
Establishment Proposal

For the Proposed Big Island Provincial Park



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Alberta 



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Introduction

This document was developed to support the engagement process for the proposal to establish Big Island Provincial Park along the North Saskatchewan River Valley in the southwest corner of the City of Edmonton. The document provides an overview of the history and significance of Big Island: first, as an important place within the river valley for Indigenous peoples, and later as a resource and recreation hub for settlers at the turn of the 20th century. Today, Big Island is part of a provincially significant wildlife corridor and is a popular recreation spot for Albertans. The site has captured the hearts and imaginations of local communities who wish to conserve Big Island and the surrounding river valley as a legacy for future generations to enjoy.

In this document you will also find the proposed vision and management intent that describe how the proposed provincial park would be cooperatively managed by the Government of Alberta, Enoch Cree Nation and the City of Edmonton. The three governments are guided by a Terms of Reference that they co-developed to work collaboratively for the establishment of Big Island Provincial Park. If the park is established, the Terms of Reference would be updated to guide how the three governments would undertake long-term management and operation. A vision and planning principles were developed and adopted to create a park that is conservation-focused, supports Indigenous use, and provides nature-based recreation and tourism opportunities as well as interpretive programming that tells the stories and honours the rich history of Big Island and the North Saskatchewan River.

Project Location

Big Island is a Crown-owned parcel located within the Woodbend planning area in the North Saskatchewan River valley in southwest Edmonton (Figure 1). The majority of the site is low-lying and within the floodway, separated from the lands above by steep slopes and a seasonally flooded back channel along the south side. The Woodbend area stretches along both sides of the river and is made up of private, municipal and Crown land. While the entire Woodbend area is important for conservation, the focus of this establishment proposal is on the Crown-owned Big Island.

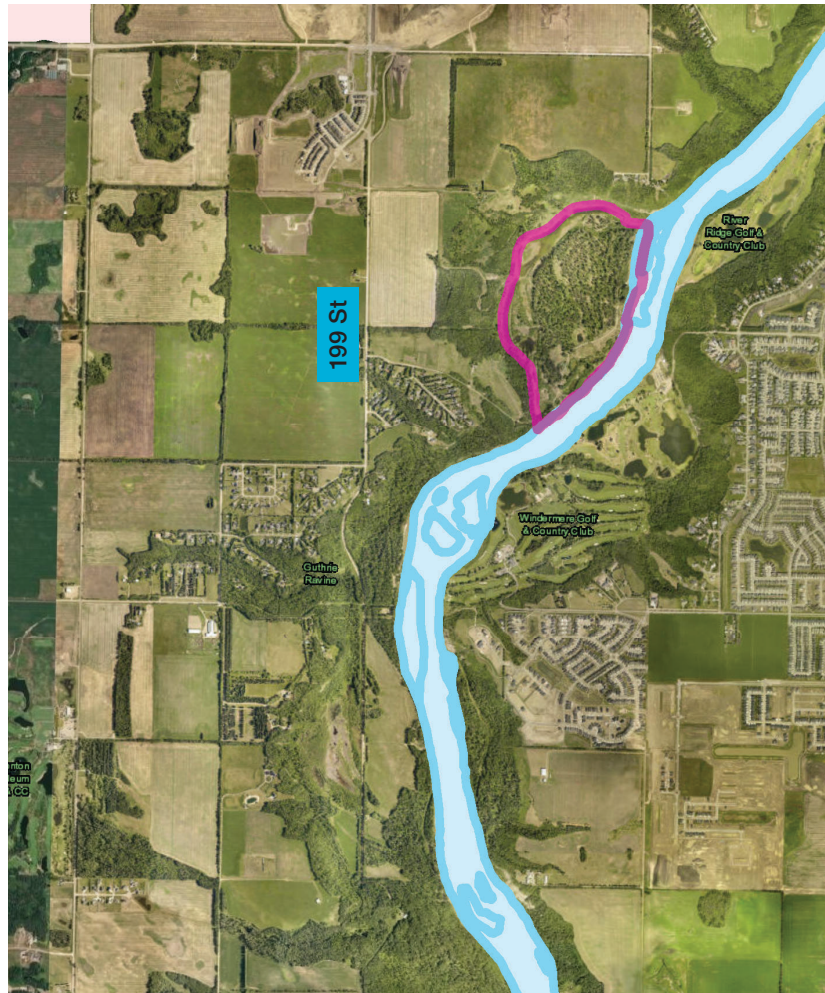
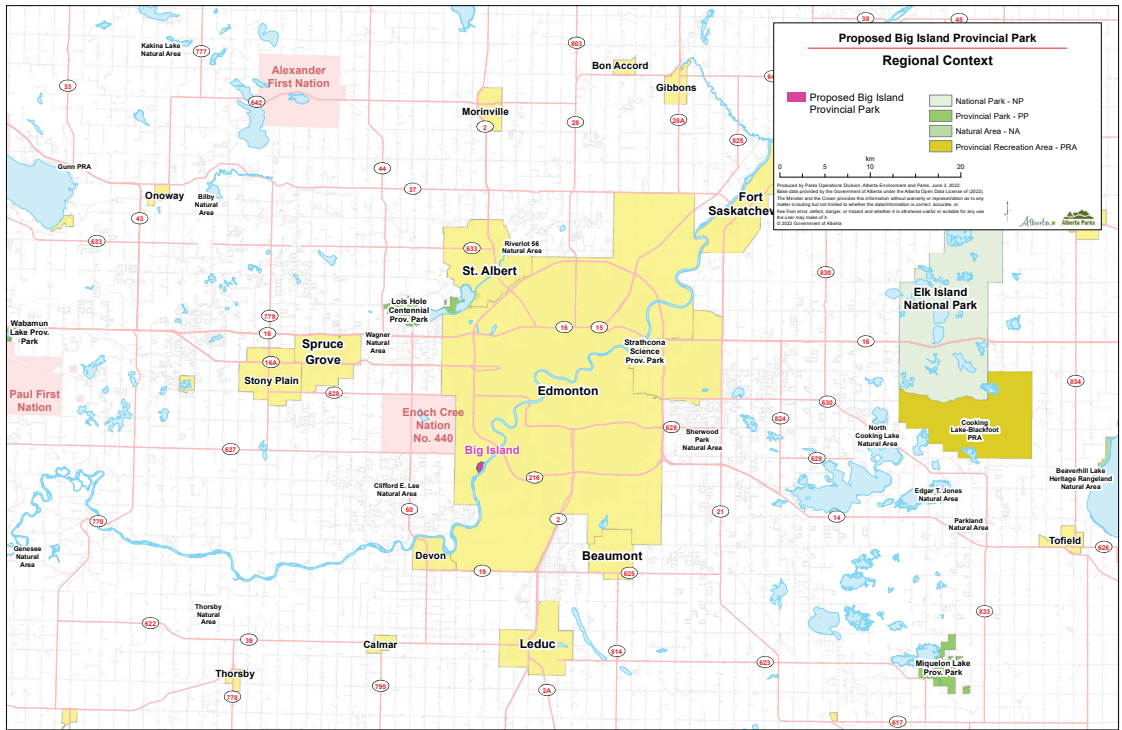


Figure 1: Big Island Project Map

Significance and History of Big Island

At 68 hectares, Big Island is not very big and is no longer a true island due to natural processes, but it has played an outsized role in the City of Edmonton's history. It is located within the North Saskatchewan River valley, the jewel of the Capital Region, and supports the river valley's role as a provincially significant wildlife corridor, playing a key role in sustaining ecological connectivity through the Capital Region and holding cultural significance for Indigenous peoples who have lived in amiskwaciywâskahikan (amisk-WA-chee wass-skag-N – the Cree word for Edmonton) for millennia.

maskêkosak History

Since time immemorial, the River Cree and Western Cree peoples, living in small bands, enjoyed wahkohtowin (Wa KOO ta WIN or kinship) with all natural elements including trees, plants, fish, birds, abundant game, migrating flocks and herds while trading along the North Saskatchewan River. The land was respected and cared for and in turn it gave abundant provisions to humankind. Plants provided plentiful remedies –some say more than 200 medicines were gathered and used. Land meant, and still means, animate and inanimate family members, culture, identity and self. The land, spirituality and natural law were intertwined and still are.

The arrival of settlers in the 1880s led to the depletion of traditional food sources, the introduction of diseases, and the creation of reserve lands, which at one time stretched all the way to the North Saskatchewan River adjacent to Big Island. Those lands are known as maskêkosihk (muss KAY go sik or the Land of Medicines), or Enoch Cree Nation, and the living descendants of the original people are known as the maskêkosak (people of the Land of Medicines). The maskêkosak, as with other Indigenous peoples, have an intimate connection with the land and their traditional lands once encompassed Big Island.

Settler History

Big Island's long and storied history after contact includes resource and recreational use by settlers who began arriving to the region in the 1880s. Multiple and sometimes conflicting uses occurred at Big Island, including timber harvesting, coal and gold mining, oil exploration, development, and recreation in addition to the natural flooding cycles that help maintain watershed health, but had damaging impacts on infrastructure and even led to a splitting up of Big Island into two smaller islands in the early 1900s (Figure 2). Timber, coal, and gold were harvested and mined by Hudson's Bay Company and local entrepreneurs like John Walter, who purchased the island in 1911 from the Dominion Government. The City of Edmonton later purchased Big Island in 1921 with plans to make use of the island as a prison farm and then for oil drilling which fell through.

Big Island became a popular day use destination once steamboat travel came into use on the North Saskatchewan River. John Walter used to shuttle passengers to Big Island on weekends and holidays, traveling three hours one way from the Low Level Bridge for passengers to spend the day playing games and picnicking. Once steamboat travel fell out of fashion, Big Island was no longer a major recreation destination. More recently, Big Island and the surrounding Woodbend area were part of the original location of the Canadian Birkebeiner ski festival, a 55 kilometre cross country skiing event first staged in 1985 and subsequently moved to Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area and Elk Island National Park.

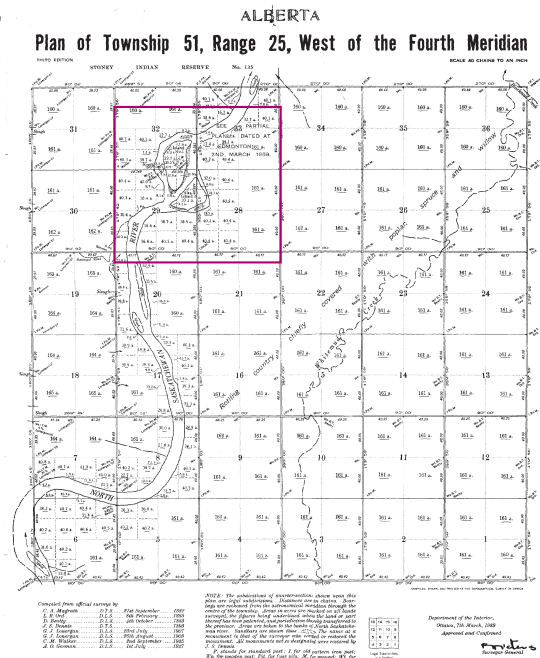
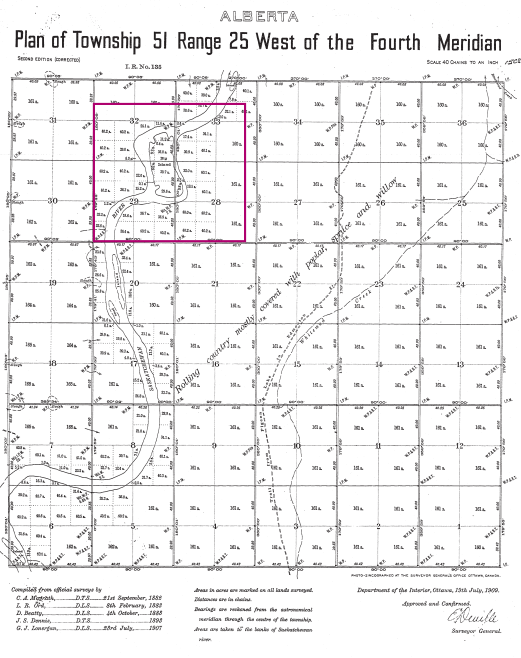
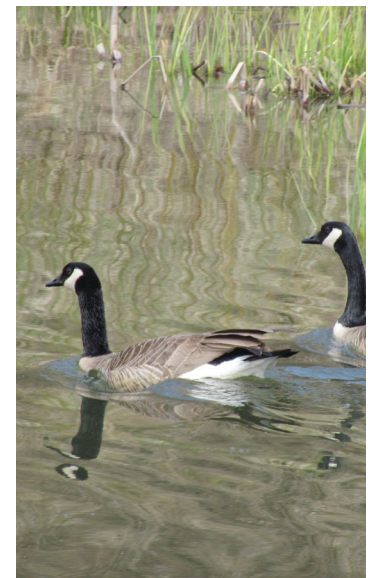


Figure 2: Surveys of Big Island 1909 (left) and 1929 (right)

Ecological Significance

Big Island and the North Saskatchewan River Valley are identified as a Provincial Key Wildlife and Biodiversity Zone due to its importance in supporting wildlife movement and biodiversity. Big Island and the surrounding Woodbend area are situated within the Central Parkland Natural Subregion which is important for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and landbirds, but the Natural Subregion contains less than 5% of native vegetation and intact landscapes, with those that remain found predominantly in parks and along water courses. This area is also part of a Sensitive Raptor Range for bald eagle as well as sharp-tailed grouse range. Wildlife species of concern have been observed in Big Island and the surrounding Woodbend area, including bald eagle, great blue heron, common nighthawk, and fisher. Other species observed include deer, moose, coyote, beaver, porcupine and red-sided garter snake. Non-native invasive plant species have taken root throughout Big Island as a result of human disturbance and periodic natural disturbances like flooding and ice push.





Recreation

Today, Big Island is a popular stopover for paddlers traveling the North Saskatchewan River and several areas along the shoreline provide informal boat access points. Visitors to the island traverse the extensive informal trail network through mature balsam forest, stop for a picnic, then make their way around the island's many wet areas including a lush back channel where they may be lucky to spot a beaver or a great blue heron. Although there is evidence of motorized use throughout the site, the land surrounding Big Island is privately owned and legal access by land must be obtained with landowner permission. There are no existing facilities or recreation infrastructure in Big Island.

Project Context: Why Big Island Provincial Park?

Rapid growth and development pressures along Big Island and the surrounding Woodbend area have resulted in calls from Albertans and local community organizations to enhance protection of Edmonton's river valley. In 2020, the City of Edmonton released their updated Ribbon of Green Strategy that establishes a framework for site-specific planning within the North Saskatchewan River Valley. It identifies the Big Island and Woodbend area as ecologically and culturally significant landscapes that should be protected and restored and incorporate nature-based recreation and river access. The Big Island / Woodbend area is also identified in the River Valley Alliance's Plan of Action¹ for a regional river valley trail system connecting Devon to Fort Saskatchewan with trails, footbridges and boat launches.

In response to calls for river valley protection, the Government of Alberta made a platform commitment to create Big Island Provincial Park, working with City of Edmonton and Enoch Cree Nation in a tri-government cooperative management approach and collaborating with key river valley stakeholders. This type of tri-government cooperative management approach to park establishment between a provincial, municipal, and Indigenous government is a unique model for park development that brings a diversity of voices to the table to help shape the proposed park vision. Through provincial grant funding, City of Edmonton is undertaking an ecological assessment and Enoch Cree Nation is undertaking a traditional land use study of Big Island to help inform future development and programming once the park is established. Enoch Cree Nation and the City of Edmonton governments will both play a co-lead role in park operations.

¹ <https://rivervalley.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Full-Plan-of-Action-Exec-Summary.pdf>

Proposed Vision and Management Intent

Vision

The vision and principles below have been adopted by the three governments and would apply to the establishment, development, and management of the proposed park:

Big Island Provincial Park will be a destination of choice for people of all ages, both area residents and visitors. It will focus on the conservation and protection of sensitive ecosystems, while providing unique opportunities for storytelling, cultural exchange, learning and recreation. It will be a model for park development, land management and stewardship by Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments and be inclusive of Indigenous peoples and land uses.

Shared Responsibility

The land belongs to future generations and our shared responsibility is to be stewards of the land today. Cooperative management is an iterative process, which integrates Indigenous and non-Indigenous forms of governance to realize our shared vision for the park.

Preservation, Protection and Conservation

Establish an area that has a respectful balance of protection, preservation, and conservation and human elements for future generations and the future resilience of the ecosystem. We will leave the land better than we found it.

Cultural Focus

Always incorporate the cultural aspect in everything developed in this park.

Education and Knowledge Sharing

The park will be designed, managed and programmed through collaboration of partners to share the history of the land, develop current uses and plan for future uses. There will be a focus on ecological and Indigenous and settler history and story-telling. Respect for the land will be grounded in tradition while incorporating environmental monitoring tools. It will be an example of the treaty relationship.

Tourism and Economic Development

We will work together to ensure the park provides economic benefit and opportunities for our communities and create meaningful visitor experiences. These experiences will enable visitors to interact respectfully with nature, local history and culture and play a role in conservation. They will invoke healing and understanding through sensory experiences.

Shared Principles for Park Development



Site Proposal

The proposed designation of Big Island as a provincial park would provide protection for the sensitive river valley ecosystem, including wildlife corridor and habitat; help to manage and develop recreational and tourism opportunities; provide cultural exchange and storytelling opportunities; and enhance community connections to the river valley. Future site planning would work towards aligning and being compatible with the visions proposed by municipal and regional river valley initiatives and organizations to protect the North Saskatchewan River Valley for future generations. Future expansion of the park would include suitable parcels of intact natural areas in the surrounding Woodbend area to create a contiguous park boundary. Land included in the park needs to be Crown-owned (owned by Government of Alberta). Future park expansion to include adjacent private or municipal land would be based on willing sellers; land will not be expropriated for inclusion in the park. The establishment of a new urban provincial park will contribute to the legacy of existing urban provincial and national parks, joining sites like Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park in the Capital Region, and Glenbow Ranch Provincial Park and Fish Creek Provincial Park in the Calgary region; and serve as a gateway to knowledge and experience of Alberta Parks' system.

What is a Provincial Park?

Provincial parks are a land designation and management tool established by Order-in-Council under the *Provincial Parks Act*². The primary goal of provincial parks is to conserve nature; however, they also support opportunities for nature-based recreation, tourism and education activities that depend on and are compatible with the natural environment. Table 1 provides a general description of the overall management intent and permitted uses; however, the specific activities and facilities permitted in each provincial park can vary depending on site-specific natural and cultural values. Each of the 76 provincial parks in Alberta Parks' system provide a unique experience for visitors.

Recreation and Permitted Uses

The designation of Big Island as a provincial park would enable the long-term protection of the site's conservation, recreation, historical, and cultural values to ensure a legacy for current visitors and future generations. The park would be developed and managed primarily as a conservation-focused, day-use site with land and river access and interpretive programming that tells the story of both Indigenous and settler histories and connections to the site while remaining respectful of ecological sensitivities. Compatible uses such as water-based recreation, hiking and walking on designated trails, picnicking, nature appreciation, and cultural exchange would be facilitated through parking and staging area development, formalized river access, an interconnected trail system, interpretive amenities, and day use areas. Inclusive design principles would be incorporated to ensure people of all abilities can experience the site.

Recreational overnight camping and motorized recreation are not being considered for the proposed provincial park due to the ecological sensitivity of the area, the small size, and its proximity to adjacent residential areas.

² <https://albertaparks.ca/albertaparksca/management-land-use/legislation-regulations/>

Facilities and Infrastructure

Facility development would seek to use existing footprints wherever possible to ensure the natural values are not further impacted. Big Island is low-lying and wet, with steep slopes, and facility development will be constrained by topography. The ecological and traditional land-use assessments underway now will inform future facility planning. Discussions with adjacent landowners and the City of Edmonton are underway to explore the potential for legal land access into Big Island. If this land is secured, access planning would accommodate walk-in, wheelchair, and river access and work towards formalizing vehicle access points off 199 Street (Figure 3) with parking located outside of the floodway. Motorized use would not be permitted beyond parking areas except for emergency access and park maintenance purposes. There are opportunities to align park infrastructure planning with direction identified in local plans like the Riverview Area Structure Plan³ for the upland area adjacent to Big Island.

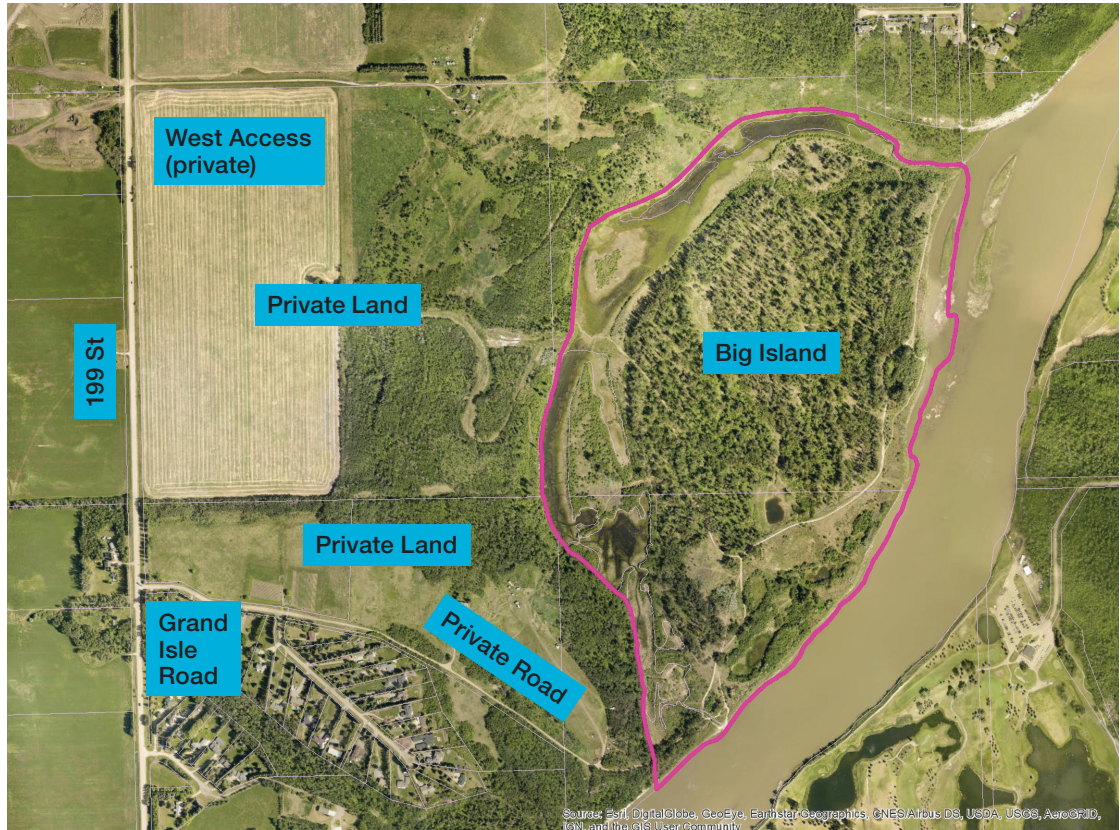


Figure 3 Map: future access and trail network

The existing trail network (visible in Figure 3) in Big Island would be assessed and formalized with designated walking and hiking trails and include trail connections to the surrounding neighbourhoods that offer routes and access to the river and recreation opportunities for residents and visitors to tie into the River Valley Alliance's Plan of Action⁴ connecting Devon to Fort Saskatchewan. The Edmonton Metropolitan Region⁵ is one of the fastest-growing urban regions in Canada, and, as the southwest part of the City where Big Island is located expands, natural spaces will decrease, making the river valley corridor more significant and valuable as residents and visitors seek opportunities to connect to nature in the city.

³ https://webdocs.edmonton.ca/infraplan/plans_in_effect/Riverview_ASP_Consolidation.pdf

⁴ <https://rivervalley.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Full-Plan-of-Action-Exec-Summary.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.emrb.ca/>

Management and Operations

The provincial park designation would enable the site to be cooperatively managed between the Government of Alberta, Enoch Cree Nation and the City of Edmonton and allow the three governments to co-create a space that is welcoming and inclusive for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous visitors in a way that recognizes the cultural and historic significance of Big Island. The provincial park designation would enable the site to be managed to maintain and enhance its natural values and aesthetics for future generations through ecological restoration while offering ways for visitors to engage with nature and experience the local Indigenous and settler history and culture of Big Island and the North Saskatchewan River valley.

TABLE 1 DESCRIPTION OF PROVINCIAL PARK LAND DESIGNATION

Provincial Park	
Purpose	Park or protected area established for the conservation of nature, with associated cultural features and ecosystem services, where nature-based recreation, tourism, and education opportunities are also significant, and are dependent on and compatible with conservation objectives.
Management Objective	Primary objective is the conservation of nature. Provincial Parks also provide a range of recreation and tourism opportunities and interpretive and educational programs. A wide diversity of nature-based recreation activities that promote the appreciation of the park's natural and cultural features are promoted. Auto access is typically provided to staging areas and support facilities.
Visitor Experience	Wide range of park experiences, which inspire people to reconnect with nature through leisure, learning, or recreation activities. Visitors can expect nature-based opportunities, supported by facilities and interpretive or education programs to the extent the activities are compatible with conservation objectives.
Criteria	Only sites with provincially significant conservation, recreation and tourism values capable of providing high quality visitor experiences. Typically large enough to maintain ecological functions while supporting a diversity of opportunities.
Permitted Uses	Permits a wide range of uses that are compatible with the conservation objective. In Big Island Provincial Park, these uses would include: Water-based recreation Non-motorized recreation (e.g. walking, hiking, snowshoeing, nature appreciation) Indigenous traditional use activities Other activities are permitted in provincial parks but are not being contemplated for Big Island including recreational overnight camping and commercial development.
Other Considerations	Commercial forestry and metallic and industrial mineral extraction are not permitted Surface access for petroleum and natural gas is only permitted for pre-existing commitments Activities that are required for landscape or resource management, such as vegetation or invasive species management, are allowable in any parks classification.

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