

Today, the salt sparkles like diamonds, casually reminding observers this is one of Alberta's oldest industries. For hundreds of years, aboriginal people used the mineral to cure fish and meat, and to tan hides. In later years, missionaries and the Hudson's Bay Company harvested salt and shipped it for export.

In 1920, it was sold for the gainful sum of 10 cents per pound (22 cents per kilogram), the equivalent of 99 cents (\$2.18 per kilogram) in today's dollars.

When outsiders think of the geography of the North, it's usually the image of lush boreal forests that comes to mind, not an ancient sea that washed over the land thousands of years ago. All that remains of that today are the salt plains, whose whisperings remind us of water's infinite importance to the region.

"Water is life, water is sacred," says Francois Paulette, who lives in Alberta's northernmost community, Fort Fitzgerald, situated just outside the park and down a gravel road from the Northwest Territories. His ancestors, the Dene Suline, have been here since "time immemorial," according to the band's mission statement framed on the walls of the new community centre.

The extensive rivers and pristine lakes have always defined the North. They were the highways before the age of the blacktop, opening up the West to early explorers, trappers, missionaries and settlers. Long before that, aboriginals had used these same land and water routes for thousands of years.

The Athabasca and Peace river systems are the largest waterways in the area. Hundreds of tributaries flow into the rivers, which eventually join the mighty Slave that pours into the Arctic Ocean. Fertile prairie, ranchland and farmland surround the Peace. The Athabasca oilsands, one of the world's largest deposits of oil, dominate the surrounding area of the Athabasca River and Fort McMurray.

The oilsands have brought billions of dollars of investment to the region — and another \$100 billion is on the way. The impact has been huge. Entire towns are employed, through direct and spinoff jobs, while the surrounding landscape is being transformed.

Logging, mining, and oil and gas operations are using up chunks of land and of the northern boreal forest. The trend has seen the international scientific community pressure Canada to adopt tougher conservation efforts, while corporations develop stronger, and more innovative, environmental plans.

In a study released last year, scientists David Schindler and Bill Donahue noted the flow of the Athabasca River has decreased by one-third since 1970, a result of human and industrial activity, and climate change. Other research is still trying to determine how much water the river can afford to lose before its health is threatened.

The geography of the North, though, is more than water and minerals. Heavily forested, the massive

expanse of land north of Edmonton to the N.W.T. is relatively flat. Imagine Alberta's southern open skies, but add a carpet of trees.

"This country is so level that, at some seasons, it is entirely overflowed, which accounts for the periodical influx and reflux of waters between the Lake of the Hills and the Peace River," wrote Mackenzie.

The Lakeland region northeast of Edmonton is where many early fur-trading posts were established. Elevated plateaus include Swan Hills at 1,200 metres, and the Birch and Caribou mountains, the latter providing a core habitat for the endangered woodland caribou. Aspen parkland makes up the southern area, while boreal forest and the low-lying bogs and marshes of muskeg are found to the north.

The importance of the boreal forest, a massive carbon storehouse, can't be overstated. It's been called the second lung of the Earth after the Amazon, providing animals and plants with a natural habitat large enough to act as a buffer for any climate change affecting northern species.

Enter Wood Buffalo National Park — a World Heritage Site slightly bigger than Switzerland that protects a significant chunk of Canada's boreal forest. It provides a refuge for the largest free-roaming, self-regulating herd of bison in the world. In many ways, it is a microcosm for much of the geography of the North, a magical canopy of only those trees hearty enough to



Muskeg and boreal forest dominate Wood Buffalo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site slightly larger than Switzerland.



The red-sided garter snake, seen here in a mating ball, is the only species of i