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FAST FACTS

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East Side, West Side - Manitoba's Hydro Line Controversy

In 2007, the Manitoba government made a decision to alter the route for a power line east of Lake Winnipeg, which would have transcended the largest remaining intact area in the boreal forest of southern Canada. The decision was reportedly made after consultation with First Nations in the area, and with environmental groups. If the area remains relatively intact, it will almost certainly be declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, because it is one of the few areas of the southern boreal forest where the fauna and flora remain relatively unravaged by logging, mineral or petroleum exploration, encroachment of agriculture, or other activities that have compromised most of the southern boreal ecozone.

Recently this decision has been attacked by the local opposition, who claim that an alternate power line route on the west side of Lake Winnipeg will cost more, take longer to build, be more susceptible to power outages, and further damage a part of the boreal forest that is already somewhat degraded by logging, encroachment of agriculture, and unrestricted recreational activity. They further claim that the government has bowed to pressure from international environmental groups, and that the resistance of First Nations to a

power line had changed to support in the few years since consultations took place.

I spent over 20 years of my life in Manitoba, enjoying many hunting, fishing and canoeing trips on the eastern side of the lake. I also visited many of the eastern shore communities on the lake in 1968 and 1969, as a young scientist doing fisheries research for the now defunct Fisheries Research Board of Canada. I can attest to the area's extreme beauty, and ecological and cultural uniqueness.

One power line might not seem like a big deal. But it becomes a magnet for other sorts of developments and disturbances of many kinds. What would happen on the eastern shores should be compared to another boreal area that was equally beautiful 40 years ago, the lower foothills and adjacent boreal plains of western Alberta. This area too was considered wilderness in the 1960s, with abundant woodland caribou, boreal grizzlies and other large mammals. That changed rapidly with the discovery of oil and gas. Once a few seismic lines and roads were in place, other activities quickly followed, including mineral exploration, agriculture and powered recreation. In 40 short years, the results have been staggering. Roads, trails, exploration lines and other "linear disturbance" wide enough to accommodate a



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gasoline powered vehicle average 3.2 km per square km in the area. Much of the area has been logged, and some has been converted to agriculture. As a result, boreal grizzlies have become extremely rare, causing even Alberta's permissive government to terminate the hunting season. Woodland caribou are declining rapidly, with many killed by traffic on roads. Also, recent research has shown that the roads and trails serve as conduits that allow wolves to travel easily among caribou herds, increasing their ability to exploit caribou herds. Motorized vehicles passing on these same networks create noise and other disturbances, compromising breeding and calving habitat for caribou. Most lakes in the area are now accessible by road. Over exploitation has caused walleye populations to collapse, and pike populations to decline. Many lakes have become ringed with summer homes, which have caused accelerating eutrophication, due to inputs of phosphorus from sewage, lawn fertilizer, land clearing and pet excrement. The once-tranquil settings are now punctuated by the roar of personal watercraft.

The Alberta example should be a lesson in what is lost when only profits are considered. The Manitoba government has made a wise decision, rare in this age when everything is for sale, and most of our politicians seem to be drawn from among the invertebrates. Stand by the government's decision, Manitobans, and see that this priceless area remains intact for future generations to enjoy and cherish. Your children and grandchildren will thank you.

D. W. Schindler founded and directed the Experimental Lakes Area in north western Ontario for 22 years. He is now the Killam Memorial Professor of Ecology at the University of Alberta, where he continues to study boreal ecology. He is an Officer in the Order of

Canada, and has received several international scientific prizes for his research.

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