacts can be seen along the trail.

### **Northern Manitoba**

Near Churchill, in northern Manitoba, is *Wapusk National Park of Canada*. “Wapusk” is the Cree word for “polar bear,” and this 11,480-square-kilometer park is important habitat to one of the world’s largest populations of the white bears. Also at Churchill is *Prince of Wales Fort National Historic Site of Canada*, an important Hudson’s Bay Company trading post and the starting point for Samuel Hearne’s great expeditions across the barrens. *York Factory National Historic Site*, once an important Hudson’s Bay Company trading post, is south of Wapusk National Park.

### **Northern Newfoundland and Labrador**

*Torngat Mountains National Park of Canada* encompasses 9,700 square kilometers at the northern end of Labrador. This national park protects an area of spectacular Arctic wilderness, with towering mountains, breathtaking fjords, gentle river valleys, and rugged coastal landscapes—a land that has been home to the Inuit and their ancestors for thousands of years. The area is also home to a variety of wildlife, including caribou, polar bear, wolf, Arctic fox, peregrine falcon, golden eagle, and a unique population of tundra-dwelling black bears.

### **World Heritage sites in northern Canada**

As mentioned above, there are three World Heritage sites in the Canadian north. Nahanni National Park was on the first list of World Heritage sites in 1978, just a few years after the park was established. Kluane National Park is part of a very large international World Heritage site originally designated in 1979 and extended twice since, known as Kluane/Wrangell–St. Elias/Glacier Bay/Tatshenshini–Alesk. Wood Buffalo National Park is a very large World Heritage site on its own, designated in 1983.

In addition to these, Canada has three Arctic areas on its current World Heritage Tentative List of proposed World Heritage sites.

**Ivvavik/Vuntut/Herschel Island (Qikiqtaruk).** Together, Ivvavik National Park, Vuntut National Park, and Herschel Island (Qikiqtaruk) Territorial Park comprise 15,500 square

kilometers of wilderness on the Yukon coastal plain, the Richardson Mountains, a portion of the Old Crow Flats wetlands, and an island in the Beaufort Sea.

**Quttinirpaaq.** On Ellesmere Island and encompassing the northernmost lands in Canada, only 720 kilometers from the North Pole, Quttinirpaaq National Park consists of mountains, ice caps, glaciers, ice shelves, and fjords. The park provided a route for early Aboriginal peoples to move from the Canadian Arctic to Greenland. The park has one of the highest concentrations of pre-contact sites surveyed in the High Arctic, including sites associated with the earliest documented human inhabitants of this remote region.

**The Klondike.** The cultural landscapes in First Nations traditional territories, including the Tr'ochëk fishing camp, and the Chilkoot Trail, the Klondike gold fields and the historic district of Dawson City, illustrate life before, during, and after the Klondike Gold Rush of 1896–1898, the last and most renowned of the world's great 19th-century gold rushes.

### Establishing new national parks in northern Canada

Parks Canada is working on several parks proposals in the North. In the Northwest Territories, the proposed Nááts'ihch'oh National Park Reserve will protect the headwaters of the South Nahanni River. Also in the Northwest Territories, a feasibility study is underway for a park that would protect the area extending from the East Arm of Great Slave Lake to the tundra east of Artillery Lake. This proposed park will be called Thaidene Nene National Park Reserve (Figure 5). There are two national park proposals in Nunavut, one on Bathurst Island and the other that would abut the western border of Nunavut, adjacent to Tuktot Nogait National Park. Parks Canada is negotiating an IIBA for the national park on northern Bathurst Island. Planning for a national park in the Mealy Mountains of southern Labrador is well advanced.

Parks Canada has launched a feasibility study for a national marine conservation area in Lancaster Sound, Nunavut. If the proposal is successful, this national marine conservation area at the mouth of the Northwest Passage would be the first in northern Canada.

### Conclusion

A colleague once told me that she worried that Parks Canada would change the North, imposing a rigid southern-based park management system on the local Aboriginal people. Instead, the North has changed Parks Canada, as policies, practices, and even legislation have been modified to adapt to north-

**Figure 5.** Parry Falls in the proposed Thaidene Nene National Park Reserve. Photo Parks Canada/David Murray.



ern realities. Parks Canada employees from southern parks have been posted to northern parks, worked alongside Aboriginal park staff and local people in cooperative management regimes, listened to the indigenous traditional knowledge, and then transferred their experiences to other parks when they move on. Policies have changed right across the system, partly because of changes that were happening in Canadian society but certainly because the experience of operating northern parks has demonstrated some new ways to manage national parks.

The national parks of northern Canada now protect an area equivalent to the size of the United Kingdom, and the government of Canada will establish more northern national parks in the coming years. As global temperatures rise, and roads and development extend into wild lands, Canada's northern national parks will continue to safeguard extensive areas of undisturbed ecosystems so that future generations of Canadians and visitors will be able to experience the Arctic and its wild nature, and future generations of the local people will continue their relationship with the land. Through collaborations between Parks Canada, the Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian public, these large and remote jewels of Canada's national park system, challenging to visit, difficult to know, homeland to Aboriginal peoples, will remain nationally significant heritage areas, protected and presented in ways that ensure their ecological and commemorative integrity for present and future generations.

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