

CFB Suffield Conservation and Reconciliation Opportunity

By Ruiping Luo

Two very important issues facing Canada today are biodiversity loss and reconciliation. An action toward resolving both may lie with Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Suffield.

In November, news reports circulated of the British Army downgrading their presence at Suffield, with Medicine Hat's CHAT news reporting a potential 50 percent reduction in troops, as estimated by the base commander. The partial withdrawal of British troops presents the opportunity to use these lands for a conservation and reconciliation effort, two topics specifically mentioned in the Government of Canada's 2021 federal budget. This is an opportunity of global importance that we have never before seen in Canada's prairies.

CFB Suffield contains one of the largest tracts of uncultivated grassland remaining in Canada. Grasslands provide habitat for the highest concentration of Canada's species at risk, and are acknowledged by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) as the most threatened ecoregion worldwide. Only 25 percent of Canada's native grasslands remain, with a mere 1 percent of this land protected. The value of the ecosystem at Suffield has long been recognized, and a National Wildlife Area (NWA) has already been established on the eastern portion of the base. Canada has committed to protecting 30 percent of land and water by 2030 (commonly known as the 30 by 30 initiative). The expansion of the NWA within CFB Suffield would contribute to this goal by sheltering endangered grasslands.

In addition, the lands at Suffield hold tremendous cultural value for Indigenous Peoples. They have lived on grasslands for thousands of years, yet there are no large

landscapes of Indigenous-managed lands in the Canadian prairies. The importance of the Suffield region to First Nations is evident in the tipi rings, medicine wheels, and other examples of Niitsitapi culture found on the base. Lands managed by Indigenous Peoples would not only provide an opportunity for Indigenous communities to reconnect to the land, a connection essential to their Indigenous culture, but they could play an important role in the healing of these lands.

Lands managed by Indigenous Peoples are often healthier and support greater biodiversity. In prioritizing conservation, there may be further economic opportunities for both the Niitsitapi and the nearby city of Medicine Hat in restoring damaged areas at Suffield, and in occasions for tourism. Establishing something like an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) or other form of co-management in Suffield could also move Canada further towards reconciliation, and would show Canada's commitment to both reconciliation and conservation.

Canada's 2021 Speech from the Throne called for "Action on reconciliation" and

"Action on climate change." Expanding the NWA and establishing an IPCA at CFB Suffield contributes to both. The 2700-km² base is large enough to consider bison reintroduction, a species predominant in the cultures of plains Indigenous Peoples and critical for maintaining Great Plains biodiversity. As CFB Suffield is on federal land, a clear opportunity is presented to fulfil the promises our federal government made towards reconciliation and conservation.

AWA has written to Minister of Defence Anand and Minister of Environment and Climate Change Guilbeault. We see a visionary opportunity at Suffield Military Reserve near Medicine Hat to fulfil the promises our federal government made towards reconciliation and conservation. Canada's support is needed as we move towards addressing climate change and advancing reconciliation to heal both land and plains Indigenous cultures. 🌱

Suffield National Wildlife Area includes three nationally significant areas and these extensive sand dunes and hills provide habitat for endangered species like Ord's kangaroo rat. Photo ©C.Olson

