



War Lake First Nation
Keeyask ATK Monitoring Program

**War Lake First Nation
Keeyask Generation Project
ATK Monitoring Program Report (April 2021 to March 2023)
June 2024**

Background

The Keeyask Generation Project is a 695 MW hydroelectric generating station and associated principal structures, situated 180 km northeast of Thompson and 40 km southwest of Gillam, currently nearing the end of construction. Located on the lower Nelson River at Gull Rapids, the area is of historical, cultural and emotional importance to the Cree First Nations living there. A reservoir will be created upstream of the structures, which includes a powerhouse complex, a spillway, dams, and dykes.

Through a long process of negotiations, War Lake First Nation (War Lake) agreed to form a partnership along with Tataskweyak Cree Nation, York Factory First Nation, Fox Lake Cree Nation (collectively known as the Partner First Nations), and Manitoba Hydro and ratified the *Joint Keeyask Development Agreement* (JKDA) in 2009, which led to the formation of the Keeyask Hydropower Limited Partnership (KHLP).

Regulatory approval to start the construction of the Keeyask Generation Project was provided in July 2014 after the KHLP submitted an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project. War Lake First Nation and Tataskweyak Cree Nation, operating as Cree Nation Partners (CNP), assessed the project impacts on its own people using its own Overview of Water and Land (OWL) evaluation process, which was based on Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge (ATK) and used the Mother Earth Ecosystem Model. The findings of the OWL process were published in the Cree Nation Partner's *Keeyask Environmental Evaluation Report* (2012), which was developed as a stand-alone report in support of the partnership's EIS submission.

Part of the commitments made in the EIS included the development an Environmental Protection Plan (EPP), developed to help mitigate, monitor, and manage the environmental impacts predicted in the EIS.

War Lake First Nation signed the JKDA believing in the importance of a comprehensive environmental assessment process, including the resulting EIS and EPP, which are intended to give equal respect to ATK and western technical science for assessing and monitoring environmental impacts. Both ATK and technical science studies were conducted to provide a baseline from which to assess project impacts on the physical, aquatic, terrestrial and socio-economic environments, as well as on traditional resource use, heritage resources and community health.

The War Lake First Nation Keeyask ATK Monitoring Program was launched in the summer of 2017. War Lake First Nation's first *ATK Monitoring Program Report (November 2017-April 2019)* was published in May 2019. This second report covers activities undertaken from April 1, 2019, to March 31, 2020. The third report covers the period from April 1, 2020 to March 31, 2021, and this report covers the period from April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2023.

Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge

ATK is knowledge that reflects our experience, understanding, wisdom, values, beliefs, norms and priorities governing our relationships with Mother Earth and all her beings, derived and developed through living in our homeland ecosystem since time immemorial. ATK is inextricably linked to our culture and our worldview.

- Page 35, CNP Keeyask Environmental Evaluation Report (2012)

Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge (ATK) was integrated in the Keeyask environmental assessment process and plays an important role in War Lake’s monitoring of project impacts. The CNP approach to using ATK to evaluate past hydroelectric development impacts and the predicted impacts resulting from the construction and operation of Keeyask is modeled on the definition of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) which values the knowledge, beliefs, traditions, practices and worldviews of Indigenous communities about the relationship of living beings with one another and their environment. TEK contributes to the survival of Indigenous communities over countless generations by securing livelihoods through the use and preservation of the environment. TEK is also now recognized by western science as being a valuable body of knowledge, experience, and understandings in managing environmental resources and in measuring environmental impacts from human disturbances, including climate change.

Oral traditions are based on knowledge passed on from one generation to the next. This oral history captures the knowledge and experience gained in one’s lifetime – together they provide the foundation for ATK. Research and monitoring requires spoken word opportunities for collecting and recording information, which can include discussion forums, interviews and mapping including Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Mapping (TLUOM). Relying on individual and group interviews and mapping to show the extent and type of land use, information recorded on maps include hunting, trapping, fishing, plant and timber harvesting activity, camp and cabin sites, landscape markers, sacred sites and travel routes. However, ATK is proprietary and sensitive, belonging exclusively to each Indigenous community. The content recorded is protected and only shared with the consent of the knowledge keepers and the community.

ATK collected can go beyond recording only land use and occupancy. Past and present experiences and observations on language, traditions, values and the balance of spiritual, physical, mental and emotional dimensions are often recorded with Oral History and Oral Tradition interviews and through group discussions. Values include recognizing the spiritual and its interconnectedness with the physical, acknowledging reciprocity or the “*belief that as we receive from others, we must also offer to others*”, and understanding the concept of all things being equal as in “*we are part of the natural world with no separation between living and non-living*”.

Indigenous thought... is holistic, circular and relational. “Indigenous peoples have traditionally seen all life on the planet as so multi-dimensionally entwined that they have not been quick to distinguish the living from the non-living”... all things on the earth: plants, animals, earth, water, air and other humans.

ATK is continuously maintained by Indigenous communities and groups in response to their environment and their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity. Ensuring that knowledge and experiences passed down from one generation to the next, including collective worldview, values, customs and ways of doing and thinking, is integral to the preservation of ATK.

Cree Nation Partners Environmental Evaluation

The OWL evaluation process, based on TEK principles, guided compensations and partnership negotiations between War Lake and Manitoba Hydro. Both the War Lake 2002 *OWL Process Keeyask Project Draft Report* and the 2002 *Overview of Water and Land (OWL) Summary Report* acknowledged that the OWL process was guided by the Cree worldview. Further OWL studies followed using reference groups to examine the predicted environmental effects of Keeyask, focusing on the relationship of CNP Members to their environment. This comprehensive study process involved meetings, interviews, survey and community engagement, and resulted in War Lake's *Adverse Effects Agreement* and the JKDA.

The CNP 2012 *Keeyask Environmental Evaluation Report* was attached to the Keeyask EIS along with similar environmental evaluations conducted by York Factory First Nation and Fox Lake Cree Nation. The provisions for ATK environmental monitoring under the Environmental Protection Plan allowed for each of the Partner First Nations to develop their own approach to monitoring the effects of the project on their communities and environment through independent Traditional Knowledge Monitoring Programs.

The EIS also included findings from community fieldwork studies conducted by War Lake Members and completed in 2009-2010. The local fieldwork team conducted Key Person Interviews (KPIs) with Members, collected and reviewed community and historical documents, and described an environmental baseline that provided a point of comparison for reporting on environmental monitoring activities conducted in 2017-2019 under the War Lake ATK Monitoring Program. Where significant, the 2009-2010 findings are included in this report.

Keeyask Environmental Protection Plan

The EEP was developed during the Keeyask environmental assessment process to mitigate, manage and monitor predicted adverse effects during Keeyask construction and operation. During the process, a baseline of conditions was established and described in the Keeyask EIS. The War Lake ATK Monitoring Program outlines the fieldwork research necessary to help compare past fieldwork results that helped define a baseline with current findings to determine the following:

- Test predicted effects outlined in the EIS;
- Identify unanticipated effects of the Project;
- Monitor the effectiveness of mitigation measures; and
- Determine if adaptive management is required.

War Lake ATK Monitoring Program

The War Lake ATK Monitoring Program was designed to provide opportunities for War Lake Members, including Elders, resource users, knowledge holders and youth to record, discuss, and communicate observations and perspectives regarding the effects of Keeyask construction and operation on all aspects of their world. This fieldwork research is conducted with the support and guidance of local fieldwork staff and advisors.

The program is guided by the following community objectives:

- Incorporate ATK in Keeyask monitoring and reporting processes;
- Ensure ATK is given equal weight to western science;
- Provide employment and training opportunities for War Lake Members;
- Provide opportunities for War Lake Members to participate in “on the land” activities;
- Facilitate the transfer of valuable knowledge held by Elders to our youth;
- Facilitate information sharing between Partner First Nations and Manitoba Hydro; and
- Ensure War Lake Members are kept well-informed of all program activities and results.

Two key components drive the Program. Monitoring through “on-the-land” observations and through roundtable discussions with experienced resource users. Members, Elders, knowledge holders and youth get together “on the land” to observe and discuss changes to the land and waterways. Each season, a monitoring trip is planned to spend 3-5 days at a site traditionally used for hunting, trapping and fishing. The second component is Resource Users Roundtables. The resource users’ discussion forum provides opportunities for Members to share their experience and knowledge of being on the land to trap, hunt and fish. Discussions are held each season to share knowledge and changes observed in areas that extend from the Landing (Aiken) River to Three Sisters Lake to Fox River.

Objectives

War Lake developed its own traditional knowledge-based environmental monitoring program to:

- Identify areas and sites of importance;
- Document observations and traditional knowledge;
- Create a baseline of current conditions;
- Monitor changes to the environment;
- Explore the causes of environmental change; and
- Establish a record for future generations.

Community Engagement

Community support and involvement are essential for successfully applying traditional knowledge to any research, assessment or monitoring project. War Lake Members established a collaborative approach that respects Cree cultural values using community-based direction and participation to design the War Lake ATK Monitoring Program.

To ensure the effectiveness of the monitoring process, informed consent was obtained from all participants based on the provision of clear information on the objectives of each program event and the following assurances:

- All information collected was owned and controlled by War Lake First Nation;
- All sensitive information would be fully protected; and
- Confidentiality of individual contributions would be fully respected.

The information provided through GPS and mapping activities is considered highly sensitive and will only be shared with parties under the strict direction and approval of War Lake First Nation. Similarly, the rich detail of events and activities identifying War Lake family members will be kept private and preserved for the community as part of their historical legacy. Signed consent and confidentiality forms are kept off-site for security and privacy.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic restricted War Lake from undertaking the full range of activities planned for the ATK Monitoring Program in 2020 and into 2021. As public health guidelines shifted and War Lake took all necessary measures to ensure that COVID-19 was kept out of the community, it was difficult to organize the activities as planned. The ATK Monitoring Program requires in-person interaction to conduct both the ATK Monitoring Trips and Resource User Roundtables described above.

The pandemic also restricted, at times, War Lake Members from undertaking traditional activities with family members and close friends, as in-person interactions were greatly restricted. Unfortunately, this has lessened the number of “on-the-land” observations War Lake could report in this time.

The easing of COVID restrictions coincided with the completion of Keeyask construction. With the Project winding down and moving into the Operational Phase, War Lake has been working to undertake several important community initiatives, including the development and construction of a new Community Centre. Part of the work of Chief and Council has been to incorporate planning for future ATK Monitoring programming into the plans for the new Centre.

Caribou Monitoring and the Keeyask Caribou Coordination Committee

War Lake continued to conduct caribou monitoring in the War Lake Traditional Use Area. Using GPS and snowmobiles, two War Lake Members noted the locations of caribou spotted, both in small and large numbers. When possible, the species and sex of the caribou are noted.

Information gleaned from War Lake's caribou monitoring was shared with the Keeyask Caribou Coordination Committee and the Keeyask Monitoring Advisory Committee to ensure the continued protection of this important species.

Resource Users Roundtables

War Lake explored the possibility of holding Resource User Roundtables, both in-person and via teleconference, but because they rely on in-person information sharing, with up to 10 Resource Users participating at once, it was deemed unsafe to attempt to organize these events.

ATK Monitoring Trips

War Lake had trouble accessing some of the valued locations visited in previous years, such as Atkinson Lake, due to ice-road conditions and seasonal timing. War Lake conducted one ATK Monitoring Trip to the highly valued location of Fox River in September 2023.

Recently, War Lake has completed the purchase of the facilities at the joining of the Bigstone and Fox Rivers. With a significant investment, War Lake intends to reconstruct and renovate this facility for future use in the ATK Monitoring Program and for the Keeyask Adverse Effects Agreement. War Lake is currently in the planning stages for repairs and upgrades, but decided to visit the site in September 2023 to take pictures and notes regarding what is needed for the site to serve as a safe location to carry out traditional activities, including:

1. Traditional camps
2. Traditional youth camps (used for knowledge and skill transfer)
3. Hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering activities.
4. Environmental observations related to the Keeyask Project and climate change.

In previous reports, War Lake has provided a comparison of various observations to previous years, including in relation to the physical environment, hunting, fishing, trapping, and related areas of observation. Due to the lack of activity and engagement when compared to previous years, War Lake has decided to resume its full ATK Monitoring Program before providing further comparisons.

ATK Monitoring Program Review

In 2022, War Lake determined that a review of the ATK Monitoring Program was required following the lifting of COVID restrictions. With the Keeyask Project construction largely complete, War Lake experienced Members returning to the community and a shift in priorities for the immediate future. With less time dedicated to Keeyask, Chief and Council determined that a review of the Program may help to increase awareness and participation.

Surveys were prepared and distributed in late 2023 to receive community feedback on the future of the Program, including what Programs are working, what could be changed, and how this could occur. Completed surveys are still being collected, but the results will help War Lake leadership determine what changes, if any, should be made to the Program.

One generally agreed upon idea is to open an ATK Monitoring office in the new Community Centre to help encourage participation and organize community events, including ATK Monitoring Trips and Resource User Roundtables.

Other ideas which are being ranked and discussed include:

1. Addressing concerns regarding Zebra mussels in off-system lakes in War Lake's Traditional Use Area
2. Monitoring off-system water levels and shoreline erosion.

War Lake will continue to communicate with Manitoba Hydro with about the intent of programming to ensure we are not duplicating existing studies.

Chief and Council Briefings

Advisors, who help to manage aspects of the ATK Monitoring Program under the direction of Chief and Council, maintained regular communication to assist with work plan development, program changes, survey development, and activity organization.

Looking Forward

Following the results of the ATK Monitoring Program Surveys, War Lake leadership will consider modifying ATK Monitoring programs based on community feedback to better suit the needs and address the concerns of the community.