

Provincial Election 2023: Environmental Platforms We'd Like to See



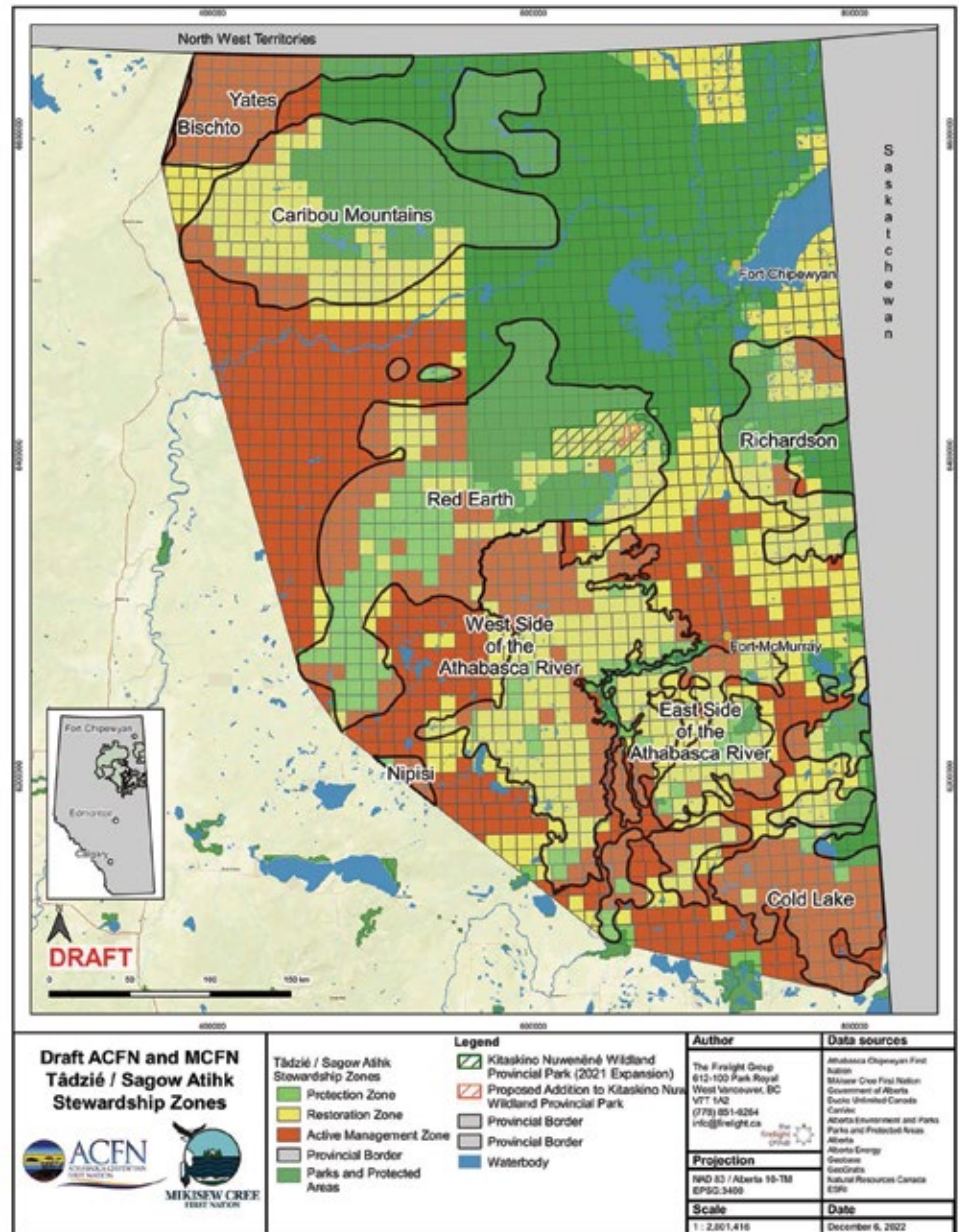
By Carolyn Campbell

Albertans are set to elect their next government this spring. The May 29 election date could mark an important crossroads for our priceless waters and lands, here are key measures Alberta Wilderness Association is seeking in political parties' election platforms. Because of the breadth of the first two items, I've dug further into why and how to navigate there.

Please talk up 'conservation' with your family and friends, tell parties and your local candidates to be aware and ambitious on these issues, and get out and vote!

Complete enforceable 'sub-regional' land-use plans this term, to effectively manage and reduce cumulative human land-use impacts for woodland caribou ranges, for the Eastern Slopes, and for priority parklands and grasslands areas

What: Sub-regional plans are key missing pieces in Alberta's land management. They're more targeted than 'Regional Plans' that Alberta completed for the Lower Athabasca (LARP) in 2012, and the South Saskatchewan (SSRP) in 2014. Sub-regional plans specify how and where human-caused land disturbances — such as recreation trails, roads, cutblocks, and industrial infrastructure — will be managed, limited, and restored over specified time periods to achieve key goals.



'Protection', 'Restoration' and 'Active Management' draft land-use zones in the landmark Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and Mikisew Cree First Nation Tâdzîé-Sagow Atihk (boreal caribou) Stewardship Plan, Dec. 2022. The Plan is a living document intended to be used in processes to advance protection of northeast Alberta boreal caribou. Photo © Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and Mikisew Cree First Nation.

Why: To conserve and restore ecosystems and habitat that are being fragmented or destroyed by our unmanaged cumulative land-use impacts to date. Alberta's social and economic well-being depends upon relatively intact landscapes providing life-giving clean air, waters, and soils. We also need strong sub-regional land-use plans as part of our commitment to reconciliation, to honour our Treaty commitments and uphold the constitutionally protected rights of Indigenous peoples on whose traditional territories we live and work. Further evidence that Alberta needs to get serious about completing effective sub-regional land-use plans is provided by a series of Alberta-based Indigenous lawsuits, plus BC's comprehensive January 2023 land-use agreements with Treaty 8 First Nations, arising from a 2022 BC Supreme Court ruling.

How: By working in partnership with Indigenous rights holders, who are provided with timely, sufficient capacity. Alberta needs to integrate (or braid) Indigenous ways of knowing, vision, knowledge and values with evidence-based western science, to achieve outcomes that meet both ecosystem needs and Indigenous Rights outcomes. Integrate local community and other stakeholders' knowledge to optimize those measures for environmentally sustainable, thriving communities.

Alberta's first two sub-regional plans, for Cold Lake and Bistcho Lake, were completed in April 2022. They indicate a positive shift by Alberta to set up cross-ministry systems to track, coordinate and limit total land-use surface disturbances over significant areas. However, they lack strong actions within the first decade of the plans and defer too many decisive steps for later decades. They also didn't commit to new protected areas or specific collaborative processes with Indigenous rights holders to support their land-use goals.

Instead, a guiding example should be Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation

and Mikisew Cree First Nation's landmark Tādzié-Sagow Atihk (boreal caribou) Stewardship Plan, released December 2022. This inspiring plan maps specific zones for 'Protection', 'Restoration' and 'Active Management' across four northeast Alberta caribou ranges and connected land corridors. These Treaty 8 signatory Nations seek a minimum of one-third of each caribou range to receive full protected status within 20 years, with hard limits upon land disturbance applied in the other two zones, and timely habitat restoration actions. Together these actions would achieve minimum habitat requirements for caribou recovery in 40 years, plus multiple other environmental benefits from more intact, resilient boreal forests and wetlands. There are many striking similarities between this plan and the one that BC has recently agreed to with Treaty 8 Nations. Let's see Alberta political parties commit this election to complete strong sub-regional land-use plans.

Eastern Slopes: OHVs and coal

To conserve our Eastern Slopes headwaters lands and ecosystems, sub-regional plans should constrain off-highway vehicle (OHV) use in certain areas that are incompatible with these high-impact activities. For Castle Provincial Park and Castle Wildland Provincial Park, OHV use still needs to be phased out as per the *2018 Castle Management Plan*. Crucial sub-regional planning on industrial and recreation footprint was suspended in the Livingstone and Porcupine Hills, which continue to experience significant damage to vegetation and waters. (See below for our Bighorn protection requests).

Political parties should commit to a legislated ban against future coal mining and exploration in the Eastern Slopes, because of the unacceptable impacts upon water quality and quantity, and species at risk such as westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, Athabasca rainbow trout, grizzly bear,

and woodland caribou.

Expand protected areas to 25 percent of Alberta this term, and 30 percent by 2030, including meaningful Indigenous co-development and co-management.

Why: Expanding protected areas is a key action for Alberta: to do our part to halt the human-caused crisis of animal and plant extinction, and to shift land use to uphold the constitutionally protected rights of Indigenous peoples. Currently just under 16 percent of Alberta's lands and waters are designated as permanent protected areas. Foothills, Grasslands and Parklands natural regions are drastically under-represented and need special focus. The Kunming-Montreal Framework targets were approved in December 2022 by roughly 190 countries, including Canada. These include placing at least 30 percent of the world's lands and waters under effective conservation and protection by 2030.

How: Establish interim protection for the most threatened areas, and ensure protected areas are prominent elements of sub-regional land-use planning, described above. New and existing protected areas need to elevate Indigenous leadership, culture, languages, rights, and responsibilities.

Examples in particular regions:

Grasslands — Protect the identified SSRP 'priority sub-regional planning areas' in the Milk River valley and southeast Alberta Wild Horse Plains. Both are areas of high biodiversity and intact native grassland vegetation critical to many species at risk. Our iconic greater sage-grouse need larger habitat protection areas: their numbers remain critically low, and threats continue from energy and mineral activity. Establishing Heritage Rangeland protected areas on public lands grazing leases would support responsible grazing; these

would integrate well with enhanced incentives to landowners to voluntarily protect private lands. Low-hanging fruit includes the SSRP's proposed expansions of both Twin River and One-Four Heritage Rangeland Natural Areas, re-classifying them clearly as *Heritage Rangeland*.

Eastern Slopes — Protect the Bighorn backcountry's vital North Saskatchewan River headwaters. *Wildland Park* designation, promised by Alberta in 1986, remains suitable for Bighorn's five Public Land-Use Zones of *Prime Protection* and *Critical Wildlife Zones* under the *Eastern Slopes Policy*. AWA strongly believes that motorized recreation should be excluded from those sensitive, erosion-prone slopes, wetlands, and meadows. For the eastern Kiska-Willson zone and other heavily abused off-road areas in the west country, there should be more quality front-country managed campgrounds and low-impact walking-hiking trails, with limited motorized recreation on carefully designated trails that no longer undermine recovery of species at risk such as threatened bull trout and grizzly bears.

Upper Smoky-Sheep Creek — situated west-northwest of Grande Cache, next to the Willmore Wilderness, these watersheds are primarily *Prime Protection* and *Critical Wildlife Zones*. The area, also known as E10, has had no industrial forestry tenure, but is facing pressure to be allocated for clearcuts. That should not be allowed. These steep slopes have extensive mountain goat and bighorn sheep areas, core grizzly bear habitat, and partly overlap with threatened Redrock-Prairie Creek caribou range. Sheep Creek itself supports threatened bull trout and Arctic grayling, a species of special concern. This area should be protected for its exceptional biodiversity, to contribute to the exercise of Indigenous rights, and for compatible wilderness-based recreation.

Restore a cohesive Fish and Wildlife branch under one department.

Alberta's Fish and Wildlife staff and direction have recently been fragmented between three departments. This should be reversed. We need an integrated approach for wildlife inventories, science-based hunting and fishing allocations, conserving habitat, and taking timely action to recover species at risk. Fish and wildlife staffing capacity should also be increased to enable effective monitoring and enforcement.

Modernize Alberta's archaic Wildlife Act and Forests Act to manage for habitat, ecosystems and Indigenous rights.

Alberta's Wildlife Act remains focused on hunting-fishing allocations. It should be modernized to include clear direction, timelines, and regulatory teeth to manage habitat to conserve biodiversity and recover species at risk.

Alberta's Forests Act remains focused on managing forestry clearcut allocations under an outdated sustained timber yield approach. Weak ecosystem guidelines and unsustainable logging volumes are degrading forest wetlands, waters, soils, and species diversity. It's long past time for our *Forests Act* to focus on restoring and sustaining forest ecosystems and upholding Indigenous rights, within which sustainable economic and social pursuits could occur. Needed reforms include ensuring meaningful Indigenous decision-making, insisting upon much stronger evidence-based ecological stewardship, and strengthening transparency and public consultation about forest management and forestry tenure.

Rescind the Alberta Energy Regulator's approval of Suncor Fort Hills oilsands mine's high-risk plan

for the outstanding, irrecoverable McClelland Lake wetlands.

At the edge of Alberta's mineable oilsands, in a landscape of tailings ponds and bitumen pits, the deep peatlands and clean waters of the McClelland Lake wetlands provide a safe stopover and breeding area along the major migratory bird flyway of the Lower Athabasca River. Its spectacular 'patterned fen' wetland should be protected for future generations to marvel at. Instead, Suncor intends to insert a very large underground wall and water pipeline system into the middle of that groundwater-fed fen, for many decades, to mine its upper half. AWA believes Suncor has failed to meet its regulatory requirements to have a plan that ensures the natural water flows, water chemistry and water levels will remain in the unmined half of the wetlands. Regulatory approval for the plan should be withdrawn.

Reform Alberta's weak Mine Financial Security Program (MFSP), so oil sands and coal mine operators, not citizens, pay to reclaim these sites.

MFSP needs to require oil sands and coal mine operators to post full financial security with government for their actual disturbance footprint. The current MFSP requires only token payments until 15 years before a poorly defined 'end of mine life.' AWA believes Albertans will be stuck paying tens or hundreds of billions for clean-up. Shifting to full financial security will encourage operators to minimize disturbance and undertake timely progressive reclamation.

Thank you for seeking strong conservation measures in political parties' election platforms! 🍓