



Polar bears

...Though only at the distance of two miles, so low and flat was the land, that it appeared ten miles off, and scarcely a tree was to be seen....

The words of R.M. Ballantyne, a clerk with the Hudson Bay Company, upon sighting this region.



Tundra, Churchill area

THE LAND:

The entire region is a vast sodden plain that slopes gently toward the sea at a gradient of less than a metre per kilometre. Up to 85 percent of the region is muskeg or peat-forming wetlands. Such a huge expanse

of peat occurs nowhere else in North America and in only a few places in the world.

This is a land more of water than earth. Water lies everywhere - shallow oblong lakes, rivers that meander endlessly, streams running nowhere, bogs and fens; up to 50 percent of the surface is covered by water. Water in the form of permafrost underlies much of the region, resulting in landforms such as patterned ground, string bogs and palsas (mounds of frozen peat). In summer, walking is torture. Possibly nowhere else on earth are biting and sucking insects more abundant.

VEGETATION:

Approaching from sea as the first Europeans did, one sees a treeless land. Out-

Major Land Uses

Major nesting area for shorebirds and

geese

Tourism - polar bear viewing

Main Communities

Churchill

Moose Factory - Moosonee

York Factory

Aboriginal Peoples**Parks and Natural Areas**

Wapusk National Park

Polar Bear Provincial Park

Further Information

This Google Earth image shows just how wet the area around James Bay is. This location just west of Moosonee is only 12 m above sea level.



side of alpine areas this is one of the most southerly expanses of tundra in the world. Separating the treeless tundra from the boreal forest is a mosaic of forest and tundra. Farther inland, dense forests of white spruce, balsam fir, aspen, balsam poplar and white birch occur on well-drained riverbanks and lake shores. Black spruce and tamarack spread over vast expanses of poorly drained muskeg.



Willow Ptarmigan

WILDLIFE:

The region is famous for its polar bears. A unique characteristic of this most southerly population of polar bears is that they construct summer dens to cool off in. Some are more than six metres deep and have probably been used for centuries. Caribou concentrate along the coastline in summer and winter inland among the boreal forests. In summer the coast of this region is alive with birds. Lesser snow geese, small Canada geese, brant, tundra swans, oldsquaw, king eider, northern phalarope and a host of shorebirds nest here.

STATUS OF NATIONAL PARKS:

A federal-provincial agreement establishing Wapusk National Park was signed in Churchill on April 24th, 1996 in the presence of the Prince of Wales, whose namesake fort is nearby. Parks Canada, Manitoba, the Local Government District of Churchill and Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (representing the northern Manitoba First Nations of Fox Lake and York Factory) worked together to achieve this agreement. Wapusk National Park, at 11,475 km², is the largest national park situated entirely in the provinces. Wapusk is the Cree name for white bear.

The national park includes one of the largest known polar bear denning sites in the world and is one of the most accessible places known to view polar bears. The Hudson Bay coastline provides critical waterfowl and shorebird nesting and feeding habitat.



Attawapiskat River



The Moosonee Museum is tucked away in the high school, but well worth the visit. Traditional clothes, works of art, and crafts are on display.

Hundreds of thousands of geese nest across the coastal wetlands. Of course, the local people take advantage of this dependable food source. The making of decoys has been raised to an art form.



Natural Region 27



James Bay Lowlands

In addition, the area includes most of the natural resource features typical of the larger natural region, including: low-lying landscape with little relief; extensive muskeg; beach ridges; glacial features such as eskers; permafrost; and low arctic and subarctic vegetation.

Not only does the proposed national park offer superlative wildlife viewing, but visi-

tors to the area can also enjoy significant cultural resources. Four sites of national historic significance are located in the vicinity, including York Factory, for nearly three centuries the Hudson's Bay Company's principal fur trade centre, and the ruins of Fort Prince of Wales, a massive stone fortification built by the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1700s.





The daily Ontario Northland train goes where no car or truck ever has ventured: across the coastal wetland in the summer. Tourists can take it north in the morning, then return the same evening, getting a quick taste of life in the north. For local people, this route is a critical connection to the services of southern Ontario.



Muskeg comes in two varieties: wet (above) and even wetter (below). Black spruce grow in the slightly less wet sites, and various mosses cover the ground. Sometimes, the mosses even grow across ponds, making a floating mat of moss, known as a “quaking bog”. In the lower picture, the spruce trees have died, perhaps because the railway is acting as a dam and has raised the water level.

