

# Chinchaga

# Wilderness



**The last hope for the creation  
of a large protected area  
in the foothills of Alberta**

A publication of Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society - Edmonton Chapter and the Federation of Alberta Naturalists. August 2003



CANADIAN  
PARKS AND  
WILDERNESS  
SOCIETY  
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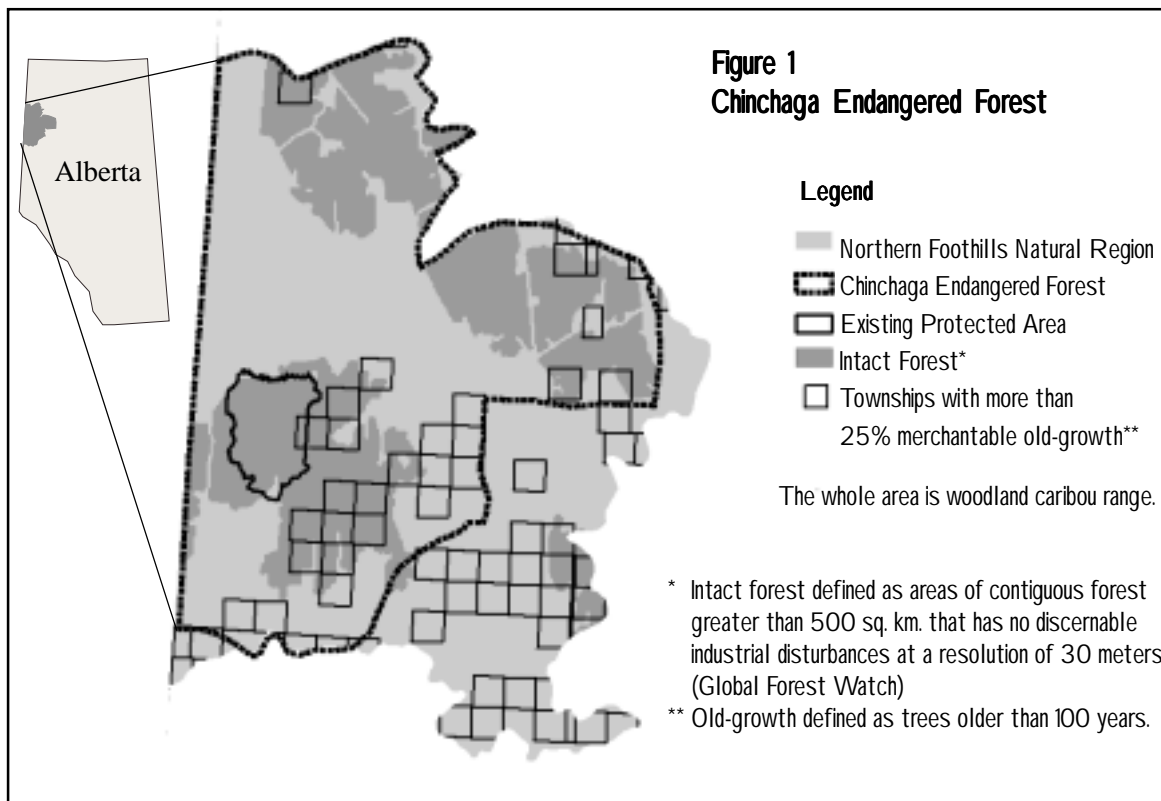
Cover photo credits (clockwise from upper left): S. Gunsch, M. Degner, H. Walsh, H. Walsh

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## THE CHINCHAGA – AN ENDANGERED FOREST

The Chinchaga area contains a wonderful diversity of ecosystems including old-growth forests, marshes, lakes and peatlands. Woodland caribou, grizzly bear and wolverine still roam widely in the Chinchaga area, and many birds depend on the Chinchaga area to nest and raise their young. An Alberta government report describes the Chinchaga area as the best opportunity to set aside an area capable of maintaining the ecological diversity of the Foothills Region.

**A moratorium on new industrial activity within the Chinchaga Endangered Forest (see Figure 1) is required until a legislated protected area is established through a meaningful land-use planning process. Designation of the protected area must be based on ecological principles to ensure adequate size and regional representation. The protected area must not interfere with the traditional rights of First Nations.**



\* Alberta Environmental Protection. 1998. *The Boreal Forest Natural Region of Alberta*. Natural Resources Service, Natural Heritage Planning and Evaluation Branch, Edmonton AB.

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## THE ENDANGERED FOREST CAMPAIGN

Concern about the loss of natural forests throughout the world has led to the development of an international forum involving environmental groups and leaders in the wood products industry. In the last three years over 400 companies, including Home Depot, Lowe's, IKEA, and Staples have publicly announced their commitment protect the world's intact, old-growth and/or Endangered Forests by not sourcing wood from those areas.

Endangered Forests can be identified on the basis of four different criteria:

1. **Naturally rare forests-** forests that are rare due to natural conditions.
2. **Anthropogenically rare forests-** remaining areas in forests that have been more than 70% converted.
3. **Intact forests-** large blocks of natural forest in regions that do not have adequate protected areas.
4. **Other ecologically important forests-** these are the 'best of the rest'- the remaining ecologically important patches left in otherwise degraded and converted forest areas that are not anthropogenically rare at the ecoregional level.

The Chinchaga Wilderness is considered an Endangered Forest for the following reasons:

1. It contains critical forest fragments of remaining old-growth and undisturbed forest in an ecoregion in which less than 2% of the total area is protected and less than 30% remains functionally intact.
2. It contains habitat for focal conservation species: grizzly bear, woodland caribou, wolverine and migratory birds, all of which are declining in Alberta as a result of industrial activities in the forest.

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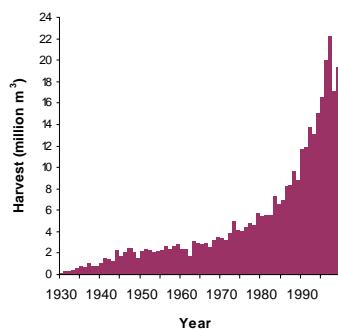
\* For more information see—[http://www.forestethics.org/pdf/EF\\_Definitions\\_Wye\\_River.pdf](http://www.forestethics.org/pdf/EF_Definitions_Wye_River.pdf).

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## THREATS TO THE CHINCHAGA

### FOREST INDUSTRY

**Figure 2**  
Volume of forest harvested in  
Alberta, 1930-1999



*Source:* Stelfox and Wynes, 1999

Within a lifetime almost all of Alberta's northern forest is to be logged. Logging removes old-growth habitat, fragments the forest, and removes organic material and nutrients. Site preparation that often follows logging destroys soil structure, and that, plus use of herbicides, alters the natural succession of the forest over time moving the natural forest more towards a plantation. The roads necessary for logging are also detrimental to wildlife.

The Chinchaga Wilderness is largely within a region that has no long-term forestry tenure allocations. A few forest companies do have tenure within part of the area, including: Daishowa-Marubeni International (DMI), Manning Diversified Forest Products (MDFP), Tolko and Canadian Forest Products (Canfor).

#### TEXT BOX 1

##### UNFULFILLED FOREST INDUSTRY COMMITMENTS TO PROTECTED AREAS

**The Alberta Forest Products Association (66 member companies) signed on to the Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy and have endorsed the following:**

- The protection of a network of natural landscape areas that represent the environmental diversity of Alberta's six natural regions.
- The key decisions (on protection) must be driven by science, not by politics or self-interests.
- Sustainable development of the forest resource for the benefit of all Albertans.

**Canadian Forest Products (Canfor) - from Canfor's Forestry Principles, 1999**

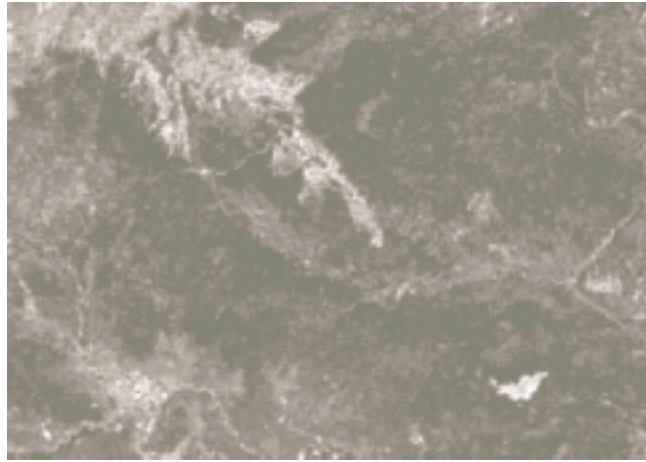
- Canfor will use forest ecosystem management that encompasses entire forest landscapes and that forecasts the future condition of forests for 100 years or more.
- Forests in a natural state are becoming increasingly rare throughout the world. We support the creation of conservation areas which are representative of natural forests.

**Daishowa-Marubeni International Ltd. Peace River Pulp Division (DMI) Detailed Forest Management Plan 1999-2009 states:**

- DMI has committed to an ecological management approach
- Protected areas are a required element of ecological forest management. They serve as benchmarks for future comparison to a managed landscape.

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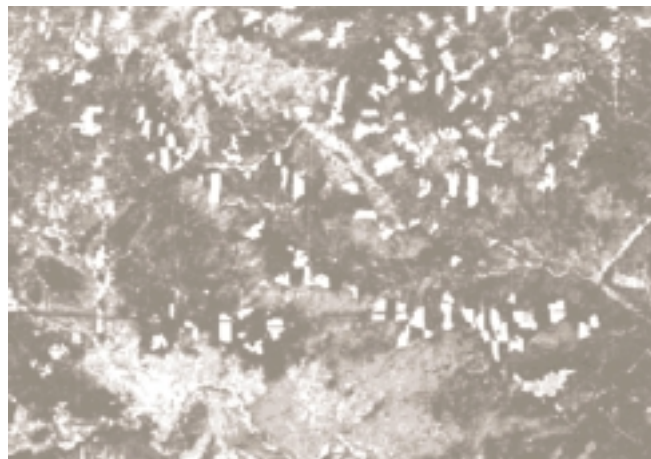
Both DMI and Canfor have indicated a commitment to ecological management of the forests they log and support for protected areas. **In spite of this neither Canfor nor DMI supported a large representative protected area in the Chinchaga during the Government's process for selecting protected areas (Special Places 2000).** Furthermore, DMI has made no apparent effort to avoid logging in the larger area proposed for protection by their own Ecological Public Advisory Committee and Alberta conservation groups, and they still continue to plan logging within that area.



Global Forest Watch

**Figures 3 and 4**

**Part of the Chinchaga forest area in 1990 (above) and the same area in 2000 (below)  
The white shapes are clear-cuts in an area logged by Daishowa and Manning Diversified.**



Global Forest Watch

## PETROLEUM INDUSTRY

Petroleum companies continue development in the Chinchaga Wilderness. In January 1999 petroleum companies created twenty-two new wellsites in areas containing important habitat for woodland caribou in the Chinchaga. Studies of the effects of linear disturbance on caribou in Alberta indicate the serious effects this type of development can have on caribou, supporting the need for protected areas to maintain caribou populations.

The oil and gas sector, through its various activities, has left a significant impact on the boreal forest of northwestern Alberta in the form of roads, wellsites, pipelines, and seismic lines. This impact will intensify as they continue to extract petroleum products and increase exploration activity for oil sands deposits. Activity in northwestern Alberta by the energy sector is predicted to last a minimum of 40-70 years for conventional oil and gas deposits, and much longer for oil sands.

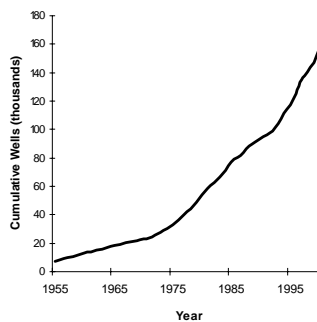
Causes of forest fragmentation by the energy sector are: seismic lines, low-grade roads, well sites, pipelines, access roads, and processing plants. The majority of new wellsites, pipelines, and powerlines occur on pristine forest.

### TEXT BOX 2

#### Petroleum Industry Commitments to Protected Areas

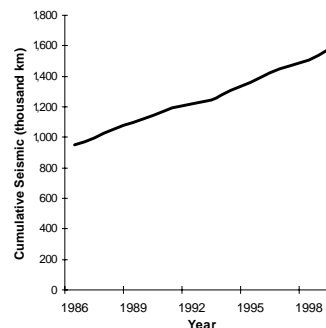
*The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers* (CAPP) signed on to the Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy. In 1998 CAPP and conservation groups recommended a suite of tools to be used to facilitate the removal of existing activities or tenures from areas designated for protection.

**Figure 5**  
Cumulative number of oil and gas wells completed in: 1955-2000



Source: CAPP, 2001

**Figure 6**  
Cumulative length of seismic lines approved in the Green Zone: 1986-1999.



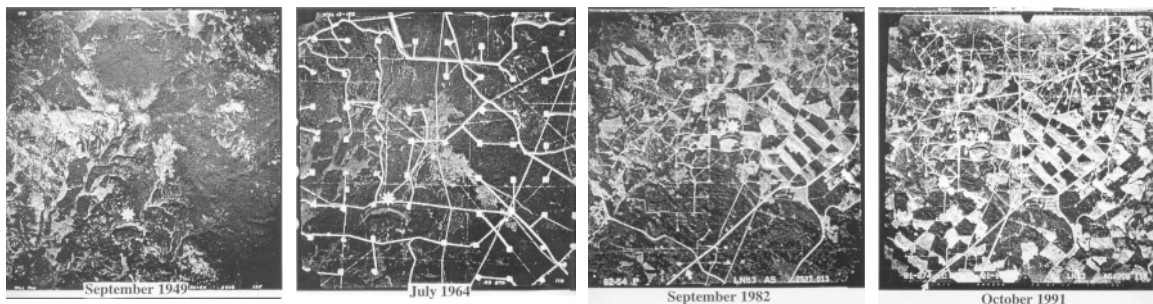
Source: Alberta Sustainable Resource Development records

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## CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

Because of the lack of integrated planning, the disturbances caused by the petroleum and forestry sectors add to each other, leading to a rapid degradation of the forest. Forestry and oil and gas exploration and development displaces wildlife and destroys habitat. It disrupts predator-prey relationships and often allows invasion of habitat by non-native species. It also increases road kill, hunting and poaching, noise and other human disturbance stressful to wildlife.

**There are no government regulations to limit the amount of cutting for seismic lines, wellsites, roads and pipelines in the forest. Although forestry logging rates are limited by government regulation, the permitted allowable cut is based only on sustaining the fibre supply of the forest, and not its ecological integrity. The combined effects of industrial activity and fire results in a cumulative rate of disturbance that is causing the integrity and wilderness values of the forest to decline. The forest is getting smaller, younger, and more fragmented, natural patterns and processes are being altered, and there is a marked increase in human access (with its secondary problems). Woodland caribou, grizzly bear, wolverine and other old-growth and wilderness dependent species (e.g., warblers) are in decline as a result.**



Time-lapse sequence of four aerial photographs (1949, 1964, 1982, 1991) documenting the transformation of an area in the Swan Hills, in the Foothills of Alberta by the cumulative effects of the petroleum and forest industries. (Air Photo Services, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development)



## UNFULFILLED GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS

### **Special Places 2000**

On March 11, 1992, His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh in his capacity as the International President of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), received a commitment from our provincial government (The Honorable Ralph Klein, then Minister of Environmental Protection) to prepare a "made in Alberta" strategy for completing our component of Canada's Endangered Spaces program. This program recommended the protection of at least 12% of each of Canada's natural regions and subregions.

### **The National Forest Strategy** states:

We will enhance our capacity to ensure that our forest management activities maintain the biological diversity of our forests by: working toward completing, a network of protected areas representative of Canada's forest ecosystem classification categories and managing for the continuation of old-growth forest landscapes as natural heritage.

### **The Canadian Biodiversity Strategy** states:

The establishment and management of protected areas is the second element of the ecological management approach. Protected areas are not by themselves the solution to protecting Canada's biodiversity. They must be complemented by sound stewardship across the entire landscape.

### **The Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy** states:

"Representative Protected Areas," containing ecosystems typical of the natural regions and sub-regions of Alberta. They should be selected on the basis of scientific criteria to provide:

- baseline or benchmark natural history data for the region or sub-region;
- opportunities to observe natural processes;
- preservation of biodiversity.

### **The Alberta Forest Legacy** states:

"Reference areas will be established to allow interpretation of research and monitoring of results. The reference areas will be of a size and longevity appropriate to the experiment, as well as benchmark information about unrelated or "background" ecosystem changes that occur."

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## WILDLIFE IN THE CHINCHAGA

### WOODLAND CARIBOU

The Alberta Wildlife Act designates woodland caribou as a threatened species due to the decline in their distribution and numbers as a result of loss and fragmentation of their natural habitat.

Caribou require large areas of treed and open peatlands, as well as mature forests of spruce and pine. They are widely dispersed and in low densities over their range; a strategy that minimizes predation by wolves. Caribou are slow to reproduce and cannot tolerate the disturbance associated with industrial development. The increased access resulting from industrial development causes increased mortality from vehicle collisions, hunting, predation, and general disturbance.



W. Sawchuk

When clear-cut logging occurs in or near caribou range there is an influx of moose and deer, which prefer the vegetation that comes in after logging. This increase in prey species attracts wolves to the area and results in increased predation on caribou. The creation of roads and seismic lines further increases the ability of wolves to utilize caribou as prey.

A herd of about 200 caribou (Pedigree herd) exists in the Chinchaga area. Their habitat is not adequately protected, as the current park includes little of their range.

Alberta's Woodland Caribou Conservation Strategy recognizes the value of protected areas as a strategy for maintaining woodland caribou populations. A much larger protected area is needed to include more of the range of the Chinchaga caribou herd.

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## GRIZZLY BEAR

In February 2002, Alberta's Endangered Species Coordinating Committee recommended that grizzly bear status be increased from "May be at Risk" to "Threatened". This came shortly after the Fish and Wildlife Division released a new status report on the Grizzly Bear (January 2002). The report states that "despite recent successes in population management and the reduction of grizzly bear mortality in Alberta, longer-term threats to this inherently sensitive species remain. The most serious threat to Alberta grizzly bear populations is human-caused mortality resulting from uncontrolled human access and activity."

In the Foothills of Alberta, grizzly bear densities are generally low because of low food supply. This low population density, means large areas are necessary to maintain grizzly bear populations. Large areas are also necessary to meet the grizzly bear's need for solitude. Female grizzly bears with cubs often inhabit remote areas away from the presence of other bears in order to maximize safety of cubs and to facilitate undisturbed interactions of mothers and cubs.



M. Degner

The Fish and Wildlife Division Status report indicates that the Chinchaga area (Bear Management Area 2A) has experienced a 68% loss in the population. Although not directly addressing the population decline in this area the report does state that, "Grizzly bears are particularly prone to cumulative land use effects because of their inability to adapt to human disturbance." It further states that, "The greatest threat to grizzly bear population is loss of wilderness habitats through resource extraction and recreational development."

A larger protected area in the Chinchaga, free of industrial disturbance, would have very positive effects on the population of grizzly bears in northwestern Alberta.

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## WOLVERINE

The wolverine is considered at risk of extinction in Alberta. Wolverines were once found across Alberta, but now are restricted to the northern half of the province and along the mountains and foothills. Trapping data suggests that the highest populations are found in the western parts of the province, and that populations have declined in most regions of Alberta in the past two decades.



M. Degner

Wolverine populations decline as a result of human activities that fragment and eliminate habitat. These include human settlement, extensive logging, oil and gas development, recreational developments and increased trapping and hunting resulting from increased access. A government report concludes that with an ever-expanding human population, there may be a time when most wolverine populations will be restricted to large protected areas.

## BIRDS

North America's northern forest (the boreal) is critical to the continent's bird life. A third of all North American land-living birds are born in the boreal forest. As many as five billion land-living birds, and 40% of North America's nesting waterfowl migrate out of the boreal forest each autumn. They spend the winters in southern Canada, the United States, and Central and South America and return to the boreal forest each spring to take advantage of the abundant food available in the summer and to raise their young. The annual migration of birds between the tropical Americas and the north has been termed 'the world's largest vertebrate migration system'. While there is much public concern about the degradation of the tropical forests, the boreal forest is equally critical to their survival.

Numerous songbirds in Alberta forests are in decline as a result of the loss of old-growth habitat and forest fragmentation caused by industrial use. Already the western tanager, the bay-breasted,

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blackburnian, black-throated green, Cape May and Canada warblers are listed as species of concern in Alberta. Alberta scientists are finding some species of birds significantly less abundant in forested areas with industrial disturbance, and this is just after only a portion of the commercial forest is logged—the effects will be even more serious when the remaining commercial forest is removed in the planned future cuts.

Thousands of boreal lakes and wetlands provide food and habitat for the continent's waterbirds including the trumpeter swan. Trumpeter swans, the world's largest swan, are listed as vulnerable in Alberta. They require permanent water bodies with stable levels where they use the shallow areas with an abundant supply of aquatic plants, insects and snails for nest sites and food. The birds, who are long-lived, are very territorial and usually only one pair will take up residence on a lake to which they typically return year after year.



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Federation of AB Naturalists

Trumpeter swans are sensitive to human disturbance. This may result in refusal to nest, abandonment of an existing nest and the possible loss of cygnets, and even the permanent abandonment of nesting lakes. The Important Bird Area Conservation Plan for trumpeter swans in the Grande Prairie area states that, "Disturbance and habitat degradation are major threats to swans...pairs may habituate to small increases in shoreline disturbance, lakes that have been abandoned will not likely be recolonized unless the source of disturbance is removed." The Chinchaga area has many lakes used by trumpeter swans, and it is reported that flocks continue to expand into this area.

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## PROTECTION OF THE CHINCHAGA

Alberta conservation groups have long sought the protection of the Chinchaga Wilderness (Text Box 4). The existing park in the region (Fig. 1) is small and primarily comprised of peatlands. It lacks representation of Endangered Forest features of the area and does not represent all the ecosystems of the northern Foothills Natural Region. It is too small to maintain natural processes or meet the habitat requirements of wide-ranging species such as grizzly bear and the endangered woodland caribou. It is lacking in old-growth forest and intact areas essential for the protection of species and wilderness. We propose that additional protection be established in the region, sufficient to achieve all of these objectives.

Protection of the Chinchaga Wilderness would have the following benefits:

- contribute to the maintenance of biodiversity of the Foothills Natural Region of Alberta, including species of particular concern such as woodland caribou and grizzly bear;
- meet public demand for the protection of wilderness, for current and future generations;<sup>7</sup>
- provide an ecological benchmark for Alberta's northern Foothills Natural Region, as required for the implementation of ecological forest management;
- enable the highest standards of forest product certification (Forest Stewardship Council);
- assist market access for the local forest industry in the face of growing public demand for sustainable forest management;
- contribute to the economic diversification of northwest Alberta through new opportunities for tourism; and
- provide an opportunity for the Alberta government and forest industry to honour their commitments to the National Forest Strategy and the Canadian Biodiversity Strategy and others (Text Box 3).

**The protection of the Chinchaga Wilderness needs to be accomplished through a science-based land-use planning process that identifies an appropriate protected area as well as surrounding special management zones.** This planning process must involve conservation organizations, First Nations, local communities, industry, trappers, guides and outfitters, tourism operators, recreationists, scientists and government. It must recognize and maintain the globally significant wilderness and wildlife habitat of the area. **For now, a moratorium on new industrial development must be placed on the area to maintain its values while protected area boundaries are being discussed.** This means that existing petroleum facilities may continue to operate, but no new activity such as logging, or development of roads, well sites, and seismic lines is permitted.

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<sup>7</sup> A 2001 MacAllister opinion poll for the Canadian Boreal Trust found that almost 50% of prairie province residents strongly preferred protection, and less than 5% strongly preferred development of the boreal forest.

## History of the Chinchaga Endangered Forest

**Early 1990's**- Without public consultation the government promised the Chinchaga area forest to Grande Alberta Paper to supply their proposed pulp and paper mill to be built in Grande Prairie.

**1995**- The Chinchaga area was nominated for protection under the Special Places 2000 program by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, and others.

**1998**- Manning Diversified Forest Products (MDFP) was given additional quota in the Chinchaga area in spite of ongoing Special Places considerations, making it even more difficult to establish a forested protected area.

**1998**- Candidate site boundaries for a protected area were determined (approximately 930 sq. km) by government committee and given to Special Places 2000 Local Committee for consideration.

**1999**- Daishowa (DMI)/Canfor Ecological Public Advisory Committee recommended protection of >5,000 sq. km site for wilderness and use as an ecological benchmark to enable ecological management, as proposed by DMI and Canfor.

**March 1999**- Local committee recommended 1800 sq. km site for protection.

**May 1999**- Under pressure, the local committee changed recommendation to 800 sq. km site, with a secondary area recommended for protection if conditions changed.

**December 1999**- Government established a 800 sq. km site.

**October 1999**- Alberta conservation groups asked MDFP and DMI to seek logging quota outside of a 6,500 sq. km recommended site— DMI refused, MDFP did not respond. Both of these companies continued logging one of the last areas of old-growth within the recommended site.

**2001**- Grande Alberta Paper Project failed to meet deadlines. Conservationists again requested a larger protected area— government refused.

**2002**- Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society- Edmonton Chapter proposed the establishment of a multi-stakeholder committee to develop a Land Use Plan for the area. Government and industry did not respond.

**2003**- Alberta conservation groups together with some international groups (ForestEthics, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Greenpeace) identified an Endangered Forest in the Chinchaga area and called for a moratorium on new industrial development until a legislated protected area is established.

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