

Northern mountain range to be protected

The Ne'Ch' area near Yukon border is 'high-value habitat' for wildlife

LARRY PYNN
Postmedia News

VANCOUVER — A wild and massive "island" mountain range known to the Kaska Dena First Nation as "the place where animals go to get fat" is expected to become a protected zone in northwestern B.C. near the Yukon border.

The Ne'Ch' — also known as the Horseranch Range — consists of about 201,800 hectares of "high-value habitat," for caribou,

moose, Stone's sheep, mountain goat and grizzly bears.

Located east of Highway 37 near the native community of Good Hope Lake, the wilderness area has been recommended for protection by the Dease-Liard Sustainable Resource Management Plan, a provincial process that involves various government ministries in consultation with groups such as First Nations and industry to determine the economic and environmental values of resources.

Its report, released in August, outlines the management plan for the Dease and Liard river drainages, an area encompassing 2.38 million hectares.

The plan describes Ne'Ch' as an "island mountain range" nestled between the Cassiar Mountains and Liard Plains, its waters flowing to the Mackenzie River and on to the Arctic.

Bill Lux, a representative of the Dena Kayeh Institute, the Kaska nation's non-profit environmental arm, said Tuesday he expects the provincial cabinet to confirm the Ne'Ch' protected area as early as February. He described Ne'Ch' as

about 40 kilometres in length, with the tree line extending about halfway up the range.

"It is one long contiguous mountain range that stands on its own," he said.

The northern end features rolling grassy hills and valleys that are habitat for grizzlies, moose and caribou, while the southern, craggier parts are home to mountain goats and Stone's sheep.

"That's why this range is so important; it has sustained our people forever," Lux said.

"That's where the animals go to get fat before moving to their wintering

grounds. It has everything, a really unique mountain."

The range can be entered by foot or horseback on traditional trails, or by aircraft.

Horseranch Lake, Pike Lake, Vincent Lake, Looncry Lake and Deadwood Lake lie within the area.

Chloe O'Loughlin, executive director of the B.C. chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, which has worked with the Kaska nation to press for legislated protection for Ne'Ch', said the top of the range features lichen-covered rocks and a spongy surface along which "one can walk for miles and

miles, and look down on these incredible landscapes."

The idea is to incorporate the proposed new protected area with the 4,597-hectare Boya Lake Provincial Park, immediately to the west.

O'Loughlin feels the "unique and special area" is worthy of becoming part of a national park.

Lux said he favours a conservancy designation that has fewer hard restrictions, adding the Kaska Dena are seeking a co-management agreement with the province that would allow traditional activities such as hunting and trapping, and ecotourism.