



Polar Bear Provincial Park

Master Plan - Proposed Amendment

November 2005

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ISSUE:

Polar Bear Provincial Park (PBPP) was established in 1970, to protect sub-arctic and low arctic landscapes. PBPP is the representative wilderness class park for the Hudson Bay Coast and Northern Taiga ecoregions, OE and 1E respectively. The park is one of the least-altered tracts of land remaining in Ontario. The park provides opportunities for low-intensity wilderness recreation, opportunities for scientific research, and traditional land and resource use by First Nation people.

The Weenusk First Nation community of Peawanuck is located on the Winisk River, surrounded by PBPP to the north, east and west. Fuel and supplies for Peawanuck are currently transported in by air which is extremely expensive (five to 10 times what they would be in Toronto).

For the past three years, a winter road has been built between Fort Severn and Peawanuck outside the park boundary. The existing route has presented a number of construction difficulties and safety concerns due to insufficient freezing. During the past three winters, heavy equipment has gone through the ice. Such incidents increase the potential for loss of life and spills of hazardous materials.

The existing winter route between Fort Severn and Peawanuck is about 258 kilometres long, and skirts around PBPP.

Weenusk First Nation proposed abandoning the existing winter road route because it is unreliable, too long and includes numerous water crossings, which are a safety concern.

PLANNING BACKGROUND:

The proposed new winter road route is approximately 180 kilometres long, approximately 80 kilometres shorter than the route in use for the last three years – 123 kilometres of which would be inside PBPP.

Before a new winter road can be built, MNR will fulfill its legal obligations under the Environmental Assessment Act for the full length of the winter road both inside the park and on Crown lands outside the park.

In addition, annual approvals are required to authorize the winter road under the Provincial Parks Act and the Public Lands Act.

Following are the proposed changes / additions to amend the Polar Bear Provincial Park Master Plan (1980) to provide policy direction for the management of the proposed winter road access through Polar Bear Provincial Park. This proposed amendment should be read as a supplement to and amending the original master plan. The section headings come from the original master plan with page number references in brackets. The **wording of the proposed amendment is bolded in the text** and underlined on Figure 1 to show changes to wording. Excerpts from the original text of the Polar Bear Provincial Park Master Plan appear as regular text.

1.1 Goal

Proviso: ...Polar Bear Provincial Park will continue to accommodate the traditional gathering activities of native people, and allow **annual construction, maintenance and use of a winter road to access Peawanuck from Fort Severn through a portion of Polar Bear Provincial Park** without unduly compromising the wilderness integrity of the park.

1.2 Statement Explaining the Goal (pg 1)

The emphasis will be placed on unmechanized activities with very few exceptions. Exceptions will include guide operated power boats in the Sutton River and Winisk River access zones and along the coast, aircraft landing at access zones and the **use of vehicles within the Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone.**

1.3 Park Classification (pg 2)

Polar Bear Provincial Park is classified as a wilderness park and will be managed and protected according to the directions provided in the Ontario Provincial Parks Planning and Management Policies and the Provincial Parks Act and its regulations.

Some departures from the initial objectives of the wilderness classification will be made to accommodate the very special circumstances of Polar Bear Provincial Park. For example, waterfowl hunting will be allowed at points in Access Zone 2 and 4 because of the precedent of these activities at these locations and because of the important relationship of the native people to the management of the park. Any hunting by non-native people at these access zones will be done through the goose camp operations. **As well, the annual construction, maintenance and use of a winter road from Peawanuck to Fort Severn will be allowed through Polar Bear Provincial Park in the Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone established for that specific purpose. The Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone will provide winter road access for the Weenusk First Nation community in Peawanuck in order to transport critical supplies to the community. This zone is not intended to provide public access to the park.**

1.4 Park Zoning

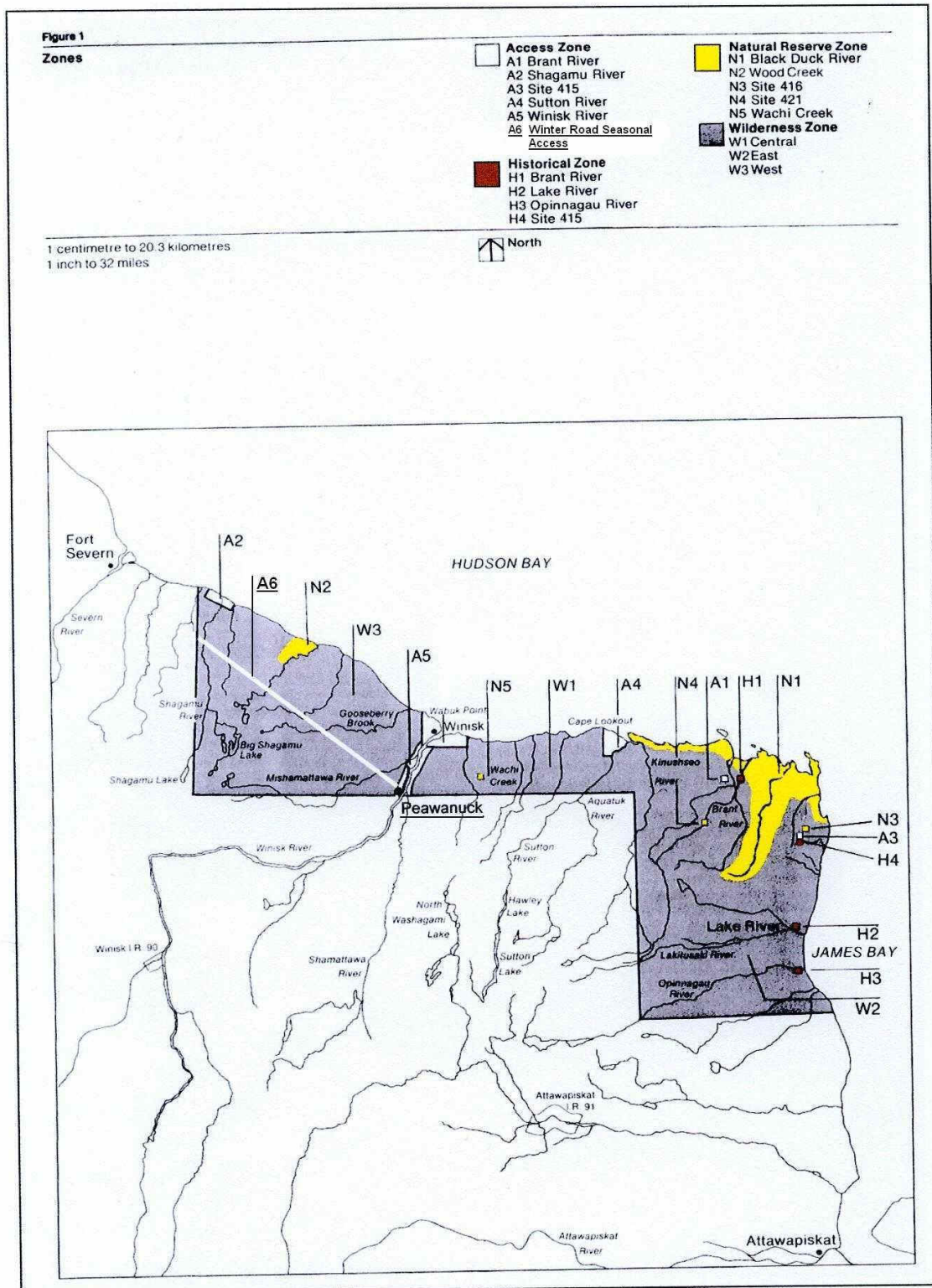
Polar Bear Provincial Park will have **six** access zones, five nature reserve zones, four historical zones, and three wilderness zones established as shown in Figure 1. A more sophisticated zoning system may evolve, however, with more detailed knowledge of the park's environment.

2.0 Access Zones (pg 2)

2.1 General (pg 2)

Access zones will be provided at **six** locations within Polar Bear Provincial Park – Brant River, Shagamu River, Site 415, Sutton River, Winisk River **and the Winter Road Seasonal Access.** The **six** zones occupy **approximately 14,064 ha** of the **2,408,514 ha** for the entire park. **The combined area in access zones is 0.6 percent of the entire park area.** Facilities and services, including public information and interpretation, will be provided as necessary at each access zone, **with the exception of the Winter Road Seasonal Access. Further, the Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone will only be in effect each year from December 1st to April 30th and the lands and waters in the Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone will continue to be part of the Western Wilderness Zone from May 1st to November 30th.** The park's operational headquarters at **Peawanuck**, outside the park boundaries, will be the major location for services and supplies.

Figure 1.



2.2 Activities and Facilities (pg 2)

Activities and facilities will be directed toward wilderness-type use ...

Activities involving mechanized vehicles will not be permitted except in the case of motor canoes used by native guides at the Sutton River and Winisk River and along the coast, aircraft landing at access zones **and vehicles needed for annual construction and travel along the Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone. There will be no public visitor facilities in the Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone.**

3.0 Wilderness Zones (pg 5)

The three wilderness zones are mainly dedicated to the environmental protection (from the interference by man) of large tracts of unimpaired wild land for low impact wilderness recreation and scientific purposes.

Western Wilderness Zone (W3) is traversed in the south western corner by the Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone. As the Winter Seasonal Access Zone is only in effect each year from December 1st to April 30th and the lands and waters in the Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone will continue to be part of the Western Wilderness Zone from May 1st to November 30th. Monitoring of construction and use of the Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone will occur to identify effects of the access zone on wilderness features and values.

6.0 Native People and Polar Bear Provincial Park (pg 6)

The Weenusk First Nation reserve is located in Peawanuck, at the southern tip of Hudson Bay, about 30 kilometres inland on the Winisk River and about 150 kilometres from Fort Severn. These two settlements are the most northerly communities in Ontario. This remoteness means that the cost of living, to supply the communities is very high. The Ministry of Natural Resources has worked with Weenusk First Nation for the past three years to establish a winter road outside the park boundary. That road could not be used in the winter 2002-03 because of poor weather. Furthermore, that route has also presented a number of construction difficulties and safety concerns due to insufficient freezing. During the past three winters, heavy equipment has gone through the ice. Such incidents increase the potential for loss of life and spills of hazardous materials. It has become apparent based on three years of experience that the previous winter road route is unreliable and contains significant safety hazards that cannot be overcome.

The new winter road route through the park will result in fewer disturbances to the northern environment and values and features of the park will be monitored and protected. Mitigation measures and conditions will be addressed in work permit approvals to address construction, maintenance and use of the winter road.

7.0 Development (pg 7)

7.4 Other Access Zones (pg 12)

The Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone is not intended to provide public access to the wilderness park. The five other access zones and their permitted uses address public visitor distribution and park access needs.

Potential Access Zones: At some point in the future, it may be advisable to create new access zones inside or at the periphery of Polar Bear Provincial Park. Master plans should be flexible enough to allow for changes over the years. However, it is also important that the wilderness concept not be jeopardized by an overabundance of interior access zones.

Presently only one additional access point is under consideration; Site 421.

After three seasons of unsuccessful efforts to provide for the annual construction and use of a winter road outside Polar Bear Provincial Park, a winter road corridor will be developed through the park to Peawanuck.

A6 Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone

The winter road seasonal access zone is a 123 km long winter road corridor to link to an existing winter road to Fort Severn in order to service and supply the community of Peawanuck. The corridor is 500 metres wide on either side of the centre line of the zone. The alignment will be refined during preconstruction surveys in the field to, where possible, apply best practices to avoid Polar Bear denning sites, minimize tree removal and organic terrain disturbance to leave as much surface protection as possible for underlying permafrost, and, minimize crossings of streams and waterbodies. Design and construction guidelines for winter roads and ice bridges will be followed to mitigate potential impacts. The winter use is defined as annual construction and use of the Peawanuck winter road from December 1st to April 30th of any given year.

9.0 Operations (pg 18)

9.7 Peawanuck Winter Road

The annual construction and use of the Peawanuck winter road will commence in 2006. The road from Fort Severn to Peawanuck will include 123 kilometres within Polar Bear Provincial Park. Regular maintenance of the road will occur following best practices for winter roads and ice bridges.

Approval Statement

The proceeding proposed amendment to the Polar Bear Provincial Park Master Plan (1980) is recommended for approval. The approved amendment will permit the designation of a Winter Road Seasonal Access Zone to allow the annual construction, maintenance and use of the Peawanuck winter road through Polar Bear Provincial Park for winter access to Peawanuck.

Approved by:

Adair Ireland – Smith
Managing Director
Ontario Parks

Date: