

# The "Caribou Heaven": Recognizing a Sacred Site and Integrating Naskapi Ecological Knowledge in the Management of the Proposed Kuururjuaq National Park (Nunavik, Canada)



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## Recognition of Cultural Sites as Sacred Areas

Sacred sites are increasingly recognized as being vital for the expression and transmission of culture, for the conservation of biodiversity, and as a manifestation of spiritual values related to nature. Following Recommendation No. 13 of the Vth International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Parks Congress in 2003, sites of cultural value (for example, burial sites and places referred to in legends) can be designated as “sacred areas” upon the establishment of protected areas.

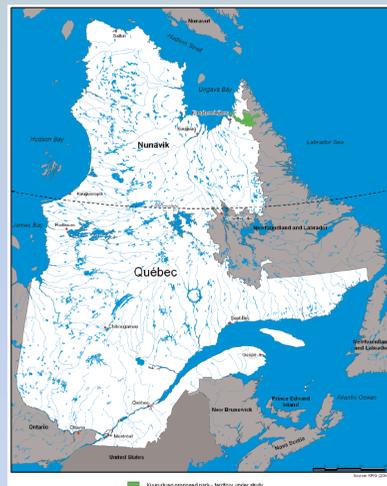
In June, 2002, the Government of Québec signed an agreement with the Kativik Regional Government (14 northern villages, 14 Inuit reserved lands, and 1 Naskapi reserved land), giving them responsibility for the development and management of the Kuururjuaq National Park, that is representative of the tundra ecosystem, and which covers over 4 274 km<sup>2</sup> and protects the Torngat mountain foothills in the upstream reaches of the Koroc River.

An important cultural site for the Naskapi First Nation is believed to be situated within the limits of the proposed Kuururjuaq National Park.



The Torngat Mountains, the highest range in eastern continental Canada, lie north of the peninsula that separates Ungava Bay from the Labrador Sea.

© Photo: Robert Fréchette, Kativik Regional Government



## Aboriginal Peoples, Canada's Parks and Protected Areas

In 1975, the James Bay Crees, the Inuit of Québec, and the governments of Québec and Canada signed the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement.

Since 1975, Aboriginal land claim agreements have changed how protected areas are planned, established, and managed in Canada.

This agreement marks the beginning of a thirty-year history in the evolving participation of Aboriginal people in parks and protected areas in Canada. It established the Northern Québec Hunting, Fishing, and Trapping Coordinating Committee – the first of what are now referred to as “co-management bodies” – between

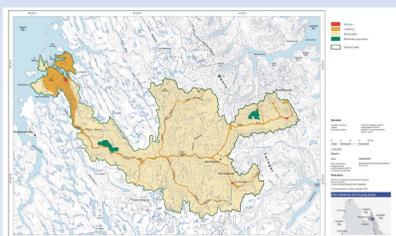
provincial and federal government and Inuit and Cree representatives, with a broad range of shared management responsibilities.

Subsequently, on January 31, 1978, the Naskapi signed the Northeastern Québec Agreement, a similar management body.

## The Kuururjuaq National Park Zoning

A Provisional Master Plan, developed through a consultation process, sets out a proposed boundary, zoning proposals, and a development concept.

The provisional master plan did not mention the Caribou heaven and did not foresee the protection of those areas that are sacred or culturally important.



Zoning plan of the future Kuururjuaq Park

## The Naskapi Nation and the Links Between Nature and Culture

The Naskapi are one of the ten First Nations of Québec. The majority of the 1028 people of the Naskapi Nation live in the village of Kawawachikamach in north-eastern Québec. Naskapi is the principal language and is spoken by all of the residents, including at the school.



View on Kawawachikamach.

© Photo: M John Mameamskum, Naskapi Nation

The Naskapi rely on subsistence hunting, fishing, and trapping for a large part of their food supply and for many raw materials. Among the many animal species that inhabit the tundra, caribou have a very special status for the Naskapi culture and caribou hunting is of great importance to them. The knowledge that the Naskapi have built about the caribou is extremely rich and accurate.



Clothes made with caribou skin

© Photo: Naskapi Nation

Snow Shoes made with parts of caribou

© Photo: Naskapi Nation

## The Legend of the Caribou Heaven

Based on legends passed down for generations through their families, Naskapi Elders believe that there is a sacred place on the Koroc River called the Caribou Heaven, which they call *atiuk weej* in Naskapi or “the house of the caribou” in English, to which the souls of dead caribou go. The soul is then “clothed” in a new body, enabling it to return to the land.

The legend of Caribou Heaven or the house of the caribou has great importance for the Naskapi culture. In the past, such beliefs served to guide the behaviour of and provide ethical guidelines to the ancestors, who survived largely by hunting caribou. For them, the responsible behaviour promoted by the legend, including using all parts of the caribou killed as a way of showing respect to the soul of the caribou, ensured that the caribou would return to the hunter, thus ensuring the survival of the Naskapi themselves.

A number of legends about the house of the caribou live on in the memory of the Naskapi Elders: some tell of people who got lost while looking for the house of the caribou; others provide lessons to those who do not believe in the existence of the Caribou Heaven; still others believe in the soul of the mountain and that of the caribou.

Today, the legend serves as a tool for the Naskapi to teach their children the importance of treating all of Nature, not just the caribou, with respect. The legend helps Naskapi and non-Naskapi to understand that everyone is part of Nature and has an important responsibility of stewardship.

## A Naskapi elder's description of traditional uses of caribou.

“When we shot down a caribou, we used all parts of his body. Even the bones were crushed and boiled into bone fat and broth that we drank. The marrow was eaten raw. We also used the powder of the burned bones to whiten tanned hides, which we rubbed with this powder. Then, we expanded the skins for the surplus powder to be blown by the wind. The skins of the caribou were used to make tents. We also made sinew with skin – thin strips that were used for fishing nets or fishing rods. These strips were also used to connect the different parts of sleds. The sinew was used to do many other things; for example, we tied our luggage when we wanted to travel. We also made rackets. We dried the meat and reduced it to very fine powder. We also used the shoes and made necklaces with the teeth and also games. When we made a drum, we used a lot of parts of the caribou. We also made toys for children with certain parts of the caribou. We respected this animal a lot because it allowed us to live and it was always present among us.”

1The authors' translation from the original text in French in Babeux, D., P. Einish, D. Geoffroy, C. Lévesque, S. Nabineacoo, G. Poirier, M. Paré, and R. Robinson, 2008. Les Savoirs Écologiques des Naskapis: caractérisation, utilisation, transmission. Projet de mobilisation des connaissances réalisé dans le cadre de l'initiative des Écosystèmes du Nord, Environnement Canada, 2004-2008. NRS: Montréal



Caribou play a central role in the tundra and taiga ecology, including the net effect of forage removal, production of greenhouse gas, and return of nutrients.

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Mr Donald Peastitute recounts a legend about the Caribou Heaven

© Photo: Blanka Füleki



Mr Philip Einish, Jr., Mr Joe Guanish, Mr Peter Guanish and Mr Donald Peastitute look at documentation on the Caribou Heaven

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## The Kuururjuaq National Park and the Recognition of the Caribou Heaven as Sacred Site

The Naskapi Elders Advisory Council and the Council of the Naskapi Nation recommended that:

- that the site known to them as the Caribou Heaven be designated as a sacred area;
- that a Naskapi Elder should be a member of the committee responsible for managing the park at all times;
- the integration of the Caribou Heaven into the cultural and educational facilities and materials of the future park.

Today, the designation of the Caribou Heaven as a sacred area is being considered in a final management plan and there is a strong likelihood that it will be designated as such.

The Naskapi prepared a CD containing many variations of the legend of the Caribou Heaven, which they hope will be integrated into the educational programme of the proposed park.



Mr Philip Einish, Jr., Mr Matthew Mameamskum, Mr Joe Guanish, Mr Peter Guanish and Mr Donald Peastitute examine documentation on the Kuururjuaq Park

© Photo: Blanka Füleki



Mr Donald Peastitute, Mr Philip Peastitute and Mr George Guanish look at a map showing the proposed Kuururjuaq Park

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## Conclusions

Co-operative agreements and land claims that guide protected areas establishment and management can offer a way for government park agencies, Aboriginal communities, and other stakeholders to work together to preserve natural areas that are crucial to Aboriginal culture and sustain Indigenous ways of life, while simultaneously achieving key conservation goals. The “Caribou Heaven” project is an innovative approach to conserving bio-cultural heritage and sharing the ecological, socio-cultural, educational, and economic benefits of protected areas.

Key lessons :

- Recognizing the importance of cultural and spiritual resources and traditional knowledge as an expression of Aboriginal peoples' relationship to their land;
- Enabling community leadership to express a vision for conservation and use of their aboriginal territories;
- Ensuring sufficient time, patience, and trust to develop an equitable partnership between the park agency, the Aboriginal communities, and other stakeholders.

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