

Case study

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The Nature Conservancy
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Establishment of a protected area empowering Indigenous people

Thaidene Nënë Indigenous Protected Area, National Park Reserve, Territorial Protected Area and Wildlife Conservation Area, Canada



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The living connection between land and people, between water and land, between forest and barrens makes Thaidene Nënë a National Treasure of Canada. Carrying these relationships into the future, the ecological integrity and Dene way of life of Thaidene Nënë will be a living legacy for all, where the Łutsël K'é Dene First Nation and the Parks Canada Agency/GNWT will welcome the world.

– Thaidene Nënë Establishment Agreement –

Description of the site: In August 2019, the Łutsël K'é Dene First Nation (LKDFN) signed agreements with Parks Canada⁶⁶ and the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT)⁶⁷ to create a new 26,376 km² protected area called Thaidene Nënë, “Land of the Ancestors”,⁶⁸ in the heart of their traditional homeland in the Northwest Territories. Together with the adjacent Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary, the Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve and Territorial Protected Area and Wildlife Conservation Area protect an ecological system that is one of the largest terrestrial protected area zones in North America. Thaidene Nënë is now protected under Dēnesųlinē [LKDFN], federal and territorial law. All three governments will

work together to manage the Thaidene Nënë protected areas, ensuring that Indigenous knowledge and culture are the foundation of protecting the globally significant ecosystem that provides habitat for grizzly bears, wolves, moose and muskox, and the critical winter ground for herds of barren ground caribou (*Rangifer tarandus groenlandicus*).

Sustainability challenge: Although the First Nation had historically resisted the creation of a formal protected area, the recent discovery of diamond and mineral resources in the territory created a development boom that posed new threats to the traditional lands, waters and wildlife for the Łutsël K'é Dene. These development pressures challenged the LKDFN's ability to manage its lands, particularly when coupled with the risks of climate change. In 2000, Chief Felix Lockhart, concerned about this industrial development in the traditional territory, initiated discussions with Parks Canada about the creation of a potential National Park Reserve. The challenge and the vision for Thaidene Nënë was to construct a governance framework for the protected area that would provide the legal and economic



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empowerment for – and be informed by – Indigenous knowledge and stewardship.

Key benefits: The new protected area encompasses the core of the traditional homeland of the Łutsël K'é Dene – areas that include sacred sites and other places of critical cultural and sustenance values for the Nation. Most importantly, the protected area's Establishment Agreements call for Canadian and LKDFN governments to collaborate in the management and operation of Thaidene Nënë, and explicitly aim to protect and promote Łutsël K'e Dënesųłiné culture. This will allow the First Nation to realise its vision of governance, allowing for the continuation of an Indigenous system of intergenerational transmission of knowledge and human connection with the land to inform stewardship and management decisions and policy. The community has begun to set its own agenda to meet its needs for economic opportunities. The park enables them to ensure clean water, with a large portion of the protected area covering a freshwater area of Great Slave Lake, the deepest freshwater area in North America; as well as work to preserve sustainable food sources. The community

will meet these needs by creating its own plans, informing multi-party management plans in a meaningful way, and by creating and enforcing its own laws. The Agreements guarantee that Dënesųłiné knowledge be used to make decisions and to develop interpretation and promotional materials for the park, and to protect sacred places and document heritage resources.

While tourism is envisioned as an important opportunity for the park, before visitors enter Thaidene Nënë they will have to register and complete an orientation programme so that they can learn about safety and how to properly respect the land they are visiting. They will also be required to obtain necessary permits and licenses, to be approved by the Management Board.

The protected area provides additional opportunities to promote the use of the Dënesųłiné language, promote the Dene way of life, and ensure the history and culture of the Łutsël K'é Dënesųłiné are shared across Canada and globally.

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Business case: The protected area is not just about biological and cultural conservation, but it is also about promoting a viable economic future for the Łutsël K'é. Thaidene Nënë will foster sustainable economic growth by building park infrastructure in the home community of Łutsël K'é', bringing new stewardship and management jobs to the community, and encouraging ecotourism to the region.

The Establishment Agreements prioritise training and employment for Łutsël K'é Dënesųłiné people and maximising economic opportunities for Łutsël K'e Dënesųłiné businesses. Park staff will be chosen in part for their knowledge of Łutsël K'e Dënesųłiné culture, familiarity with the Dënesųłiné language, knowledge of Thaidene Nënë and how to travel and use the land, and community awareness. Construction of infrastructure – including a visitor and heritage centre, administrative offices for park management, and storage for historical and cultural information and objects – will provide opportunities for rental income, as LKDFN expects to own these facilities and to rent space on a long-term basis to Parks Canada and GNWT.

LKDFN has also established a CA\$30 million trust fund to support its management and operation responsibilities in Thaidene Nënë. The Trust will provide a long-term revenue stream that will be instrumental for achieving stable operational, stewardship and management objectives set for Thaidene Nënë by LKDFN.

Lessons learned: Establishing the Thaidene Nënë protected area could only become a viable solution for its most invested Indigenous human community once their leadership, voice and traditional knowledge were recognised and prioritised in all aspects of the management, planning and economic activity in the park. The Establishment Agreements for the park treat LKDFN as a legitimate government with treaty rights and deep knowledge and connection to the landscape, and thus permit the creation of an area that enhances the leadership and authority of the local community and creates a more effective vehicle for multiple values to be preserved and protected in cultural and biodiversity conservation.

Next steps: The newly created LKDFN TDN Strategic Plan started implementation in 2020. This includes creating the visitor orientation programme and related infrastructure.

Endnotes

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