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HEADLINE: World Heritage Site's fate rests with Ottawa: Nahanni National Park: Northwest Territories asks for help to settle land squabbles (Toronto edition headline.); Territories ask Ottawa's help with park's future: Nahanni National Park: Conservationists, industries vie for land (All but Toronto edition headline.)

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CALGARY - Nahanni National Park, site of one of the world's most wild and scenic rivers, is under such development pressure that a regulatory review agency in the Northwest Territories has taken the unusual measure of asking the federal government to intervene.

While southern provincial governments jealously guard their jurisdictions, the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review

Board recently asked Robert Nault, the Northern Affairs Minister, and Sheila Copps, the minister responsible for Parks Canada, to settle jurisdictional differences within their departments to help decide what kind of developments -- if any -- are appropriate around the park.

The plea by the board may help resolve decades-long development issues for the Nahanni River, where conservationists have long dreamed of expanding the park and where industry is frustrated by what both say is a regulatory mess.

Located on the Yukon-Northwest Territories border, the park is home to Virginia Falls, twice the height of Niagara, and is often referred to as Canada's Grand Canyon. There are about a dozen development proposals on the resource-rich fringes of the park, whose boundaries are said to have been determined not by environmental considerations but by the fuel limits of a survey plane.

Public policy experts say the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs is at odds with Parks Canada over the Nahanni due to conflicting mandates. Northern Affairs' mandate includes promoting economic development in the North, while Parks Canada is charged

** with protecting the ecological integrity of Canada's national parks.

Internal reports by Parks Canada and the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board portray government departments working against each other and a complicated regulatory system that frustrates both industry and environmentalists with proposals that are dealt with on a piecemeal basis.

"The board recognizes there is a problem here and somebody needs to show some leadership and deal with it. Where governments fail to exercise powers to protect the public interest, these boards should be doing that," said Kevin O'Reilly, research director for the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee.

Neil Hartling of Whitehorse, who runs wilderness river tours on the Nahanni, also says a holistic approach is necessary.

"We're not opposed to mining, but what we're saying is, 'Let's look at everything in its entirety.' In fairness to the mining industry, let's fix this system because it's unfair to every stakeholder to go down this path," Mr. Hartling said.

The Nahanni region, which has an almost mythical appeal for environmentalists, is experiencing a modern-day gold rush for resources, ranging from oil and gas to minerals. Last week, conservationists were lobbying for an environmental assessment on seismic testing for a natural gas project south of the park's boundaries.

Major, more pressing developments include a \$140-million mining operation by Canadian Zinc Corporation of Vancouver on Prairie Creek, a tributary that flows into the park's most famous feature, the South Nahanni River. Canadian Zinc also wants to build a 165-kilometre all-weather road through adjoining land that Parks Canada hopes to annex as part of a buffer zone around the park.

Companies are also searching in the proposed buffer zone for other minerals such as tantalum, which is used in making electronic components. Late last year, a mine that had been shut down since 1988 was reopened by North American Tungsten Corporation at the northwest corner of the park.

The projects are proceeding so rapidly that the United Nations committee that chose Nahanni as its first World Heritage Site in 1978 -- picking it over such natural wonders as Yellowstone Park -- sent a letter of concern last summer to the federal government. The UN committee could designate the Nahanni as a World Heritage Site in danger. Such a rebuke carries no weight other than being an embarrassment for the government of Jean Chretien, which has touted Nahanni as one of the premier wilderness parks in the world.

The park was established in 1974 largely through the efforts of Pierre Trudeau, the former prime minister. He was so awed by the dark canyons, steaming hot springs and abundant wildlife during a two-week canoe trip down the South Nahanni in 1970 that he suggested to Mr. Chretien, then minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, that the area become a national park.

Becky Mason, daughter of the late author, filmmaker and famed canoeist Bill Mason, is among those concerned about the future of the Nahanni.

"I know if [my father] was alive today it would break his heart if he knew that one of his favourite places was threatened," she said in an e-mail to conservationists last week.

The Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board's appeal to Mr. Nault and Ms. Copps is seen as significant because it comes from an agency that has never turned down a development proposal and rarely sends projects to full environmental review. But in the case of Canadian Zinc, the board in a written report concluded the mine is likely to have a significant environmental impact in and around the park.

Another agency, the Mackenzie Valley Land and Water Board, expressed environmental concerns in November about Canadian Zinc's Prairie Creek mine. Parks Canada has also raised concerns about the impact of the mine, which exists just outside the park on a site that was worked by previous companies long before the park as established. Pollutants from the previous operations, including cyanide and PCB storage sites, have been identified, and cleanup proposals are being worked out. The area has been subject to flash floods in recent years, one of which claimed the life of a park visitor.

Parks Canada proposed tripling the size of Nahanni National Park under a 1987 management plan. The park's original boundaries, drawn in 1976, protected only one of 23 watersheds in the region, conservationists note.

"When the park was first established, the constraints for the boundary were apparently determined by the fuel capacity of a Norseman aircraft that could fly the park on one tank. So you

ended up with a skinny park that encased the main river channel but doesn't encapsulate the watershed, so it doesn't well protect the area," said Mr. Hartling.

"The environmental assessment regime that currently exists only requires that they look at each phase as each package unto its own, and there isn't any requirement to look at the cumulative effects of these things."

ILLUSTRATION: Black & White Photo: Ed Struzik, The Edmonton Journal / A biologist with Parks Canada takes in the views of Nahanni National Park. Pierre Trudeau helped establish the park in 1974 after he took a canoe trip down one of its rivers.

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