

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ST RAPHAEL SIGNATURE SITE STRATEGY - BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

The St. Raphael Signature Site is a 153,000 hectare area of remote boreal forest and lakes in northwestern Ontario's Sunset Country. This special area encompasses one of Ontario's newest provincial parks and a surrounding enhanced management area; a new land use designation under *Ontario's Living Legacy Land Use Strategy (1999)*. The components of the signature site are: St. Raphael Provincial Park (P2287) and the Miniss Enhanced Management Area (EMA) (E2283a).

The Background Document presents a summary of the information and data gathered to-date on the St. Raphael Signature Site. This information has been gathered by the Project Team with assistance from an Advisory Committee made up of representatives from the public, interest groups, and stakeholders. Information was also received from the public during the Invitation to Participate. The Background Document will form the basis for future decisions to be made during the preparation of a Strategy for the signature site. The Strategy will ensure the right opportunities are promoted in the right locations within the site and that unique and sensitive values are protected.

The strategy will encompass the vision and objectives for the site, developed with public consultation at each stage. The vision statement for the St. Raphael Signature Site, developed through input received during the Invitation to Participate, is:

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

The Signature Site Strategy will be developed through the five stages outlined below:

Stage	Document	Timing
Invitation to Participate	None	February 2003
Background Document	Background Document	January 2004 (This Document)
Issues and Management Options	Issues and Management Options	Spring 2004
Preliminary Strategy	Preliminary Strategy	Summer 2004
Final Strategy	Final Strategy	Fall 2004

As policies and direction for the Strategy are developed, they will be directly incorporated into the development of options and the preliminary and final plans for the St. Raphael Provincial Park and the Miniss EMA. The result will be a comprehensive strategy for the entire signature site, a detailed park plan for St. Raphael Provincial Park, and a detailed resource management plan for the Miniss EMA.

Background information gathered to date indicates visitors to St. Raphael come to enjoy the world class fisheries, pristine waters and wilderness experience. There is potential to expand backcountry recreation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ST RAPHAEL SIGNATURE SITE STRATEGY - BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

and eco-tourism opportunities in the signature site, drawing on the area's circular canoe routes and waterway connections to the major river systems of Lake St. Joseph and the Albany River. A thriving remote tourism industry already exists in the signature site based on fishing, and to a lesser extent, hunting, mushroom gathering, wildlife viewing and other water and land based pursuits. The development and enhancement of this industry will continue to be encouraged.

The Miniss EMA is an important part of the Caribou Forest Sustainable Forest Licence (SFL) held by Bowater Canadian Forest Products Incorporated and contributes to the wood supply of several regional forest product facilities. The Miniss EMA may also contain areas for potential mineral exploration and development.

The limited access inside St. Raphael has played a key role in maintaining the area's pristine natural beauty and remoteness. Entry into the site is currently limited to a boat launch, a winter road, unregulated snowmobile trails, air transport and canoe. Several active canoe routes make use of parts of the park waterways and access the park from several different locations. There are two small unofficial boat launch locations at Minchin Lake, located along Highway 599 on the eastern boundary of the park. Access to the signature site can also be achieved by boat from Pashkokogan Lake at Highway 599, Medcalf Lake, and from Lake St. Joseph at Miniss Bay.

An historic freight trail once ran through the signature site to Central Patricia Mine at Pickle Lake. This trail was originally established to house horses used to transport supplies to the mine, and was later upgraded to house freight trains and tractors. The trail can still be observed in some areas, but is mostly over grown and has not been active since Highway 599 was built in the early 1950s.

Existing development within the St. Raphael Signature Site is limited to facilities and structures related to outdoor recreation, tourism operations, trap cabins, and First Nation habitations. Current land use activities in the signature site include trapping, hunting, angling, remote commercial tourism, general public recreation and traditional First Nation resource harvesting.

St. Raphael supports several significant wildlife, vegetation and landscape features that are rare and representative of the region. St. Raphael Provincial Park and portions of the Miniss EMA contain important winter habitat and calving sites for woodland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*). The signature site also provides nesting grounds for species such as sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*), bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), herons (*Ardea herodias*) and osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*). The site contains four provincially rare and ten regionally rare plant species. The river darter (*Percina shumardi*), found in Churchill Lake is considered a provincially rare fish species. Four significant dragonfly and damselfly

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ST RAPHAEL SIGNATURE SITE STRATEGY - BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

species have also been observed in St. Raphael. St. Raphael protects valuable ecological communities, such as old-growth red pine (*Pinus resinosa*) stands and an extensive bog complex.

The signature site displays post-glacial features that are characteristic of northwestern Ontario. The bedrock geology contributes significantly to the geological conservation targets of Ontario Parks in that St. Raphael represents the regional structural-tectonic boundaries of three geological subprovinces of the Superior Province of the Canadian Shield. The Miniss River Fault and Churchill Batholith are provincially significant geological features in the signature site in both their display and extent. The geomorphology displayed in the area is common across the province, with beaded eskers, esker-kames, and drumlin fields being widespread across the site. The display of fluted till moraine in parts of St. Raphael is regionally significant (Frey and Duba, 2002).

The St. Raphael Signature Site captures many of the lakes connected with the St. Raphael River and the Miniss River systems, as well as one lake connected to the Pashkokogan River. The lakes and rivers of the signature site all form part of the Albany Watershed and the Upper Albany River tertiary waterway. There are over 400 permanent water bodies in the signature site and some 2,500 kilometres of shoreline.

Forest fire management will be an important consideration for the St. Raphael Signature Site. Large fires play an important role in maintaining a diverse forest mosaic and creating suitable habitat for woodland caribou and other boreal wildlife. Eco-region 3S, in which the signature site is located, has among the highest fire frequencies in Ontario, however the numerous lakes and water bodies in the signature site has limited fire activity (Harris and Foster, 2002).

Little evidence or documentation of human activity exists for the St. Raphael Signature Site due to its remoteness. However, there was a major freight train route through the area in the early 1900's, and early ancestors of the Ojibway were present in the area for approximately 1,000 years. Several archeological sites, in the form of ceremonial sites and pictographs, exist in the signature site, and demonstrate First Nation cultural and traditional use of the area. During the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s, the Hudson Bay Company established trading posts throughout the region. The waterways contained within the signature site served as important transportation routes for furs and trading goods during this period.

The St. Raphael Signature Site is located in Fisheries Division 31. No commercial fisheries are active within the signature site, although subsistence fishing may still occur in those lakes easily accessible to nearby First Nations communities. Several commercial fisheries existed in the signature site during the 1950s to the early 1970s. There are 17 baitfish blocks located either entirely or partially within the signature site boundary.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ST RAPHAEL SIGNATURE SITE STRATEGY - BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

No commercial forest harvesting has occurred within the St. Raphael Signature site in the last several decades. Recent forestry operations have occurred outside the signature site in the vicinity of Churchill Lake and Lawson Lake. The current FMP for the Caribou Forest covers the period of 2002-2022 and outlines specific operational plans for the five-year term of 2002-2007. Approximately 1,600 hectares between Vincent and Ghost lakes has been scheduled for harvest. Access options were evaluated by the Ontario Forest Accord Advisory Board, and two crossings were approved within the 2002-2022 Forest Management Plan. Any additional crossings would have to be consistent with the overall intent of the signature site strategy, and may require amendments to the park management plan.

There are 12 Bear Management Areas (BMAs) within or partially within the signature site, although only three of these BMAs, near Churchill Lake, south of Spirit Lake and south of Minchin Lake have been used in the past several years. The signature site is located in Wildlife Management Unit 16B. There are 11 traplines either wholly or partially within the signature site.

Within the signature site portages are generally in good condition and are currently maintained by outpost camp owners and their guests. Some of the lesser used portages can be difficult to locate and may be hard to traverse due to blowdown. Canoeists planning to use these routes should remember they are in a remote area, and should be prepared to handle unpredictable situations. A few portages in the site may not be suitable for today's recreational canoeist.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The following is an abbreviated list of specific challenges and opportunities identified by the project team, the advisory committee, and through correspondence with the public. The following list is not complete and is subject to public and stakeholder review. As the planning process continues, the list will be added to or redefined. Please note the list is not in any order of significance.

- Local First Nation communities have an interest in protection of cultural and traditional values, tourism development interests, and increased involvement in resource management decisions.
- Roads into the signature site are required for forestry purposes. Roads inside the Miniss EMA will have a direct impact on remoteness and must be carefully planned.
- There are no developed or official entry points into the signature site.
- Snowmobiles and ATVs have resulted in increased winter use of the signature site.
- The geology of the area is of interest to prospectors and the mining sector.
- Much of the forest in the signature site has escaped natural forest fire for extended periods. This is affecting successional pathways for the current aging forest.
- The red pine stands on Hooker Lake are aging, and regeneration is limited to non-existent.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ST RAPHAEL SIGNATURE SITE STRATEGY - BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

- The Medcalf Peatland has been identified as unique, and the strategy must explore available means of protecting this site (e.g. zoning).
- The signature site contains high quality caribou habitat and important calving sites.
- Nesting sites for sandhill cranes are uncommon in the Thunder Bay region, but were indicated to exist in the Medcalf Peatland.
- Literature suggests that lake trout and lake sturgeon were once found in lakes within the signature site.
- Fisheries in a few lakes may have been over allocated, while surpluses exist on other lakes. The strategy should outline appropriate policies to ensure the fishery remains sustainable, and suggest where and how available capacity will be utilized.
- St. Raphael contains circular canoe routes that are ideal for backcountry canoeing. The strategy will have to examine the need to improve the portages and level of services.
- Wood supply is tight in northwestern Ontario, and balancing the needs of sustainable supply and no increase in costs with the needs of other resource users will be a challenge.
- Several recreational pursuits in the signature site are, by nature, conflicting. Backcountry camping and canoeing, and motorized boating are an example of activities that are not always complementary.
- At some point there may be a need to improve services in the park. The type and location of these services and the method of delivery needs to be coordinated with the overall site strategy, to ensure existing tourism businesses, and the remote character of the signature site is not compromised.

Your Personal Invitation

As someone interested in the long-term management of Ontario's provincial parks and Crown lands, you are invited to review the Background Report and participate in the development of the signature site strategy. Any comments or suggestions regarding this background information document or any other aspects of the planning process are welcome. Please take the opportunity to submit your comments to either the Ministry of Natural Resources Project Lead or the Chair of the St. Raphael Signature Site Advisory Committee at the address below:

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Box 309
Sioux Lookout, ON. P8T 1A6

or by email to: siouxlookoutdropbox@mnr.gov.on.ca