

Opinions needed to conserve East Interlake region

By Nicole Brownlee

Fisher River Cree Nation is reaching out to eastern Interlake communities for their feedback on expanding protected areas in the region.

With the help of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Peguis First Nation and several Interlake communities, the Fisher River Cree Nation Conservation Areas Initiative aims to protect the health of the natural landscape while creating sustainable economic opportunities.

"This is a fabulous opportunity to look at balancing conservation with sustainable economic development," said Ron Thiessen, executive director of the Manitoba chapter of CPAWS.

"We hope to create a conservation proposal that's tailored to be suitable to the people in the region, that meets people's interests in terms of their employment, their lifestyle, their cultures."

Less than one per cent of the original tall-grass prairie remains in Manitoba because of development, which has endangered and threatened several species.

"It's time to get working on this before it's too late," said Thiessen.

A portion of the region is conserved under the Manitoba Protected Areas Initiative, but community members hope to expand the boundaries to preserve several ecosystems.

"Back like 15 years ago, we identified the Fisher Bay area as an area of interest to the community because our people have lived here a long time, and we utilize the Fisher Bay area," said FRCN Chief David Crate.

"We wanted to maintain that area so that it will be here for future genera-

tions."

The province designated Fisher Bay Provincial Park as protected on July 4, 2011. The park has since become a home to piping plovers, foxes, bears, moose and wolves.

Through several consultations, the group hopes to create a balanced plan to benefit wildlife, businesses and communities, said Crate.

"We don't want to affect the businesses in the area, you know. That's part of their livelihood, but what we'd like to hear from them is any issues they may have with bringing an area under permanent protection," said Crate.

The organization is collecting thoughts from stakeholders in the area like the loggers, trappers, commercial fishers and neighbouring communities to evaluate which areas should be conserved, developed or changed.

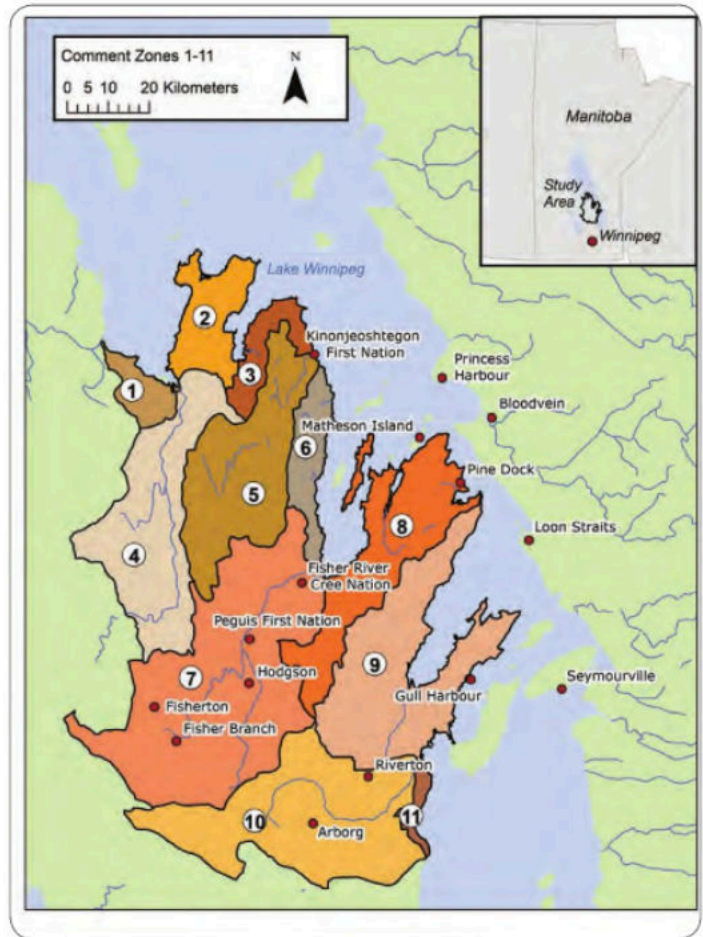
"It's such a beautiful area. ... There are business opportunities for ecotourism and things like that," said Crate.

"There are a variety of ways that areas can be protected or conserved for nature in Manitoba," said Thiessen.

"There are over a dozen different designations ... and each one has certain advantages and disadvantages based on what is trying to be accomplished."

Preliminary conversations with the province and community leaders have been positive, but they're looking forward to face-to-face meetings to have more open discussions about the initiative, said Crate.

"We're working on bringing an understanding to the region, the indi-



MAP SUPPLIED BY FRCN CONSERVATION AREAS INITIATIVE. The FRCN Conservation Areas Initiative is looking for opinions from community members in these 11 zones.

viduals, the businesses that it's something that everybody can participate in for the future protection and for the future generations."

To share your views about the initiative or attend the online community meeting on Oct. 7 at 7 p.m. or Oct. 13 at 7 p.m., visit frcnconservation.ca.