

## Letter of support for the nomination of the North Saskatchewan River

By Lorne Taylor

Okimaw Vernon Watchmaker, the Grand Chief of the Confederation of Treaty Number 6 First Nations has written a letter of support for the nomination of the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta to the Canadian Heritage River System. The Confederation of Treaty 6 Nations was created in 1993 to service as the united political voice for the 16 Treaty Nations that were signatures of Treaty number 6.

Okimaw Vernon Watchmaker was elected chief of the Kehwin Cree Nation in 2018 and appointed Grand Chief of the Confederation in 2021..

“I am pleased to provide this letter on behalf of the Nations across Treaty No. 6 Territory, to express our enthusiasm in support of nominating and designating the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta to the Canadian Heritage River System (CHRS), which would honor its exceptional natural, cultural, recreational and spiritual values.

The North Saskatchewan River, kisiskaciwan-sipiy, (“it flows swiftly”) holds substantial traditional significance, being a place of gathering, commerce, and ceremony from time immemorial. The Great Binding Law provides a framework to live in harmony with the land for

generations to come.

It tells us that if we look after the land, the land will look after us. It is also an extension of kindness to newcomers, including regulators and resource developers ensuring that no more polluting of this sacred river will be allowed. Further, the spirit and intent of Treaty was expressed by Commissioner Alexander Morris at the entering into of Treaty No. 6 at Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt in 1876, when he stated, “What we speak of and do now will last as long as the sun shines and the river runs, we are looking forward to our children’s children, for we are old and have but few days to live.”

The North Saskatchewan River has always been an integral part of our heritage since time immemorial and continues to be an integral part of our Treaty No. 6. At Fort Pitt when Commissioner Morris indicated “as long as yonder river flows” he was pointing to the North Saskatchewan River. Water is life to the Indigenous Peoples of Treaty No. 6 Territory, as a matter of fact our word for water literally means life; “Nipi” derived from “Niya” My “Pimatisiwin” Life. So much so that when Treaty No. 6 was entered into by our ancestors, the mountains where the headwaters of the rivers are were not even on the table for discussion, these they reserved for

all future generations so that the clean/clear life-giving water would always be there for the continued good health and good medicine for all. With its deceptively slow-moving surface and its ever-shifting features, with its permanence and its continual movement, the river is a suitable metaphor for Indigenous storytelling. Indeed, traditional stories are the most ancient literature of this land, yet they continue to change and shift and to speak to the realities of people in the present day.

Today, the North Saskatchewan River continues to be of great importance. Designation under the CHRS would serve to encourage enduring respect and stewardship of this landscape and grow relations among river communities. These are values and aspirations we support.”

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OKIMAW VERNON WATCH-  
MAKER

GRAND CHIEF, CONDEDERA-  
CY OF TREATY 6 FIRST NATIONS

The letter was on the agenda of the Smoky Lake town Council meeting of April 6, 2021. Mayor Hank Hollowaychuk said it was gratifying to see a letter of support from the First Nations. Town and county planners Kyle Schole and Jordan Ruegg have done a lot to promote the nomination of the river.