

History

May 2021

Introduction

The lower Winnipeg River basin (LWRB) is located in the northwest section of the entire Winnipeg River basin (WRB), which spans parts of western Ontario and small parts of Manitoba and northern Minnesota, United States. The Discussion Sheet Series highlights research on ecological and socio-economic aspects of the basin to encourage discussion with experts, government departments, Indigenous groups, and stakeholders. The Discussion Sheet Series is based on available data collected in 2018 and 2019. Sheet 8 of 11 summarizes the history of the LWRB.

History of Winnipeg River Use and Developments in the Basin

The Winnipeg River has historically been a major east–west transportation route, connecting the northern Great Plains to the Laurentian Great Lakes. Archeological studies determined that the human presence in the LWRB (Whiteshell area) can be traced back to 3000 BCE (Marsh, 2006). Petroforms found near the Whiteshell River point to the importance of this area for Indigenous travel and ceremonies. Many of these sacred sites for Indigenous People are still used for teachings and healing.

In the 17th century, the Winnipeg River became a major fur trade route for the Montreal-based North West Company; it connected the Red River region (Fort Maurepas located on Traverse Bay, near the mouth of the Winnipeg River) to Lake of the Woods (Fort St. Charles). Quebecois explorer Pierre Gauthier, Sieur de la Verendrye, is well known for his travels in the Winnipeg River region in the 1730s (Government of Manitoba, n.d.a; Penny, 1970, p. 137). The voyageurs transported furs from inland posts through the LWRB to Fort William (present Thunder Bay, Ontario). These trips ceased when the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company merged in 1821 (Government of Manitoba, n.d.b)

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the expansion of railway networks into the west made the Winnipeg River an obsolete mode of transporting commercial goods and travel. The last



canoe brigade to use the Winnipeg River was that of the Wolseley Expeditionary Force sent by the Canadian government to confront Louis Riel's Red River Rebellion in August 1870 (Government of Manitoba, n.d.a; Lac du Bonnet and District Historical Society, 2019).

EVENTS IN THE LWRB IN THE LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES:

- 1871–1873** **Signing of Treaties 1 and 3 between Indigenous Peoples and the Crown.** Treaty 1 was negotiated and came into effect in August 1871, and Treaty 3 was signed in October 1873 (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010). Treaties are foundational documents affirming Indigenous and Treaty rights. These rights are protected under S.35 of the Constitution Act.
- 1883** **Railroad development:** The line of the Canadian Pacific Railway connecting Winnipeg and Fort William (Thunder Bay, Ontario) was fully operational by 1883 (Government of Manitoba, n.d.a). The line connected eastern Canada to the LWRB and Winnipeg (Canadian Pacific Railway Company, 1912).
- 1906** **Hydroelectric development:** The Pinawa dam on the Winnipeg River was constructed in 1906, marking the beginning of hydroelectric development in LWRB (Kives, 2006). The Pinawa dam was Manitoba's first year-round producer of electrical power. The station closed in 1951 (Government of Manitoba, n.d.c). During the 20th century, six additional hydraulic generating stations were built in the LWRB that still operate today. The Winnipeg River flow is regulated at the outlets of the Lake of the Woods (Ontario), as well as on the English River tributary (Ontario) (LWCB, 2002a).
- 1920–1930** **Mineral development:** Being part of the mineral-rich Precambrian Shield, the LWRB attracted significant mining activity in the early 20th century. Mineral explorations in the Bird River greenstone belt resulted in the discovery of copper-nickel deposits around 1920 (Manitoba Rocks, n.d.). In the 1930s, the first commercial shipments of lithium were made from Bernic Lake¹ (Manitoba Rocks, n.d.).
- 1926** **Pine Falls paper mill:** The coal-fuelled Pine Falls paper mill was built in 1926 and, beginning in 1927, produced 250 tonnes of paper per day. The mill supported the entire town of Pine Falls, which was established around the mill specifically for workers and their families. In the 1970s, Pine Falls mill was the only newspaper-making facility on the Prairies, producing 480 tonnes of paper per day (Goldsborough & Kotak, 2017). The forest supply for the mill came from the LWRB area under Tembec Industries Inc.'s (Tembec) Forest Management Licenses (FML) 01 (Government of Manitoba, 2013). The mill closed permanently in 2010 and was later fully demolished.

¹ Bernic Lake is located just north of Whiteshell Provincial Park in the LWRB.



1930 **Whiteshell Provincial Park:** In 1931, the Whiteshell Forest Reserve was created under the Forest Act of 1930. Thirty years later, in 1961, Whiteshell was turned into one of Manitoba’s first provincial parks after the passing of the Provincial Parks Act (Government of Manitoba, n.d.d). The creation of Whiteshell Provincial Park enabled people to realize the recreation potential of the Winnipeg River area.

The establishment of mining and forestry industries and the incorporation of Whiteshell Provincial Park led to road development in the LWRB for access purposes. Also, Highway 1 became a key east–west route incorporated as part of the Trans-Canada Highway in 1962, running through the LWRB and further connecting the LWRB to different parts of the country (TransCanadaHighway.com, n.d.).

Increased road connectivity contributed to tourism development. The LWRB became a popular destination for outdoor activities, attracting summer cottagers, campers, and anglers due to its abundance of water, proximity to the boreal forest, and the location of the provincial park with campsites and other facilities.² The demand for cottaging increased. O’Shaughnessy (1978) reported that the number of private cottages grew steadily from 1961 to 1971 in eastern Manitoba.

Knowledge of the history of people living in the watershed, past developments, and their impacts helps us better understand the current economic realities and social dynamics. It also helps position any initiative undertaken in the watershed within the reality and culture of communities for better outcomes.

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² See Sheet 10: Industries and Economic Activity for details on tourism and recreation in the LWRB.



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