



THREE NATIONS CELEBRATE TWINNING OF HAY-ZAMA LAKES WILDLAND PARK WITH CHINESE NATURE RESERVE

By Christyann Olson, AWA Executive Director

On Tuesday evening I pulled out the topographical map for Zama Lake and looked closely at the place where my adventure on Wednesday, May 28, 2008 would take me. One quick glance at the size of the blue patch in the middle of all the green tells you there is something special here. The mapped wetlands and marshes tell the story.

I've known about this area for a number of years, and AWA has been involved in the work being done to care for this international Ramsar site since 1994. But I had never been so far north. As we flew north along the Rockies, the mountains were snow-capped and the rivers full. The mighty Peace River was an easy landmark, as was the meandering, magnificent Chinchaga River. We were on our way to celebrate the dedication of Hay-Zama Wildland Provincial Park and the twinning of Hay-Zama with the Dalai Lake National Nature Reserve in Inner Mongolia, China.

Once on the ground at Rainbow Lake, we traveled to Chateh, where the school, decorated for the occasion, welcomed visitors to the celebration. People were excited, children were intrigued, and guests from many walks of life came to recognize the treasure of Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Park. A delegation of eight government and academic officials had come from the Republic of China to participate in the ceremonies and join the celebration.

James Ahnassay, Chief of the Dene Thá First Nation, welcomed everyone. From the time the Hay-Zama Committee was formed in 1994, the Dene Thá Council wanted to protect the lakes in perpetuity. "By twinning these lakes to a very similar complex in China," said the Chief, "we are making a statement to the world about maintaining wetlands throughout the world. This is our celebration; these lakes are an ecosystem of international significance." A Dene Thá elder spoke passionately in Dene and



As the celebration began, drumming prayers and powerful words spoken by a Dene Thá elder grounded those gathered for the event: dignitaries from First Nations, the People's Republic of China, and the Province of Alberta; school children and honoured guests; and the communities surrounding Hay-Zama Lakes Wildland Park. PHOTO: C. OLSON

gave the opening prayer. The drumming created a sense of connectedness and peaceful awareness.

Throughout the ceremony, the recognition of strong collaborative efforts and the unique partnership of industry, government, First Nations, and the environmental community was emphasized. Their ability to focus on common goals and work through differences to find cooperative, sustainable ways of developing the oil and gas reserves while protecting the lakes that support more than 200,000 birds annually was an important message.

Mr. Hu Qun of the People's Republic of China and Deputy Minister of Tourism, Parks, and Recreation Bill Werry signed the Twinning Agreement. Mr. Hu Qun spoke about the hope that this experience will become the model for collaboration around the world; that we will improve friendship among countries and further enhance our ability to work together to protect our lands. "There is significant meaning to signing the Twinning Agreement. We own this earth together and we share in the responsibility to protect this earth and protect this environment. Signing the MOU between Hay-Zama and Dalai Lake

establishes the platform for future work towards protection and collaboration for the betterment of humankind."

Frank Oberle, MLA Peace River, represented Minister Cindy Ady and brought greetings from the Province to those celebrating the official designation of the park. He took time to recognize Cliff Wallis and Alberta Wilderness Association for their role in the work of the Hay-Zama Committee, and especially Cliff for his spearheading of the twinning project. MLA Oberle gave an important message to the children and the Dene community. "What your community has achieved is important not just in your region or province or country, but around the world. You should be very proud today and take this as proof you can change the world if you want to."

The ceremony closed with the drumming of the Dene Thá leading the community in a traditional Tea Dance with everyone joining in the circle of friendship, a feast of traditional Dene foods, and tours of the wetlands. Back home on the banks of the Bow with the evening sun setting on the Rockies, I reflected on the work we do at AWA and how little we realize the vast importance of our role. 🌱