

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: St. Raphael Signature Site Preliminary Strategy

Introduction

St. Raphael Signature Site is a remote area of interconnecting waterways and boreal forest, encompassing more than 150,000 hectares in northwestern Ontario. The area exhibits a range of natural, cultural and recreational values and is known for outstanding scenery, remote character, fly-in fishing and circular canoe routes. This combination of characteristics, values and the remote location of the area prompted the St. Raphael landscape to be profiled as one of nine "Featured Areas" or "Signature Sites" in the *Ontario's Living Legacy Land Use Strategy* in 1999.

The lands and waters within the St. Raphael Signature Site are assigned to two land use designations; a provincial park and an enhanced management area. St. Raphael Provincial Park, a waterway class park, includes many of the waterways and shorelines in the signature site. This park surrounds a remote landscape that has been designated as the Miniss Enhanced Management Area: a remote access enhanced management area. The area surrounding the signature site is managed as a general use area by the Ministry of Natural Resources.

The vision statement for the St. Raphael Signature Site is:

'To preserve and protect the remote characteristics and unique values of the St. Raphael Signature Site, while maintaining and balancing traditional, economic and recreational activities and opportunities.'

This preliminary strategy for St. Raphael Signature Site has been prepared as a high-level direction statement which will guide the development of a park management plan for St. Raphael Provincial Park and a resource management plan for the Miniss Enhanced Management Area. The preliminary strategy for St. Raphael Signature Site has been developed as part of a comprehensive planning process, complete with Aboriginal input and public consultation at each stage of development. The planning stages are as follows:

1. Development of the *Terms of Reference* (March 2003)
2. Invitation to Participate extended to the public (March 2003)
3. Information collection and development of a *Background Document* (January 2004)
4. Development of an *Issues and Options Document* (November 2004)
5. **Development of a *Preliminary Signature Site Strategy* (current stage)**
6. Completion of the final *St. Raphael Signature Site Strategy*

Aboriginal Use

St. Raphael Signature Site overlaps the treaty area of the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation (Treaty # 9). A portion of the signature site also overlaps the documented territory of Treaty # 3 peoples. Communities of the Ojibway Nation of Saugeen (Treaty # 3) and Mishkeegogamang First Nation (Treaty # 9) have affirmed that land encompassed by St. Raphael Signature Site is within their traditional use area. Members of these communities have strong ties to the waters and land that make up and surround the signature site. The Ministry of Natural Resources recognizes the importance of Aboriginal culture and traditional land use. Aboriginal communities have indicated they use the signature site area for hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering and travel. These uses may continue, subject to public safety, conservation and other considerations.

The Ministry of Natural Resources will work with Aboriginal people to identify economic opportunities in the signature site area. The ministry will also continue to identify and document sites of cultural significance in the signature site, which will be considered in management planning.

Adjacent Lands

Activities in the adjacent general use area have the potential to impact on values within the signature site. Specifically, remote characteristics could be affected by activities that occur adjacent to the signature site. The planning of activities in the adjacent general use area should consider the implications of these activities on the ecological, recreation, tourism and other values in the signature site, and mitigate impacts where ever feasible. Ontario Parks will work with the Sioux Lookout District MNR staff when reviewing local level land use and resource management planning projects adjacent to the signature site to protect signature site values. Measures to reduce potential effects to the signature site should be centered on maintaining remote characteristics and protecting sensitive park values.

Cultural Heritage

The land use intent for cultural heritage in St. Raphael Signature Site is to protect cultural heritage resources. The Ministry of Natural Resources will to continue to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities to locate, identify and document sites of Aboriginal cultural significance to assist in future resource management planning and project implementation. All confirmed cultural heritage resources (e.g. registered archaeological sites) will be protected in the signature site. Where there are significant cultural heritage resources in an area, an archaeological assessment will be mandatory prior to any site development or activity which will result in considerable ground disturbance.

Earth Science

The land use intent for earth science features in St. Raphael Signature Site is to protect and promote significant earth science features and to promote these features through public education. Significant and sensitive earth science features will be protected within St. Raphael Provincial Park. Sensitive landform features in the Miniss Enhanced Management Area will be avoided where possible during planning of access roads and aggregate extraction sites.

Commercial aggregate extraction will not be permitted in St. Raphael Signature Site. Aggregate extraction will be permitted in the Miniss Enhanced Management Area where essential for exploration and mining activities, and for industry road construction and maintenance.

Energy

At the time it was established, there were no energy generation facilities nor any energy-related infrastructure within St. Raphael Signature Site. Commercial power generation is not permitted in St. Raphael Provincial Park. Ontario Parks may consider the use of renewable energy systems for supplying the park's energy needs (i.e. facilities related to operating the park), where it proves more economical and environmentally feasible than other forms of generated electricity. In the Miniss Enhanced Management Area, commercial waterpower and wind power development is not permitted due to the long-term negative impacts to remote characteristics from energy-related infrastructure (e.g. power lines, generating stations). Small-scale non-commercial energy systems to generate power for tourism facilities on land use permits or Crown leases may be considered if compatible with signature site values. Construction of utility corridors for energy transmission and communication lines is discouraged in the signature site, but will be permitted if no reasonable alternatives exist.

Fire Management

The *Forest Fire Management Strategy for Ontario (2004)*, establishes strategic direction for fire management in Ontario. The signature site is located in the Boreal Forest Management Fire Suppression Zone, in which the protection of human life, property and natural resource values are priorities. Fires in this zone will generally receive a full fire suppression response. The park management plan will provide additional direction on fire response in St. Raphael Provincial Park, where fire may have a positive impact on ecosystem health.

In addition to fire response planning, prescribed burning is another technique that can be used to reintroduce fire to a landscape. Prescribed fire in St. Raphael Provincial Park will be considered in the park management plan with consideration of park and adjacent land values. The use of fire as a management tool in the Miniss Enhanced Management Area may also be applied in resource planning with consideration of adjacent land values.

Fisheries

Fishing for walleye and pike is a very popular water-based activity in the signature site. The primary user groups include resident anglers, Aboriginal people and guests at (remote) tourism facilities. The overall intent for fisheries in St. Raphael Signature Site is to ensure healthy native fish populations are sustained. The Ministry of Natural Resources will undertake a fisheries scoping exercise to determine appropriate measures to support fisheries management in St. Raphael Signature Site. Tourism operators and non-government organizations will be encouraged to support fisheries management projects through cost and resource sharing partnerships. During park management planning, consideration may be given to phasing out the use of live bait, allowing only the use of preserved bait, or allowing only bait species harvested in St. Raphael Signature Site to be used within the park.

Forestry

At the time the signature site was established, no large-scale commercial timber harvesting had occurred. Commercial forestry operations are permitted in the Miniss Enhanced Management Area component of the St. Raphael Signature Site. The intent regarding forestry in the signature site is to ensure operations are carried out in a manner that protects the remote characteristics and unique values of the signature site. Achieving this objective will be essentially tied to the preservation of the traditionally roadless nature of the signature site. Forest management policy provided in the enhanced management area resource management plan will be developed consistent with the Land Use Strategy direction that there will be *“no impact on wood supply, and only in exceptional cases will wood costs be affected”* as a result of modifications to resource management practices in enhanced management areas. The park management plan will contain direction on access development and closure of industry roads through St. Raphael Provincial Park. Prescriptions will be designed to supplement existing forest management guidelines, with a focus on the preservation of remote characteristics and unique values of the signature site.

Fur and Bait Resources

There are active commercial fur harvesting and bait resource operations in the signature site area. The intent for commercial resource harvesting in St. Raphael Signature Site is to ensure operations are conducted in a sustainable manner, and in respect of signature site values. Active licence holders will have continued traditional access and use of the signature site with some limitations within St. Raphael Provincial Park. Active trap-lines are considered by the forest industry in preparing their harvesting schedules for areas in the signature site.

Land-based Access

The primary land use intent for access in St. Raphael Signature Site is to maintain the remote characteristics and protect unique values of the signature site. This will be achieved by minimizing impacts of roads and trails on the physical and visual landscape through providing limited well planned access for recreation, and by providing direction for commercial access.

Provincial park policy allows for road crossings of waterway class provincial parks where necessary to maintain commercial forest operations outside park boundaries. New roads in the St. Raphael Signature Site will be permitted for forestry and park purposes where necessary. Roads for advanced mineral exploration, development and/or production are permitted in the Miniss Enhanced Management Area, and will be permitted through the park on existing forest access roads or approved access corridors, and must comply with road standards developed in the park and resource management plans. Access roads for other commercial users (e.g. fur harvesters, bait resource harvesters, tourism operators) and for private use will not be considered in the signature site.

Roads into the Miniss Enhanced Management Area through St. Raphael Provincial Park will only be permitted via three access corridors. Only one road crossing of the park from the general use area will be active at any one time, with rare exceptions such as access requirements for mining activities which are not concurrent with forest operations, or in emergency response situations. Roads in the signature site will be kept to a minimum number and density, follow existing corridors where possible and will be developed to a minimum standard in keeping with approved engineering practices. Access management provisions for route planning, road design and construction standards, access control measures and decommissioning/rehabilitation of roads in St. Raphael Signature Site will be included in the park and enhanced management area resource management plans.

The use of snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles will only be permitted on trails authorized for motorized vehicle use in the signature site. An authorized trail is one that is identified in the park management plan or in the enhanced management area resource management plan. Trails that have traditionally been used for commercial fur harvesting, bait harvesting operations and bear hunting services will become authorized unless environmental values are threatened.

While existing trails will be considered for authorization in St. Raphael Provincial Park, no new trails will be considered for motorized use. Relocation of established commercial resource harvesting trails in the park may be permitted if there is a demonstrated need. Such applications must be accompanied by the access information requirements listed in section 3.1.10.3. Proposals will be reviewed individually by Ontario Parks and Sioux Lookout District Ministry of Natural Resources staff. In the Miniss Enhanced Management Area, new commercial and

recreational trail proposals will be reviewed by the Ministry of Natural Resources as part of an access management plan (e.g. forest management plan road use strategy), a work permit application, a disposition request and/or a development proposal.

Mineral Exploration and Mining

St. Raphael Signature Site has geology which may be of interest to prospectors and those in the mineral exploration sector. Mineral exploration and mining activities are permitted in the Miniss Enhanced Management Area, but are not allowed in St. Raphael Provincial Park. Mineral exploration and mining will be carried out in the enhanced management area in a manner that considers signature site values. Guidelines for (mineral) exploration for activities in enhanced management areas have been developed by the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, in conjunction with the Ontario Prospectors Association and the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Recreation

Activities enjoyed by recreationists within St. Raphael Signature Site include hunting, angling, canoeing, camping, heritage and nature appreciation, boating, cross country skiing and snowshoeing. The overall intent for recreation in St. Raphael Signature Site is to maintain remote recreational experiences and provide limited front-country recreational opportunities which respect ecological, cultural and wilderness values. Opportunities for education and interpretation of signature site features will be explored.

Enhancement or development of recreational facilities in the signature site may be considered by the Ministry of Natural Resources. The Ministry of Natural Resources will give priority consideration to proposals submitted by local Aboriginal communities. A front-country recreation area and public entry point may be permitted at Minchin Lake adjacent to Highway 599, subject to further analysis during park management planning. This site may include basic facilities such as a small parking area, a boat launch, garbage disposals, picnic tables, privies and some campsites. A second public entry point will be permitted to accommodate travelers approaching the signature site from roads to the south and west of the area. The access point could include parking and privies.

There are sensitive areas in the signature site which may be easily impacted by human recreation activity and use. In St. Raphael Provincial Park, these sites will be identified and protected through careful planning of recreational and commercial development, the application of resource management policies, and monitoring. In the Miniss Enhanced Management Area, low impact and non-consumptive recreational activities will be encouraged.

Tourism

The Ministry of Natural Resources recognizes that resource-based tourism is an important part of Ontario's tourism industry. The overall intent for tourism in St. Raphael Signature Site is to ensure an ecologically sustainable and remote resource-based tourism industry. Ecologically sustainable resource-based tourism operations can continue and there may be potential for diversified tourism opportunities in the signature site.

Expansion or relocation of facilities may be considered when ecological, cultural, social and remote values of the signature site will not be negatively impacted. Where appropriate, enhanced land tenure may be considered for existing tourism operations within the signature site. Proposals for new operations must be supported by detailed resource information, and be included in a sound business plan which demonstrates direct and sustainable benefits to local communities, and provides a fair return to the Crown. Review of any proposal will include consultation with local stakeholders, Aboriginal communities and the general public.

Tourism operators access their facilities in the signature site predominantly by float plane. This means of access will be permitted to continue as per provincial park regulations and policies provided in the park management plan.

Vegetation Management

For the purposes of this preliminary strategy, vegetation management refers to the conservation and management of signature site ground flora. The overall intent regarding vegetation management in the signature site is to protect rare, significant and sensitive vegetation species and communities, and to maintain the diversity and distribution of natural vegetation species and communities. Rare and significant vegetation species and communities exist within St. Raphael Provincial Park and will be protected through detailed park management planning. In the Miniss Enhanced Management Area, identified sensitive and culturally important vegetation communities will be considered during resource management planning. The Ministry of Natural Resources will ensure that sensitive and significant vegetation species and communities are considered when reviewing proposals for commercial and recreational development and uses. Commercial peat extraction is not permitted in the signature site.

Water Resources

Maintaining water quality will be a priority in land use and water management decisions pertaining to St. Raphael Signature Site. Water quality conservation will be considered at a watershed level. Aquatic ecosystem health in the signature site area will be maintained through careful planning of land and resource uses adjacent to streams, lakes and recharge areas.

Wildlife

Wildlife diversity in the St. Raphael Signature Site area is typical of the boreal region of northwestern Ontario with some species being rare or regionally uncommon. The land use intent with respect to wildlife is to help ensure healthy wildlife populations and support protection of species at risk by sustainable management of resource and land uses in the signature site. Wildlife species with stable populations are conserved through landscape level management (i.e. wildlife management units) and through local management actions (e.g. trap-line management). Wildlife studies and species at risk research will continue in the signature site. Traditional Aboriginal knowledge of wildlife use will be important in resource management planning for the signature site.

Woodland caribou habitat will be considered in management planning for St. Raphael Provincial Park through appropriate zoning and resource stewardship policies. Woodland caribou conservation in the Miniss Enhanced Management Area will be supported by the use of management guidelines, and any additional direction developed in the enhanced management area resource management plan.

Next Steps

This St. Raphael Signature Site Preliminary Strategy is being provided to the public for review. A series of open houses will be conducted in local communities to deliver the preliminary strategy. Advice provided will be considered in the preparation of the final St. Raphael Signature Site Strategy.

The final St. Raphael Signature Site Strategy will provide broad direction for Crown land uses in the signature site. The signature site strategy will guide the development of a park management plan and an enhanced management area resource management plan. These documents will be completed after the final signature site strategy is approved.

Your Invitation to Participate

As someone interested in the management of Ontario's provincial parks and Crown lands, you are invited to participate in the ongoing development of the St. Raphael Signature Site Strategy. All comments or suggestions regarding this document or any other aspects of the planning exercise are welcome. Please take the opportunity to submit your comments to the St. Raphael Signature Site Strategy Project Team at the address below:

St. Raphael Signature Site Strategy Project Team
49 Prince Street, Box 309
Sioux Lookout, ON
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or to the following e-mail address:

siouxlookoutdropbox@mnr.gov.on.ca

Pour obtenir de l'aide en français, veuillez communiquer avec le ministère – Kym Thrift – courrier électronique siouxlookoutdropbox@mnr.gov.on.ca, ou numéro de téléphone 807 737-5048