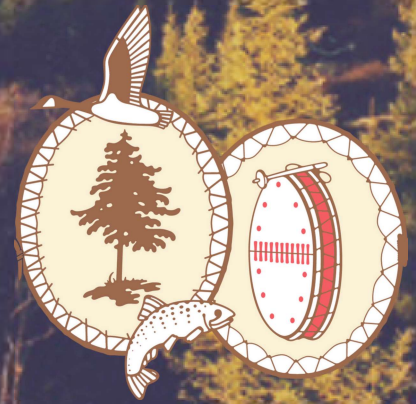


Implementing the Cree Regional Conservation Strategy

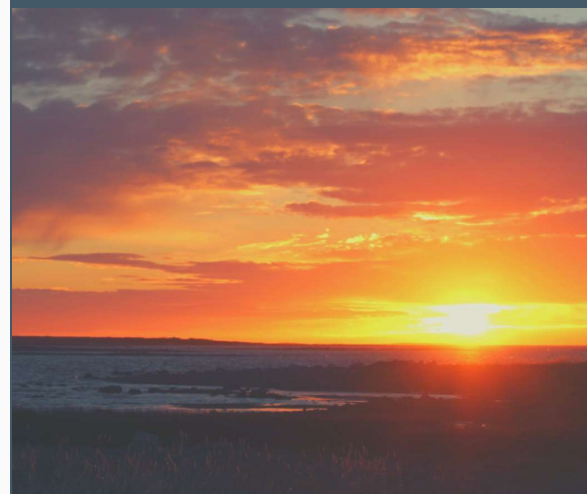
How strong Cree leadership and innovative partnerships are protecting and conserving land in Eeyou Istchee



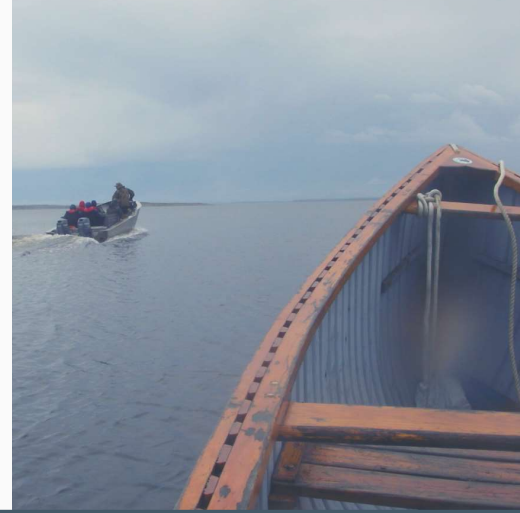
Cree communities are working to uphold their cultural stewardship responsibilities to protect and conserve the lands and waters of Eeyou Istchee – the homeland of the Cree in the Québec-James Bay region. This document outlines an example of how innovative methods and partnerships are helping to ensure Cree knowledge, values and ways of life are being upheld in conservation and protection planning and supporting a strong and leading voice for Crees in the establishment of new protected and conserved areas. The Cree Nation Government and partners at the Nature Conservancy of Canada are sharing this summary so others may learn from and build upon on this work.



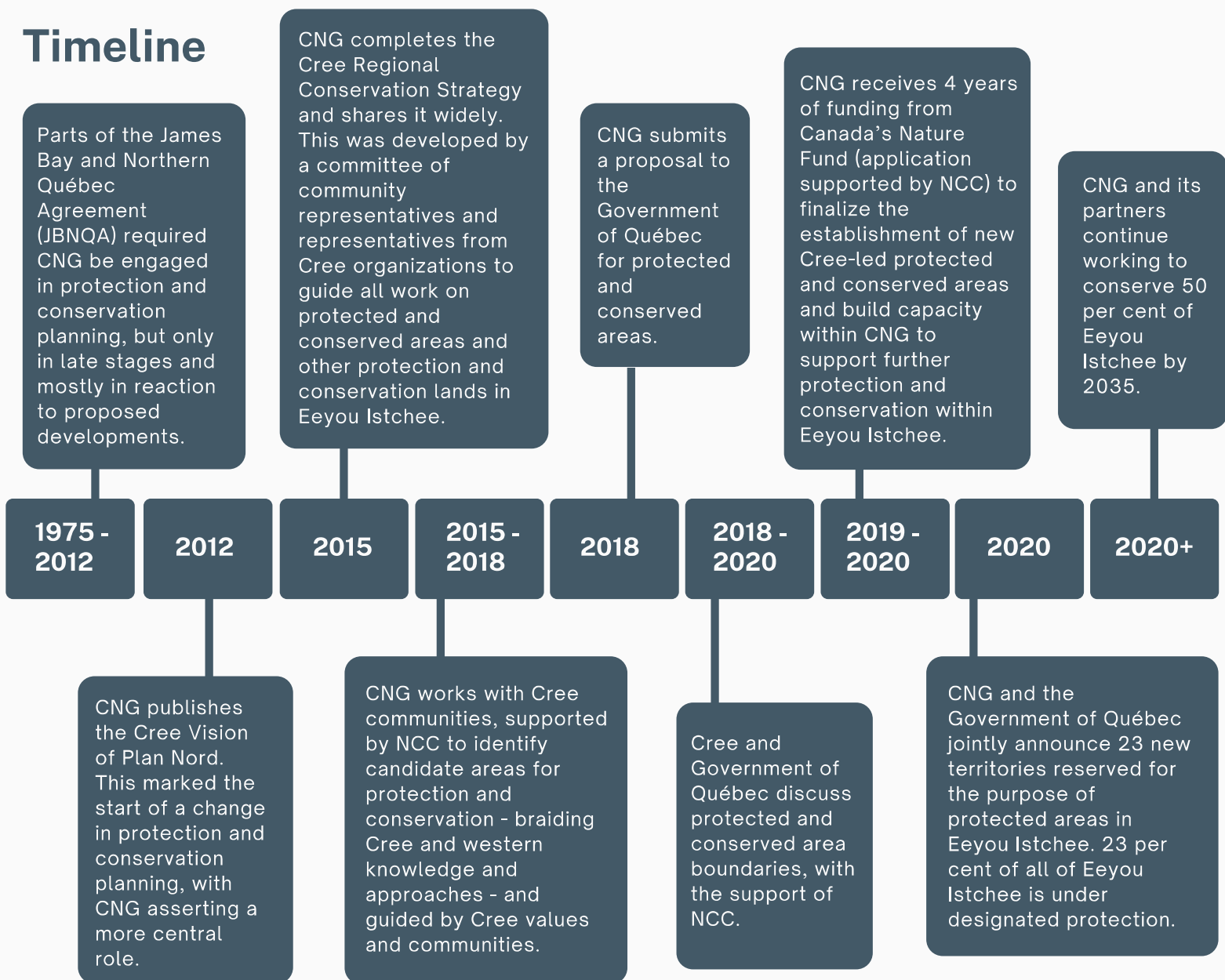
Eeyou Istchee (dark grey), the traditional territory and homeland of the Quebec Crees, an area of 400,000 square kilometers located in northwestern Quebec along the James Bay coast.



Important conservation and protection achievements have been made, but the work is ongoing and there is still more to do. The Cree Nation Government and the Government of Québec are continuing to work together to establish new land protection and conservation measures that meet national and international protection and conservation goals. CNG and Québec remain committed to developing the territory in a way that is sustainable and nurture a relationship with the lands that will create opportunities for *all* people to thrive.



Timeline



Guided by the Cree Regional Conservation Strategy

Selecting protected and conserved areas was guided by the Cree Regional Conservation Strategy (the Strategy), a Cree-led strategy that proposes braiding Cree knowledge and western knowledge together to inform Cree-leadership in decision-making for land protection and conservation. This work was completed by paying close attention to the key priorities outlined in the Strategy, including:

- **Focus on Cree values**

Cree values and laws guide and govern respectful relationships with these lands. The Strategy aims to ensure that Cree relationships and responsibilities to the land shape protected and conserved area processes at every step. Cree knowledge and experience was mapped by working with Cree tallymen (lead hunters) as well as family members; youth, elders and women; and was paired with western knowledge to guide a “two-eyed seeing” approach to select potential protected areas¹. Cultural and ecological values shared by communities were prioritized in computer modeling tools that generated recommended protected and conserved area networks for consideration and discussion. While not every area that was mapped could be included in each scenario, the different protected and conserved area options could be compared by their achievements towards the goals identified in the Strategy. Each community could review and modify the results to propose protection for their most culturally and ecologically important sites. This was a very difficult process because these interconnected areas could not all be protected and conserved at this time. Additional areas could be proposed through other protection and conservation measures in the future.

¹ Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall coined the term “two-eyed seeing”. Elder Albert Marshall lives in the community Eskasoni in Unama'ki – Cape Breton, Nova Scotia on the Traditional Territory of Mi'kma'ki.

“Our Vision is to maintain strong ties to the Cree cultural heritage and way of life, and sustain biodiversity by creating a large, interconnected network of conservation areas in Eeyou Istchee.”
– Cree Regional Conservation Strategy

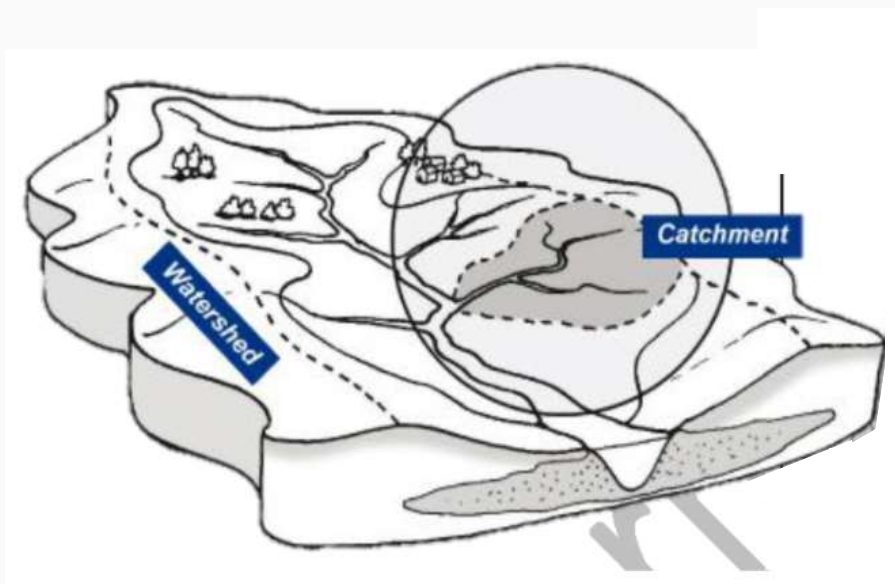




- **Adopt a watershed-based planning approach and consider the flow of water**

Water is the life blood of the land and clean water is vital to sustain the Cree way of life. Waterways, wetlands, and lakes are important to fish and wildlife, including culturally important species like moose. Waterways are also transportation corridors, driving Cree movement and relationships with the land. Protected and conserved area design focused on water and how it flows across the land.

Eeyou Istchee is made up of about 40 major watersheds - capturing water that flows through the land before eventually reaching the sea. Protected and conserved areas were designed by connecting catchments (a “sub-watershed”) areas that drain into specific streams. The approach prioritized the protection and conservation of headwaters (the initiating source of streams and rivers) and watersheds without industrial development to help keep waters clean for downstream areas.





- **Consider the scale**

Our methods supported the exploration of protected and conserved areas at three different scales: individual traplines, community-level and all of Eeyou Istchee. This was also reflected in how communities were engaged – from individual Cree land users and tallymen to multiple families, local leadership, and regional organizations. Using these different scales, communities led the design of protected and conserved areas within their own lands through the priorities shared by their members. Communities also considered the relationships with adjacent areas within shared stream networks and watersheds. CNG then collaborated with communities to consider how these protected and conserved areas would work together across all of Eeyou Istchee, considering things like wildlife range shifts through periods of climate change. Enhancing and maintaining an interconnected landscape will be a focus of planning between now and 2035.



- **Diverse landscapes require diverse planning approaches**

Much of Eeyou Istchee remains in a healthy state, with vast expanses of boreal forests, wetlands, lakes and free-flowing rivers that are untouched by industrial disturbance. These areas are important to support Cree culture and way of life on the land. However, other parts of Eeyou Istchee have been altered by forestry, mining and hydro-electric power developments, and these areas are not equally distributed on the landscape. For example, forestry and mining activities are greater in the south, while in the north, the area above the commercial forestry limit is more impacted by hydro development within certain watersheds.

We decided to use two different methods with the aim of protecting large healthy watersheds and boreal forests that also considered unique context and values across different scales. This also meant modifying methods depending on the regions and communities to address specific needs and priorities.



- **Selecting the right tools to identify protected and conserved areas**

Cree and western knowledge systems, values and experiences were considered throughout the analysis – from selecting information to making decisions at each stage. Ultimately, we used the best of both Cree and western knowledge and approaches to identify potential protected and conserved areas and networks *using information from the smallest parts to all of Eeyou Istchee*. By braiding both ways of knowing, planning approaches and community discussions led to selecting potential protected and conserved areas which were proposed to and negotiated with the Government of Québec. Key information that was mapped and brought together to use in the analysis included:

- **Cree knowledge and land use (e.g., camps, travel routes, birth and burial places, sacred sites, important areas for certain plants and animals)**
- **Infrastructure (e.g., roads, forestry affected areas, hydroelectric dams, and powerlines)**
- **Landscape features (e.g., forest types, wetlands, climate)**

Using this information to achieve the goals outlined above, we chose two different computer modelling tools:

- **One was focused on identifying large expanses of intact watersheds that could be resilient in the face of environmental changes².**
- **The other focused on smaller watersheds to protect biodiversity and cultural values threatened by industrial development³.**

Both tools allowed objective and efficient selection of potential protected areas that could be shaped by community-specific priorities and values.

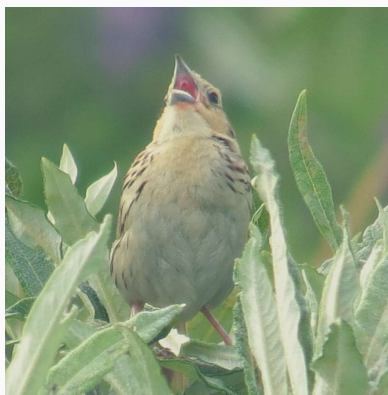
² For more information about the first tool focused on planning for intact landscapes visit: www.beaconsproject.ualberta.ca

³ For more information about the second tool focused on planning within disturbed landscapes visit: www.marxansolutions.org



Selecting Protected Area Options

Our process for selecting areas had seven steps. These steps included:



Step 1

Design potential protected areas using stream flow and natural fire characteristics

Step 2

Summarize ecological and cultural values within each potential area

Step 3

Combine potential protected areas into networks

Step 4

Evaluate networks using goals of Cree Regional Conservation Strategy

Step 5

Discuss options with community and territory leaders to finalize proposals

Step 6

Negotiate new protected areas with the government of Québec

Step 7

Finalize new protected areas through impact assessment processes



Step 1: Design potential protected and conserved areas based on ecological characteristics.

This initial step was guided by following the flow of water and we used catchments as our smallest possible building blocks, focussing on those with fewest impacts. Disturbances such as fire and climate change were also considered to select large, healthy and resilient watersheds for protection and conservation. With a manageable list of potential protected and conserved areas, we picked ones that overlapped with the traplines belonging to each community.

Step 2: Summarizing ecological and cultural values.

Our next step was to find protected and conserved areas that would best help us achieve community goals. Options could be adjusted according to a set of ecological and cultural criteria, *customized for each community to match their contexts and interests*. Each community could decide how, and which, factors should be considered.

Step 3: Creating networks.

Next we identified groups of protected and conserved areas that would best help us achieve our goals at the community and territorial level. We call these groups protected and conserved area *networks* - as they work together across the larger landscape to protect and conserve important ecological and cultural values. Cultural and ecological criteria were used to score and rank these networks.





Step 4: Compare networks to the goals of the Cree Regional Conservation Strategy.

Similar networks were grouped together for community review. We then scored each type of network according to community-specific and territory-wide ecological and cultural criteria. Some examples of the ranking criteria were:

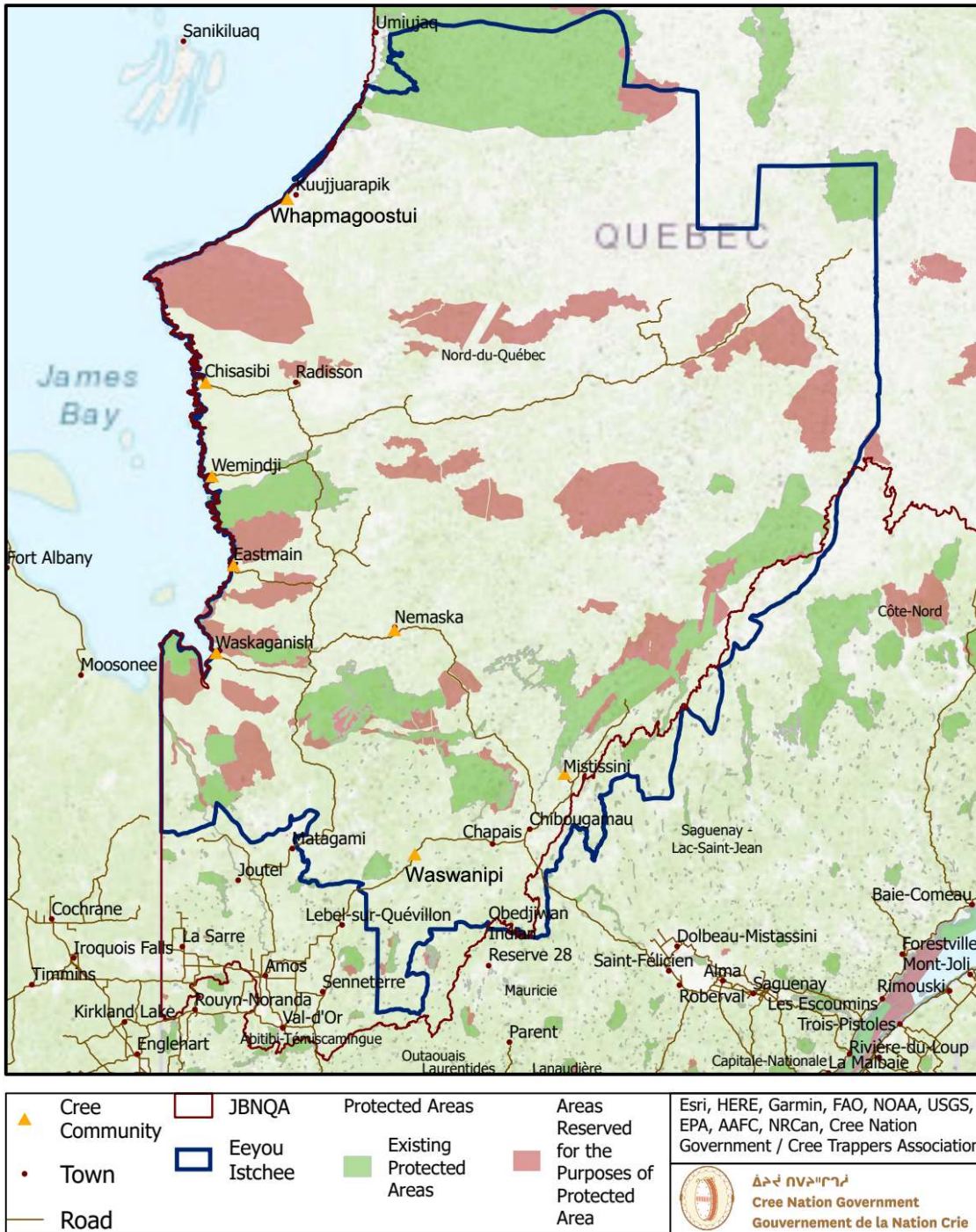
- **How vulnerable is it to environmental changes from inside, outside, and upstream?**
- **Does the protected and conserved area and network have similar important values found in the broader community, region, or Eeyou Istchee?**

Step 5: Discussing options at the community and territorial level.

Our methods provided an objective way to identify areas, and we compiled all our results and went to each community for review. Cree tallymen, land users and local leadership could discuss and modify these proposed protected and conserved areas, informed by the Cree and western approaches used in the process. Conversations lasted several days, involving different leaders, knowledge holders, and land users.

The modelling results were not the same as final proposed protected and conserved areas, as our goal was to have communities decide not only *which* options were the best, but *how*. Sometimes, we had to modify and redo our analysis. In other cases, we manually changed protected and conserved area borders at the community's direction. Some protected and conserved areas overlapped with important cultural sites of other communities or neighbouring traplines. When this happened, communities, families and land users had to work together to discuss final options. In the end, each community was able to decide on their desired protected and conserved areas.

Protected Areas in Eeyou Istchee



Step 6: Negotiations with the Government of Quebec.

We combined the final choices to develop a single, final proposal for a network of protected and conserved areas across Eeyou Istchee. It was this proposal that was negotiated between the Cree Nation Government and the Government of Quebec, leading to the 23 protected areas jointly declared in 2020. Thanks to this work, Canada's goal of protecting and conserving 17 per cent of land and Quebec's goal of protecting and conserving 20 per cent by 2020 have been exceeded.



Step 7: Impact assessment process.

To complete the legal designation process, the new protected areas will undergo an environmental and social impact assessment. CNG and its partners are continuing this work by gathering the information required for the assessment process.

The CNG continues to work with its partners to explore further land protection and conservation measures, with the goal of protected and conserved areas covering 50 per cent of Eeyou Istchee by 2035.

What made this work successful was relying on our unique strengths:

CNG Strengths:

- **Building upon decades of foundational work led by Cree communities to strengthen Cree stewardship of the territory;**
- **Understanding of the local and landscape context so that protected and conserved areas were designed to benefit communities throughout all of Eeyou Istchee; and**
- **Leading with an approach that drew on both Cree and western knowledge systems together, rather than using them separately.**

NCC Strengths:

- **Experience with mapping tools available for protected and conserved areas planning and communicating results of tools to bring together Cree and western knowledge systems in decision-making;**
- **Staff resources and connections to provide technical, mapping and decision-making support throughout the full planning cycle; and**
- **Responsive to CNG and community guidance by creatively adapting planning processes and outcomes, as needed.**





If you would like to learn more about how this work was done, please contact:

Cree Nation Government: www.cngov.ca

Nature Conservancy of Canada: www.natureconservancy.ca