Mushkegowuk Council announces new Indigenous-led project to protect globally significant marine area

(October 1, 2020 Moose Factory, ON), At a recent meeting of the Mushkegowuk Council a motion was endorsed by Mushkegowuk Chiefs to support Nation to Nation talks with the Federal Government with a goal of creating a National Marine Conservation Area (NMCA) in Western James Bay and Hudson Bay.

Grand Chief Jonathan Solomon said “Through this initiative, we will protect the entire coastal & marine ecosystems that underpin the Mushkegowuk way of life including harvesting, ceremonial rights, sacred sites, travel routes, monitoring the health of our territory and particularly, our Inherent and Treaty Rights”

“The establishment of an Indigenous-led NMCA for western James Bay and Hudson Bay would be a step towards reconciliation with the Mushkegowuk Nations and Canada”, says Grand Chief Solomon. The timing of the project is perfect” he say, “Canada is trying to meet its 25% by 2025 to make Conservation targets for the Oceans surrounding the country, our friends and colleagues at the eastern part of James Bay, the Eeyou Istchee, are doing the same NMCA process, and other Indigenous groups are also working on protected areas in the James Bay and Hudson Bay. It’s a Win, Win, Win and more Wins all the way”

The establishment of the NMCA will be designed to maintain mushkego’s harvesting rights and practices and to protect what matters most for the future generations. This would be consistent with what our Elders remember what the Treaty Commissioners said back in 1905 “that they were.... allowed as of yore to hunt and fish as they pleased” - Treaty Commissioner Daniel McMartin recorded in his diary – August 21, 1905 at New Post (Taykwa Tagamou) First Nation.

Oceans North, Wildlands League, and the Oceans Collaborative (Environment Funders Canada), are all working together with the Mushkegowuk Council, to make the project sail off the ground, with funding from donations and grants to begin the planning process of such a delicate and important work for conservation of the marine life.
Washobiyow (James Bay in English) seascape is also distinct and found almost nowhere else in the Arctic. Many large and small rivers flow into the Bay. Combined with its shallowness (<50 m or a 15-story building), the Bay is relatively warm and low in salinity, just the right conditions to support an abundance of life. Washobiyow is critically important for the biodiversity including the most southern population of polar bears, a unique year-round population of beluga whales and more than 170 species of geese, ducks and shorebirds. It is a vital source of life for Mushkegowuk, Eeyou Istchee (Quebec Cree) and Nunavik Inuit. Grand Chief stated: “and indeed for all Canadians that is worthy of protection under Cree Laws and Canada’s laws.”

The Community Engagements are about to begin with the use of the Social Media, and with Wawatay Radio. Covid-19 is preventing the Mushkegowuk Team from visiting the communities at this time. In addition, a Task Force is being developed to guide the Planning process, made up of Elders, Youth, Women, community members appointed by the respective Chiefs and Councils of Mushkegowuk.

Grand Chief Solomon states; “Having chosen the NMCA as the desired tool to ensure the protection of our Traditional Marine Territory, we are prepared to meet the officials at Parks Canada as soon as practicable to discuss next steps including a Memorandum of Understanding and a Feasibility Study strategy that will determine what is workable in this great effort by our people”.

The Mushkegowuk Council represents seven First Nations along the James Bay coast in NAN’s eastern territory: Attawapiskat First Nation, Chapleau Cree First Nation, Fort Albany First Nation, Kashechewan First Nation, Missanabie Cree First Nation, Moose Cree First Nation, Taykwa Tagamou Nation. Weenusk First Nation and Fort Severn is participating in the NMCA project.

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