

Beaver Hills Region: A New UNESCO Biosphere Reserve



By Barb Collier

On March 19, 2016, Beaver Hills joined 16 other Canadian Biosphere Reserves internationally recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve was added to the list of some 669 reserves in 120 countries worldwide. This process began in the early years of this century when a group of citizens concerned about the increased growth and economic activity in the Beaver Hills landscape east of Edmonton initiated discussions with three levels of government, the science and academic community, residents, industry, and non-governmental organizations.

Beaver Hills is a distinct geomorphological area covering 1,572 square kilometres

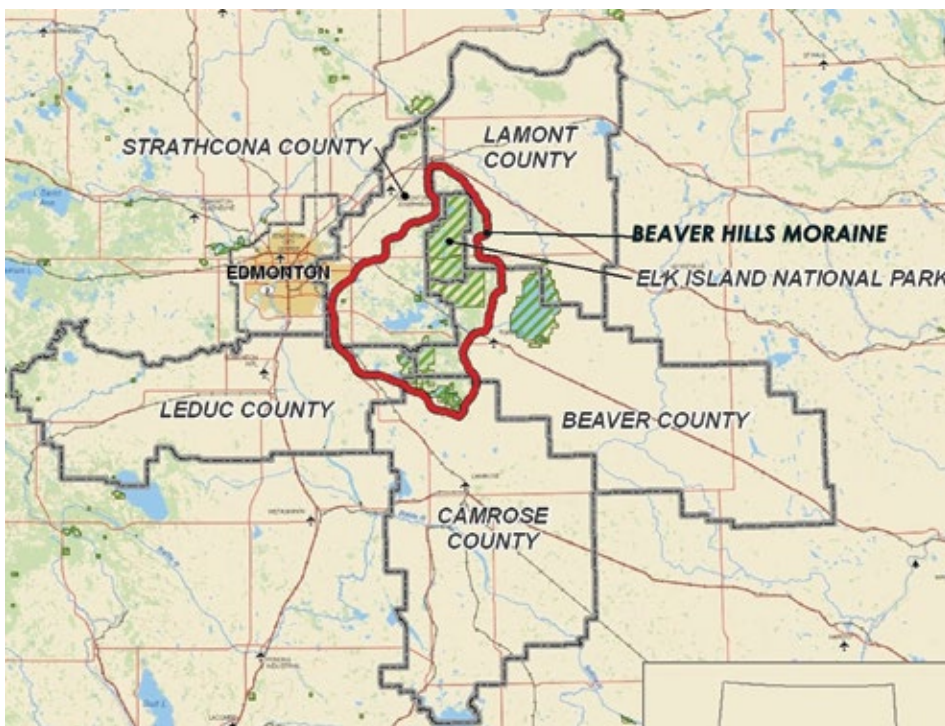
centred roughly 50 kilometres east of Edmonton. It contains dry mixed wood boreal forest, aspen parkland with moraine features such as hummocky knob and kettle upland forests mixed in with low lying wetlands and lakes. This landscape supports both boreal forest species and parkland species including 48 mammals, 152 bird species, and 8 amphibian/reptile species. Approximately 40 percent of Beaver Hills remains a natural habitat and currently 25 percent of it is protected. It is home to a University of Alberta research station where researchers have conducted dozens of studies over the last 30 years ranging from wildlife and outdoor recreation to wetlands and land management.

Alberta Wilderness Association partici-

pated in the complicated nomination process through an invitation to a workshop in 2010 where we discussed tourism activities and opportunities including agricultural, heritage and nature-based tourism while fitting all these activities into an overall ecological framework.

A biosphere reserve is described as an area of terrestrial and/or coastal ecosystems promoting solutions to reconcile the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use. It is the only global designation recognizing excellence in sustainable development at a regional scale. Biosphere reserves support three interconnected functions: Conservation – conserving ecosystems, landscapes, species and cultural heritage; Development – fostering social, cultural and ecologically sustainable economic and human development; Capacity Building – supporting research, monitoring, education, and information exchange.

These three functions are fulfilled by preserving the region through core protected areas, buffer zones, and transition areas. The core areas of Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve consist of Elk Island National Park and Miquelon Lake Provincial Park; the buffer zones include the Ministik Lake Game Bird Sanctuary, the Cooking Lake/Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area, the Strathcona Wilderness Centre in Strathcona county, the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village and six Natural Areas; the transition area – the lived in and working landscape – accounts for 75 percent of the Biosphere area. The designation does not include any legal protection for the land nor does it restrict local government land-use decisions.



The Beaver Hills. MAP COURTESY OF BEAVER HILLS INITIATIVE

The Beaver Hills Initiative (BHI) process began in early 2000 in reaction to proposed oil and gas development close to Elk Island National Park. Parks staff initiated discussions with the five municipalities (Strathcona, Beaver, Leduc, Camrose, and Lamont Counties) surrounding the Park plus First Nations, landowners, government departments, and non-governmental organizations with the intent to develop a partnership to use proactive land-use planning within the Beaver Hills area. The first meeting of the BHI coordinating committee was held in 2002. Their vision statement recognizes the natural beauty and quality of life of the region and supports cooperative efforts to sustain the quality of water, land, air, natural resources, and community development through their mission statement. That statement calls for the parties to work together for a sustainable region through shared initiative and coordinated action. Now, some 30 volunteer partner organizations are part of the Beaver Hills Initiative.

Biosphere Reserves are fundamentally places of research and monitoring. Their priority is nature, not immediate commercial business. When Alberta Wilderness Association entered the process we were impressed with the belief in the 'priority being nature not immediate commercial business.' We supported the idea of private and public land management, including tourism, which fit into an overall ecological framework with impacts of activities being researched and monitored.

The Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve is a discovery ground which will yield insights into global problems. It is a prime place to observe and record long-term environmental and ecological change including the effect of regional and global changes due to natural causes and human activities. One of the responsibilities of a Biosphere Reserve is that, when tourists come to visit, they go away with a message of global change and greater environmental and ecological concern. It remains to be seen whether this will translate into another stimulus for humans to act in ecologically appropriate

ways in the future.

Alberta Wilderness Association took part in this process with the hope that the above message would become the mantra of Beaver Hills. Many individuals, organizations, governments and businesses have worked countless hours to make the Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve become a reality. The hard work will continue. As Guy Swinerton, professor emeritus in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta and Chair of

Cow moose and her calf in Elk Island National Park, a key protected area within the Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve.



Photo courtesy of Friends of Elk Island Society



Miquelon Lake Provincial Park, the scene for this delightful fall walk, fall within the boundaries of the Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve. PHOTO COURTESY OF ALBERTA ENVIRONMENT AND PARKS

the Beaver Hills Initiative Protective Areas Working Group, states: "It's this total landscape approach that demonstrates how we have to work collectively to find balance between conservation and sustainable development." ▲

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