

Reconnection, Resiliency, and Refuge

The Case for an Indigenous Protected and
Conserved Area at Bistcho Lake



A draft report prepared by the Dene Tha' First
Nation for use in public discussions
Property of the Dene Tha' First Nation
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Introduction

Bistcho: A Place Worth Protecting

Bistcho Lake, located in the northwest of Alberta, has always been a significant and important place for the Dene people. This area is known to us, the Dene Tha' First Nation, as Mbecho. Elders speak of Mbecho as an ancestral place to which all Dene Tha' people have a unique and powerful connection.

Our Nation is proposing an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) within the Traditional Territory of the Dene Tha' First Nation (DTFN) in the greater Bistcho Lake area. For simplicity, in this document we refer to Bistcho Lake and the surrounding region as **Bistcho**. The creation of an IPCA at Bistcho would continue our Nation's journey to regain agency in stewarding our traditional lands, waters and resources.

*Dene Tha' First Nation's
Traditional Territory
surrounding Bistcho Lake.*



What is this Document?

This document is an invitation to learn. We welcome anyone to read on to experience what makes Bistcho special, both culturally and environmentally, and why we believe this place needs protection as an IPCA. We believe that the IPCA can be an opportunity to combine existing environmental monitoring programs and an Indigenous-led Guardians program to manage the area using traditional knowledge and western science together.

We emphasize that an IPCA will benefit the Alberta provincial government by contributing positively towards:

- supporting agreements and reinforcing strategies to recover woodland caribou in the Province;
- demonstrating progress on key government commitments (i.e., “Getting Alberta Back to Work – Making Life Better For Alberta’s Indigenous Peoples”) by partnering with Alberta’s Indigenous Peoples in pursuit of reconciliation, inclusion, and opportunity; and
- signaling Alberta as a global leader in strengthening ecological and cultural diversity.

Dene Definitions

Dene: Groups of Athapaskan speaking Indigenous People inhabiting northern boreal regions of Canada, eastern Alaska, and southwestern United States.

Dene Tha’: The group of Athapaskan speaking Indigenous People inhabiting northwest Alberta, northeast British Columbia and southern Northwest Territories of Canada, with communities at Chateh, Meander River, Bushe River, Indian Cabins, and Bistcho Lake, Alberta.

Dene Tha’ First Nation: A First Nation government within Canada, as per the *Indian Act* (R.S.C., 1985, c. I-5) and a Treaty 8 signatory (1900), representing over 3,100 registered band members.



Looking up the Petitot River from Bistcho Lake, where it originates

... there's a saying "once we heal ourself, the land will heal, and the water will heal" so that's my focus. That I want to see things regain, restore, and retrieve our land the way that our land treated us back then.

I want to see things grow into the positive energy. We need to heal ourself first. And once we heal ourself we can heal the land and the water.

Not only that, if we heal the land, the land will heal the animals, with their food. Even the water, if the water heals, the water will heal the fish, and then the food will come back up again. That's part of my vision.

All the richness of the life back then, like the fishes, the birds, and the ducks, and the animals, and the beaver, the muskrat, all these animals were healthy. And that healthiness was their food for the people.

Roy Salopree¹

Why an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA)?

A Path Forward for Conservation in Alberta

Indigenous-led conservation is critical to fighting climate change and stemming the biodiversity crisis. As the original caretakers of Canada's lands and waters, the Indigenous Peoples of Canada hold generations of knowledge on how to conserve nature and have a positive, mutual relationship with our ecosystems.

A sustainable future of conservation in Alberta will surely include Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) on the landscape. IPCAs present the opportunity to build relationships of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments. IPCAs recognize the historical appropriation and dispossession of lands, territories, and waters from Indigenous Peoples, and the ways in which land and resource management by Indigenous Peoples is rarely understood by non-Indigenous governments.

IPCAs are considered to be grounded in three core principles:

- They are Indigenous-led;
- They represent a long-term commitment to conservation; and
- They elevate Indigenous rights and responsibilities.

These elements are stated in the Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE) report titled "[We Rise Together: Achieving Pathway to Canada Target 1 through the creation of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas in the spirit and practice of reconciliation](#)" (March 2018). ICE was formed to provide advice and recommendations on how Canada can achieve protection of 17% of its lands and waters by 2020 (Canada Target 1).

Though IPCAs are a relatively new designation, co-managed protected areas have existed for decades in various forms in Canada and internationally. Co-management, or cooperative management, generally refers to the sharing of authority and responsibility for protected area planning and management between various levels of government (e.g., First Nations, Government of Alberta).



Aerial view of the boreal forest surrounding Bistcho Lake.

The exciting opportunity to establish Alberta's first IPCA

In Alberta, there are currently no areas designated as an IPCA under the provincial or federal government. There are, however, some parks that are intended to be cooperatively managed, such as **Kitaskino Nuwenënë Wildland Provincial Park** in the northeast of the Province, along the southern border of Wood Buffalo National Park.

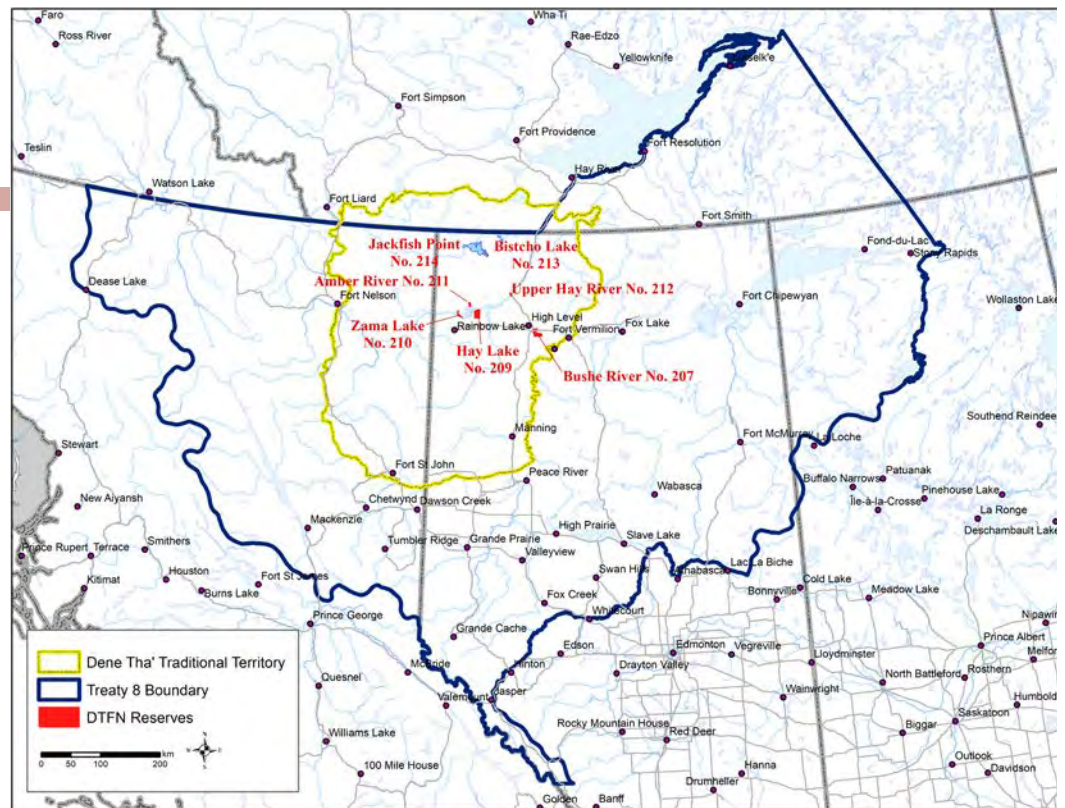
The path forward for designating an IPCA in Alberta might seem challenging: there are no examples of an IPCA that set a template for the process, there is no government mechanism in place to accept land use proposals from Indigenous communities, and there is no distinct legislation for protecting areas that are culturally, spiritually, and ecologically important to Indigenous Peoples as IPCAs.

However, there are tools that exist that can be used to implement IPCAs. In Canada, IPCAs currently must be established using existing provincial legislation. For instance, other provinces have created designations under their current legal frameworks to protect areas that are important to Indigenous Peoples (e.g., Tribal Parks in British Columbia). We believe that our proposal to create an IPCA at Bistcho represents an opportunity for Alberta to be a leader, in **Canada and globally**, by championing and supporting Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship.

Practicing our Livelihoods on Traditional Territory: Treaty Rights Under Threat

Our Nation is an adherent to Treaty 8. One of the sacred promises made to us under Treaty 8 was that we would be able to continue our traditional livelihoods of hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering as long as the rivers flow and the sun shines. Unfortunately, our ability to continue to exercise our Treaty rights is seriously threatened. Since the 1950's our Traditional Territory has been heavily impacted by oil and gas development, forestry, agricultural land expansion, hydro-electric dams, recreational uses, and mining for gravel and minerals.

Map of Dene Tha' First Nation Traditional Territory and Reserves in relation to geographic boundaries of Treaty 8.



The Dene Tha' Traditional Territory extends north of the Peace River in the south and east, into British Columbia in the west, into the Northwest Territories in the north, and into the Caribou Mountains in the east. The Traditional Territory overlaps the Peace, Hay (Mackenzie Basin) and Petitot (Liard Basin) river systems.

We have communities that lie on lake shores and riverbanks within each of these watersheds, and Bistcho Lake is at a key intersection of these important waters. Several of these communities are located in the Hay watershed, including Chateh at Hay Lakes 209, Zama Lake 210, Amber River 211, and Meander River at Upper Hay River 212. Located in the Petitot watershed are the communities of Bistcho Lake 213 and Jackfish Point 214, and in the Peace watershed is the Bushe community at Bushe River 209 (See above).

Conventional oil and gas infrastructure such as well pads, pipelines, processing plants and seismic lines cover most of our Traditional Territory. More recently, unconventional oil and gas development has been introduced to our Traditional Territory, including shale gas/ liquid natural gas (LNG) and shale oil in areas that had until recently remained relatively undeveloped. We have suffered the consequences of over a dozen pipeline spills in the last five years alone. Thousands of abandoned and orphan wells dot our territory, and we have been told that the government and industry currently have insufficient funds to clean these up.

Cumulative effects of all of this development in our Traditional Territory threaten, not only our ability to continue to use the lands to exercise Treaty rights, but also our cultural existence as Dene Tha' people. Development needs to be proactively and carefully managed to ensure that sufficient wild places and suitable areas to harvest remain to support a meaningful ability to successfully hunt, trap, fish, and gather the many species of animals, fish, birds, plants, and medicines upon which our culture and traditional livelihoods rely.



Aerial view of the Petitot River towards Bistcho Lake.

By elevating Indigenous rights and responsibilities, IPCAs have the potential to support more equitable governance of these vital areas and provide more holistic and long-term approaches to resource development and management. IPCA designation also ensures that the original stewards of the land have agency in determining how best to protect the unique ecologies in their territory.

I think this is one of the places too for the young people to learn and see the elderly people that, you know, go fishing and hunt animals, get all the food, and bring it home and share with one another. [...]

It's like coming here to the lake, it teaches me a lot of good things in life. Hope for the greater days where people can live among here and laugh with each other, play with each other, go hunting with each other, go fishing with each other, and have a good life here together, and it's kind of like a newborn life.

So we need that part to regain our strength back to this lake, and to regain our culture. We need a good life here, and this is one of the very good examples here in this special lake.

Roy Salopree¹

Why Bistcho?

Dene Tha' as Rightful Stewards of Our Own Lands and Waters

Being Dene Tha', we are intimately connected to the lands, waters, and resources in our Traditional Territory and we have responsibilities to take care of them. We teach our children our cultural and harvesting practices, our language, and what it means to be Dene Tha' by being out on the lands in our Traditional Territory, especially at Bistcho Lake.

It is critical that Dene Tha' meaningfully participate in planning and decision-making for conservation and planning that may affect our water, lands, air, species, habitats, and ecosystems that we rely upon for food security, health, and culture.

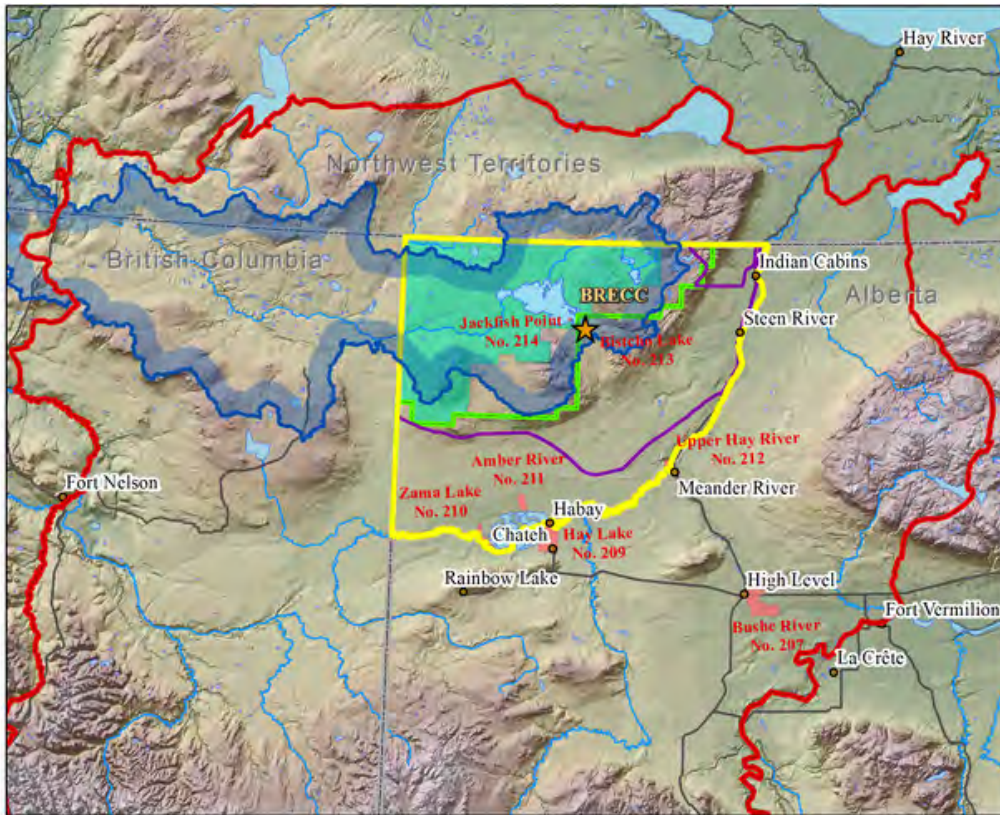
The Bistcho region is where the Dene Tha' First Nation proposes that discussions begin for creating a collaborative IPCA with the Government of Alberta and other supporting partners. The proposed IPCA would be located in the Cameron Hills (Nagah Y'i in Dene Dhah) of northwest Alberta, and include thousands of hectares of wetlands, peatlands, boreal forest, and the largest relatively undisturbed lake habitat in the Province.

Importantly, the Northwest Caribou Sub-regional Task Force has unanimously recommended that the Government of Alberta "Explore the option of conservation areas (for example Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas) in the Bistcho Lake area"²

A place known to Dene Tha' for time immemorial

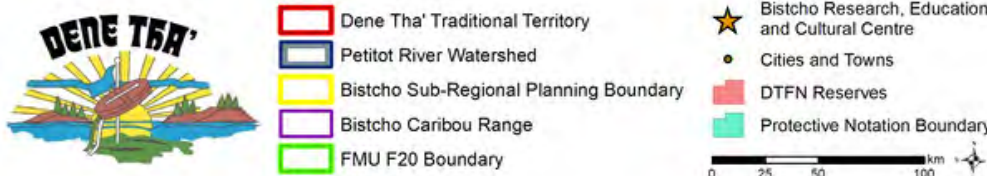
The proposed IPCA would encompass Bistcho Lake, the third largest freshwater lake entirely in Alberta. This large lake is known to Dene Tha' as Mbecho. Many Elders point to Mbecho as an ancestral place to which all living Dene Tha' have a connection; a place with many permanent villages and seasonal camps, wagon trails, fishing places, burials and sacred places. There are two Dene Tha' Indian Reservations on the southeastern shores of Bistcho Lake, Jackfish Point 214 and Bistcho Lake 213.

Areas of particular conservation importance in the potential IPCA include Bistcho Lake (especially Petitot River inflow/outflow, Egg and Moose Islands, and the West narrows); Johnson, Thurston, Beatty, and Spawn Lakes; the ravine from Southeast Bistcho Lake to Meander River, Southwest Bistcho Lake to Hay Zama Lake, Fire Pot (a naturally occurring gas seepage that is perpetually burned), and Caribou Meadows.³



Map of the Bistcho region, location of the proposed Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) at Bistcho Lake and within the Bistcho Sub-regional planning boundary.

Dene Tha' Territory and some Existing Boundaries within the Bistcho Sub-Regional Planning Area



Our vision is that the Bistcho IPCA will be a diverse and ecologically intact mosaic of dynamically functioning boreal forest and peatland communities. The vast wetlands in the region sustain balanced hydrological processes, and healthy, naturally sustaining wildlife populations that roam freely across the landscape. Species-at-risk find refuge in this protected place, and the Bistcho caribou herd returns to self-sustaining population levels that can support sustainable levels of First Nation harvesting.

Cooperatively managed by the Dene Tha' First Nation and the Government of Alberta, the Bistcho IPCA will be a Canadian leader in the collaborative management of protected places. Management of the park will recognize and respect the rights of the Dene Tha' First Nation and prioritize the protection of both cultural heritage and ecological integrity. The Dene Tha' must be involved in all stages of management planning and Traditional Knowledge will continue to inform adaptive management practices. The rich cultural history of the Dene Tha' will be acknowledged and celebrated in any public outreach or communication materials. In the face of a changing climate, the Bistcho IPCA contributes to social and ecological resilience and provides a refuge for future generations of both people and wildlife to co-exist in long-term equilibrium.

Thoughts from our Community Members

.My poor grandmother, she couldn't handle me, so I had no choice, it seems, once I didn't really want to go, but I got in for a few days, it turns out to be the best part of my life. [...] it turns out that you eat well, you see a lot of places and all kinds of animals. [...] You earn what you worked for.

Joseph Martel⁴

A History that Goes Deep: Thousands of Years of Archaeological Evidence at Bistcho

In 2013, the Lands and Education Departments of Dene Tha' First Nation initiated a unique research project, "Stories from the Ground: Digging into Dene Tha' History and Prehistory", to recover and rediscover the historic and precontact aspects of Dene Tha' life. Until this project was initiated, this part of the Province had long been recognized as one of the regions of Alberta that is least known archaeologically. Only a handful of projects had previously been conducted, with only a few sites found since the 1970s.

(L) The team of archaeologists conducting an archaeological survey near Bistcho Lake; photo by Jeremy Williams (Rivervoices); (R) Elders and DTFN Lands Department technician recording traditional land use information



Between 2013 and 2019, Dene Tha' students, Elders, and archaeologists from Taiga Heritage Consulting Ltd. participated in numerous archaeological surveys and excavations in the Dene Tha' Traditional Territory.

What was found exceeded everyone's expectations: almost **200** historical resources were recorded, including large and small precontact sites, historic settlements and trails, and various traditional use sites, complementing the oral histories of the Dene Tha'.

Findings point to Bistcho as a key historical site for our people

Before putting shovels to soil, the research team first spoke to Elders to identify potential dig sites. During the many interviews conducted with Elders from the communities of Chateh, Bushe, and Meander River, one place emerges as the most important and ancient to Dene Tha' people: **Bistcho Lake**.

Following the Elders' direction, this collaborative project required several expeditions to rediscover places at Bistcho Lake. Almost 90 sites around the lake were recorded. Several major areas pointed out by Elders showed a rich historic footprint overlaying much older precontact traces: Egg Island (Egh'e?ze Du), Moose Island (?Xahdah Du), Jackfish Point (Edah Neth'eh cho quo), an outlet of Petitot River (Mbechowoliah), and Narrows (Taageze quo), among many.

These large historic sites yielded abundant historic records, including log house settlements built on the terraces overlooking the lake, artifacts, and wagon trails that lead to hubs of Dene life, such as Habay, Meander, Fort Liard, Fort Providence, Fort Vermillion and many others.

Evidence shows thousands of years of history

Most of the recorded sites represent precontact camps that go back in time at least two or three thousand years. Some stone artifacts were made of locally-obtained rocks, but some came from far away places: obsidian (volcanic glass), likely obtained from the volcanic complex of Mount Edziza in northwest British Columbia, and Tertiary Chills Clinker from the Mackenzie Mountains in Northwest Territories.

These artifacts testify to long-range contacts and trades in precontact times between different Dene peoples and Mbecho inhabitants. This interpretation is supported by oral histories told by Dene Tha' Elders who recounted their own travels over long distances to meet people, trade and exchange information and resources.



(L) DTFN Elders examining archaeological artifacts; (R) Traditional Dene tools excavated near Bistcho Lake.

A window into Bistcho's past

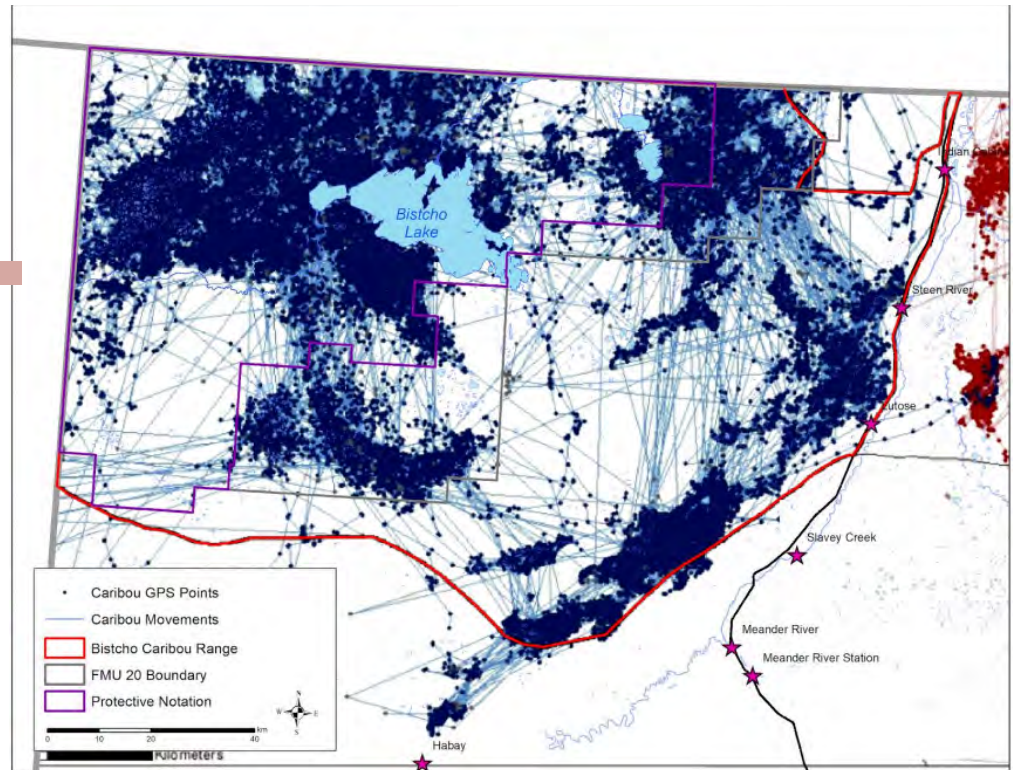
We still are in infancy in our understanding of the precontact lives of people not only at Bistcho Lake, but the entire region of northern Alberta. For thousands of years, Dene Tha' co-existed with or depended on caribou. The nature of this relationship is primarily known through the oral histories of Dene Tha' Elders, though archaeology plays an important role in shedding a new light into this fascinating subject. Because of the recent and past relationships between Dene Tha' and caribou, Dene Tha' are in a position to guide the protection and sustainable management of this threatened species.

More archaeological work, including testing and excavating, will illuminate many more details within this area. For instance, one site discovered in 2019 could provide important clues about the economy of people at Bistcho with a sequence of layers almost one metre deep that clearly demonstrate long-standing Dene Tha' occupation, all excellently preserved by surrounding organic material.

An Opportunity to Protect Caribou, a Species on the Brink in Alberta

Woodland caribou are a threatened species. With most populations in Alberta in decline, any opportunity to protect this culturally important species should be considered a priority. The proposed IPCA at Bistcho Lake would help protect habitat for the Bistcho woodland caribou herd.

Caribou telemetry locations for Bistcho woodland caribou herd, adapted from the 2017 Draft Woodland Caribou Range Plan by the Government of Alberta.



The Bistcho caribou herd is at risk

The Bistcho woodland caribou herd range extends 14,358 sq-km and lies in the northwest corner of the Province. The herd is known to have transboundary movements to British Columbia and the Northwest Territories. The Bistcho caribou herd is considered unlikely to be naturally self-sustaining according to a 2011 assessment by Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC). Population growth estimates are variable, though long-term trends suggest population decline.

Remote camera photos of woodland caribou near Bistcho Lake





Linear features such as seismic lines and roads criss-cross the landscape around Bistcho Lake, acting as “highways” for wolves to access and hunt caribou.

Protection is needed to help recover degraded habitat

Across the nation, research has shown woodland caribou are negatively impacted by industrial activities in the boreal forest. Industrial activities such as oil and gas development and forest harvesting threaten woodland caribou by altering their habitat and contributing to unsustainable predation rates.

Industrial features attract and increase other prey species, like moose, which in turn attract more predators like wolves, to caribou ranges. Legacy linear features (such as seismic lines) used to explore for oil and gas act as “highways” for wolves, allowing them to more easily access caribou in exactly the places they are hiding. All of these habitat changes disproportionately affect caribou that have few safe places left in an increasingly disturbed boreal forest.

Oil and gas exploration has disturbed 94% of the Bistcho herd’s range. There are almost 62,000 km of seismic lines in the range, the most of any caribou range in Alberta. Approximately one fifth of the range overlaps with oil and gas footprint and current operations.

F20, an untenured forest management unit, also encompasses 60.6% of the Bistcho caribou’s range. A Protective Notation, which requires special permissions for new oil and development in a portion of this forest management unit, covers 45% of the Bistcho caribou range.

More protection and habitat restoration is sorely needed to ensure the recovery and survival of the Bistcho woodland caribou herd. An IPCA at Bistcho Lake would help offer some of this critical protection.

A wildlife monitoring camera at Bistcho Lake.



Community-led caribou monitoring program positions Dene Tha' as caribou conservation leaders at Bistcho

Dene Tha' First Nation, in collaboration with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Northern Alberta (CPAWS NAB), are currently carrying out a **remote monitoring program** around Bistcho Lake. The project focuses on monitoring caribou seasonal habitat use and caribou response to various intensities of human disturbance using a motion-triggered camera array.

This camera array is, perhaps, the farthest north an array of this scale has been deployed in this region of the Province. This project used traditional knowledge of historical caribou movements in the area to inform its design, and in particular, to help focus on sampling sites where traditional knowledge suggests caribou behaviour is unique.

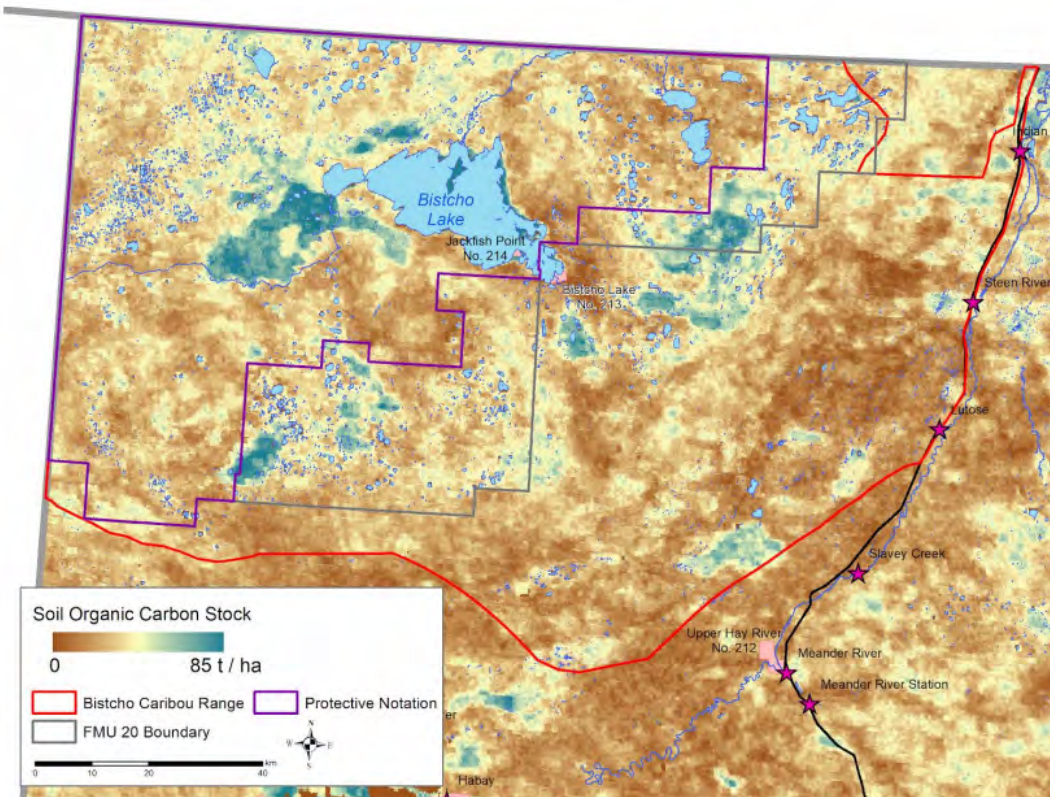
This ongoing program uniquely positions the Dene Tha' as capable leaders for caribou recovery and conservation at Bistcho. Recovery and management plans for the Bistcho herd should be informed by DTFN's ongoing community-led monitoring programs for the herd and traditional knowledge on the caribou movements and habitat use.

Camera images from one single site can detect collared individuals, female caribou with calves, solitary female caribou, and males.



A Powerful Tool to Fight Climate Change

In addition to the many cultural and biological values of Bistcho, this region also has some of the highest densities of soil organic carbon in the Province stored within its bogs. Within the F20 Forest Management Unit alone, there are about 40 million tonnes of carbon stored within the first 30-cm of soil. Maintaining the carbon-storing wetlands within the region will be critical to combating climate change.



Soil organic carbon stock (tonnes per hectare) within the Bistcho Lake area. Areas with higher soil organic carbon densities are shown in the teal colour.



During the warmer seasons, the Bistcho area becomes a colourful mosaic of forest, bog, and fen. These wetlands in particular store massive amounts of carbon.

Watershed Protection

Remote camera image
of two swans in a boreal
wetland near Bistcho Lake



For many years, Dene Tha' First Nation has been – and continues to be – a strong advocate for clean water, land, and air, which support the remaining healthy habitats and species throughout our Traditional Territory. The Dene Tha' rely upon these things to meaningfully exercise our Aboriginal and Treaty rights.

Dene Tha's Traditional Territory is at the intersection of many jurisdictions, landscapes, and watersheds. Our members are uniquely positioned and qualified to provide advice and perspectives in support of the many critical ongoing water management processes such as the Mackenzie River Basin Transboundary Waters Master Agreements (MRBTWMA) and the joint/bi-lateral AB-NWT Traditional Knowledge Working Group (TKWG). These processes govern water use throughout the region containing the potential IPCA and our entire Traditional Territory.

Watershed habitat protection includes developing multi-stakeholder methods, approaches, and tools for empowering community technicians and regional members to collect fish and fish habitat information as Traditional Knowledge informed by western science methods. This information should be relevant to community members and useful for western academic and government scientists to incorporate into existing data models and datasets. There is a gap in fish, fish habitat, and water/aquatic data in the Hay River Basin, especially at Hay Zama and Bistcho Lakes.⁵ An IPCA at Bistcho will improve our understanding of these areas, as collecting good quality data for planning, adaptive management processes, and data-based decision-making support are key aspects of our proposal.

Providing Support for Thriving Communities and Economies

There are many long-term potential socioeconomic benefits of the Bistcho IPCA. Many Elders recount that the Bistcho Lake area is a special place where healing, sharing, learning, growth, independence, self-reliance, reciprocity, and other traditional values have great potential to become reborn and revitalized in the hearts and minds of our people, here and in our communities.

With this concept of revitalization in mind, we have pursued hosting educational camps and workshops for Dene Tha' youth in the Bistcho area. The camps encourage youth to explore elements of their cultural heritage and to engage with the programs and professionals that are working to safeguard this vital location. Youth will have an essential role in preserving our traditional knowledge and practices, and themselves stand to have their lives enriched by this unique place.

There are also many socioeconomic values in hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering. Vulnerability to food insecurity and health-related illness is significantly decreased with regular access to wild food sources through active hunting⁶. The improvement to physical, social, and psychological health that results from food security can be greatly strengthened by access to wild food sources. This, of course, is true for the many Dene Tha' community members for whom wild foods are an essential part of life⁷. For these reasons, continued and increased access to self-sufficient food practices is likely to decrease reliance on medical, social, and emergency services.

Thoughts from our Elders

... Our people should reconnect to the land where our ancestors used to roam. We want a future for our next generation. As leaders, as workers, as community members – we all have to work together to make it happen. [...]

The memories of here how it's been for years and years, if only the younger generations see, you know, they are going to feel maybe something inside here [points to his heart]. [...] I think we really have to reconnect with the land and water, so there is history here, we need to bring it back, put it back to life.

Charlie Chambaud¹



Aerial photo of the Bistcho Lake Indian Reserve.

An opportunity for reconciliation and economic development

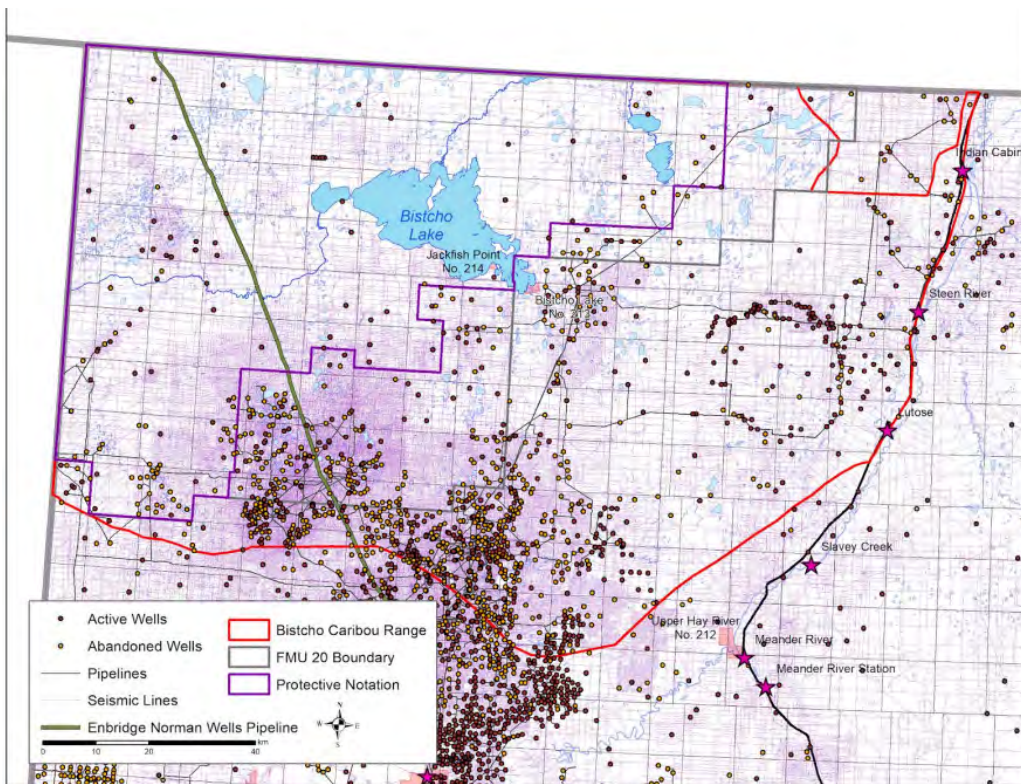
Tourism

In addition to decreased reliance on medical, social, and emergency services, the Bistcho IPCA represents an opportunity for Indigenous Tourism in the Bistcho region, sharing the heritage of Dene Tha' and the beauty of the region with all Albertans. We propose three key developments, comprising our Heritage Trail Plan, that could support an Indigenous tourism industry at Bistcho Lake:

- Creation of a trail network (the Heritage Trail route) that highlights the Dene Tha' use of these lands. Made up of wagon routes and dog sled trails, these key traditional transportation corridors would also help connect contemporary Dene Tha' communities with their traditional hunting, gathering and spiritual sites. We propose signage and interpretation, using Dene names wherever possible, along these routes that will showcase Dene Tha's historical use and care of the lands and waters.
- Construction of cabins located along the Heritage Trail route, providing rustic self-maintained accommodations and refuge for those travelling the route of our ancestors. Located at strategic points along the Heritage Trail, these cabins will provide visitors and community members a safe place in the event of emergencies and spaces to share knowledge, perspectives and ideas while enjoying the boreal wilderness.
- Creation of research, cultural and community gathering places at both ends of Bistcho Lake – sites where Dene Tha' knowledge can be gathered, shared and stored. The Bistcho Research, Education, and Cultural Centre (BRECC) will be the centrepiece of Dene Tha' First Nation's Heritage Trail Plan, acting as a welcoming space that allows visitors and community members alike to share in the cultural significance of the Bistcho Lake region and to pass on tradition and new knowledge to others.

Working together to navigate forward through the many submerged weed patches and rock ledges at Bistcho Lake.





Active and abandoned energy development in the Bistcho region (with extensive legacy seismic line footprint). A Protective Notation for Caribou (PNT 170023, green area) covers about two thirds of the F20 forest management unit. This temporary land disposition was designated in 2017 for the purposes of protecting critical habitat for woodland caribou.

Restoration of a legacy of industrial impacts

It should be noted that the region proposed for the Bistcho IPCA has lower present and forecasted value for oil and gas, agriculture, and forestry compared to other parts of the Traditional Territory. Much of the existing oil and gas infrastructure within the region has not been reclaimed or restored, therefore, habitat restoration and development reclamation are high priorities for the area.

As local Indigenous People, along with our allies and partners, we are uniquely positioned to participate in and lead regional landscape restoration economies. These restorative activities may begin to directly reconcile many ongoing ecologic and cultural concerns related to existing, prior and ongoing development. They will also help to expand upon our participation, expertise and capacity in legacy development challenges for the IPCA and our ability to share these advancements broadly with other groups in other areas with similar challenges or opportunities.

Conclusion

An IPCA at Bistcho would support important socioeconomic values for our Nation, helping our members to reconnect with the land and build sustainable local economies. Healthy, self-reliant and resilient communities are made up of individuals and households that have strong connections, access and preference for traditional livelihoods, and cultural practice and language-based identities. The Bistcho IPCA would support all of these critical values, helping Dene Tha' communities to thrive independently.

At the same time, this IPCA would preserve invaluable archaeological history, provide critical habitat for species at risk, and safeguard a massive amount of sequestered carbon to combat climate change. The values of Bistcho are environmental, cultural, and societal: an IPCA would help protect not only individual livelihoods, but also an entire culture and its inherently integrated ecological community.

*Northern Lights at
Tapawingo Lodge on
Bistcho Lake.*



Next Steps for Bistcho

Dene Tha' leadership is crucial to this process. As the original stewards and caretakers of the lands and waters at Bistcho, our Nation is uniquely positioned to lead the conservation of this area. Our goal is to lead the IPCA initiative in partnership with provincial and federal governments to build a strong future for Bistcho based on the combined strengths of traditional knowledge and western science.

The Bistcho IPCA would help the Alberta provincial government meet its legal obligations to protect and conserve woodland caribou in the Province. Protection of caribou habitat as an IPCA would place the Government of Alberta in a strong position to show the federal government that they are taking action to provide certainty in long-term protection of caribou critical habitat in partnership with Indigenous communities.

These actions would also align with and support the Conservation Agreement for Woodland Caribou signed by the Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada on October 23, 2020. Under the Agreement, the Government of Alberta commits to a series of conservation, management, and recovery actions intended to achieve naturally self-sustaining caribou populations.

Collaboration with the Government of Alberta is essential to bring the Bistcho IPCA concept to life and work towards this area becoming officially protected. Dene Tha' First Nation looks forward to in-depth discussions with the Government of Alberta on the path towards the creation of an IPCA in our Traditional Territory.

**Want to learn more about the Bistcho
IPCA and receive updates on this project?**

Visit our website at bistcholake.ca!

Dene Tha' Leadership: A Crucial Component of Conservation at Bistcho

The individual and cumulative environmental impacts of resource extraction and development on Dene Tha' traditional lands have yet to be adequately assessed and understood, and therefore mitigated.

Who better to monitor and assess the environmental effects of industry on the traditional resources of the Dene Tha' than the Dene Tha'? Who better to distinguish natural changes from anthropogenic changes in the environment?

An environmental monitoring program that complements those employed by scientists, designed and executed by those individuals who know "the land the best" and "what the land should like," would be a great assist to all stakeholders.

Stevenson, 2013⁴

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Appendix I: Contributors

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Appendix II: Photo Attribution

Dene Tha' First Nation

photographs shown on cover (caribou),
Table of Contents, and page 11 (Bottom), 13
(Bottom), 15

Jeremy Williams (Rivervoices)

photographs shown on cover (landscape,
DTFN band member) and pages 2, 4, 6, 9
(Left), 13(Top), 16, 19

Kecia Kerr

photographs shown on pages 9 (Right), 17

Taiga Heritage Consulting

photographs shown on pages 10 (Left), 10
(Right)

Gillian Chow-Fraser

photographs shown on page 12