

Prospects for Natural World Heritage Sites in the Northwest Pacific Region

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The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased and not impaired in value.

~ Theodore Roosevelt

Alaska, northern British Columbia (BC), and the western portion of the Yukon Territory have extensive areas of wildlands that are matched by protected area systems covering some 20 percent of the land area of the region. One of the most outstanding of these is the Kluane/Wrangell-St. Elias/Glacier Bay/Tatshenshini-Alsek Park complex that is shared by all three jurisdictions. This entire 10 million-ha (24,710,538-acre) area is a transboundary World Heritage site, in fact the largest such internationally designated site on the planet. With its informal abbreviated name of the “St. Elias Mountain Parks,” it is the only existing World Heritage site in the region.

The St. Elias Parks site presented an interesting use of the World Heritage Convention in that it was extended twice after the original inscription in 1979 to assist in countering threats of a proposed open pit copper mine in BC, upstream from Glacier Bay National Park. When the United States nominated Glacier Bay in 1992, the approval of this mine would have put Canada in a difficult position in terms of Article 6 of the Convention. This article states that, “Each State Party to this Convention undertakes not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage...situated on the territory of other State Parties to this Convention.” When Glacier Bay was inscribed as an addition to the St. Elias Parks complex, the proposed mine was not allowed and the BC government created the Tatshenshini-Alsek Park, which was then also added to the site 2 years later.

Recognizing the international importance of other natural areas in the northwest Pacific region, the governments of both countries have identified seven protected areas for inclusion on the Tentative List of Properties that they intend to nominate for World Heritage status in the future. In Canada, these are: the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve in BC’s Queen Charlotte Islands and the Ivvavik/Vuntut/Herschel Island Park complex on the Yukon/Alaska border. In the United States, sites on the Tentative List submitted to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s

(UNESCO) World Heritage Centre by the Department of Interior are: the Aleutian Islands Unit, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Denali National Park, Gates of the Arctic and Katmai National Parks.

Inclusion of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which is adjacent to the Ivvavik/Vuntut/Herschel Island Park complex in the Yukon, on the Tentative List of the USA is of particular interest in light of the current controversy regarding the prospects for petroleum exploration in the area and in light of the precedent set using the Convention in the case of the proposed mine in the Tatshenshini. Article 6 would again be raised, this time with the threat coming from the United States side.

Should the proposal to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil and gas exploration be approved, and should these activities be considered potentially detrimental to the migratory caribou and other natural values in the adjacent Ivvavik/Vuntut/Herschel Island Park complex in the Yukon, the USA would be in potential violation of Article 6 of the Convention. For the country that initiated the Convention and was the first to sign it, such a charge would be discouraging to the entire global heritage community.

I therefore suggest that if approval is given for development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Parks Canada (as the lead agency for the Convention in Canada) should act to immediately submit a “mixed” natural and cultural nomination of the Ivvavik/Vuntut/Herschel Island Park complex to both the World Heritage List and to the List of World Heritage in Danger. Such emergency nominations are allowed (with conditions) under section III.H of the “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention” (Feb., 2005). Should either of the Advisory Bodies to the Convention, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), conclude that the nomination would “... unquestionably meet the criteria for inscription...and face serious and specific dangers from natural events or human activities,” the World Heritage Committee could include the nomination for consideration at its next session in July of 2008.

IUCN should also make contact with the International Council on Mining and Metals noting their agreed policy on mining in protected areas, as the two main leaseholders in the area would include Chevron-Texaco and British Petroleum.

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