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# ***"Conservation and Protection of the Belcher Islands Archipelago: Achieving A Community Vision"***

**Target 1 Challenge – Nature Fund**

**Expression of Interest, January 2019**

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**Project Title:** Conservation and Protection of the Belcher Islands: Achieving a Community Vision

**Project Location:** Sanikiluaq/Belcher Islands Archipelago, Hudson Bay, Nunavut  
(3 Million Hectares)

**Contacts:**

Lucassie Arragutainaq, Manager, Sanikiluaq Hunters and Trappers Association  
House 408B Box 174  
Sanikiluaq, NU  
X0A 0W0  
(e) sani@baffithto.ca  
(p) 867-266-8709

Joel Heath, Ph.D. Executive Director, The Arctic Eider Society  
House 408B Box 174      52 Bonaventure Ave.  
Sanikiluaq, NU      St. John's, NL  
X0A 0W0      A1C 3Z6  
(e) joelheath@arcticeider.com  
(p) 613-416-9607 x2

**Project Description:**

The Belcher Island archipelago in the heart of Hudson Bay is a complex, unique and sensitive region that has been long recognized as a priority for stewardship and conservation. The unique habitats and geography of the archipelago act as a terrestrial refuge and migratory corridor for wildlife in summer, and the extensive land fast sea ice platform that forms around them in winter provides a unique vantage point for the larger Hudson Bay ecosystem. From this vantage point, the Inuit of Sanikiluaq are the sentinels and stewards of the region, with a rich history of mobilizing Inuit knowledge (*Voices from the Bay*, 1997), effective co-management, and developing community-driven research and monitoring programs. The wildlife they steward and rely on includes a unique relationship with the non-migratory sub-species of the Common Eider (*Somateria melissima sedentaria*) which remains on the islands year-round and is a key indicator species for large-scale ecosystem change (*People of a Feather*, 2011).

The archipelago has been identified and recommended for protection by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) as both a key terrestrial (Latour et al. 2008) and marine (Mallory & Fontaine 2004) site for migratory birds. It includes Important Bird Areas (IBAs), and was suggested as a Natural Area of Canadian Significance (Stewart and Lockhart, 2005), particularly related to walrus haul out sites and the indigenous sub-species of Common Eider. The terrestrial habitat of the archipelago is the primary nesting grounds for the entire sub-species, which remain aggregated at particularly productive coastal habitats and a network of polynya oases that form in the land fast ice platform during winter. The region is therefore critical habitat year-round and provides a unique opportunity to steward both breeding and wintering habitats within the same protected area. Winter habitats are particularly difficult to protect, as most species are wide ranging and ephemeral; however, the association with coastal polynyas provides a predictable and consistently important area for birds and mammals, allowing highly effective year-round protection measures in a well-defined area with high confidence in the importance of the site (Mallory and Fontaine 2004). Breeding and wintering aggregations make the population particularly vulnerable to the risk of disturbance and environmental change, further impetus for protecting and conserving the region. Diverse other resident and migratory species also rely on the archipelago including seaducks, seabirds, shorebirds, fish, shellfish and mammals (e.g. walrus, polar bear, seals, reindeer, migratory and a recently identified winter sub-population of beluga). Isostatic rebound in the region means the terrestrial ecosystem continues to increase each year, providing new islands and a unique topography of cultural sites. Given all these considerations, a protected area for the region is long-overdue with strong backing for a unique Indigenous stewardship model.

This Expression of Interest (EOI) from the community of Sanikiluaq is being submitted by the Arctic Eider Society (a registered Indigenous charity based in Sanikiluaq) in partnership with the Sanikiluaq Hunters and Trappers Association and Municipality. Together, these organizations have a long history of working in partnership with ECCC and DFO developing community-driven research and regional stewardship, and are ideally positioned to deliver an exceptional project for the Challenge – Nature Fund in a timeframe that will contribute 300,000 hectares of land to Canada's 2020 goals of conserving 17% of terrestrial and inland water in a cost-effective and proven manner. This EOI will support the creation of interim status as an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) by 2020 for the entire region of the Belcher Islands exclusive to Nunavut (inclusive of both marine and terrestrial ecosystems, as per the Nunavut Land Use Plan). Together this represents 3 million hectares that will provide the opportunity for potential designation as the largest National Wildlife Area (NWA) in Canada.

This project will provide the infrastructure, training, planning, employment and community engagement critically necessary to meet these goals and will support significant youth experience and capacity building in the implementation process. It will involve direct partnership with Qikiqtaaluk Wildlife Board, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., Government of Nunavut, Nunavut Planning Commission, Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, ECCC, and DFO throughout the process of establishing the protected and conserved area, as well as ongoing

consultation and coordination with the neighboring Inuit and Cree communities and organizations in Nunavik, Ontario, Quebec and Manitoba. It is the result of a long-term community-driven approach to partnerships that reflect a path towards self-determination as identified as a priority for reconciliation by this government. This EOI demonstrates achievability, stakeholder support, alignment with Nature Fund priorities, stable and committed funding to meet the budget requirements and performance measures. The project builds on existing capacity of the Arctic Eider Society and the community of Sanikiluaq, who have secured significant matching funds of ~\$1.2M through non-government sources and are requesting a total of \$6.4 million from the Nature Fund. Exploration of additional sources (\$400k) to meet the 20% matching fund requirement are underway.

#### **Additional Information and Progress:**

Sanikiluaq has had a long-term interest in protecting the full region of the Belcher Islands, as indicated in the Nunavut Land Use Plan (NLUP). Over the last 2 years, protected areas planning has been ongoing including meeting with Environment and Climate Change Canada, Fisheries and Oceans and the Nunavut Planning Commission to identify and plan specific measures for protection. An extensive compilation of background research has been ongoing, and a follow-up meeting is planned for March 2019 that will bring key stakeholders to Sanikiluaq to move this effort forward. As such, the community has been working on an ongoing basis and is well positioned to contribute to interim status as an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area for the 2020 deadline. Given the uniqueness of the islands and tight connections between terrestrial and marine habitats, a National Wildlife Area is being considered as a long-term protection strategy with the caveat of a community desire for a whole-of-government approach that further brings Fisheries and Oceans to the table for long-term stewardship, whether or not Marine Protected Areas legislation is implemented.

The community has been further coordinating with neighboring communities and regions through the Hudson Bay Consortium to share progress and facilitate a regional networked approach to large-scale stewardship of the region.

Extensive expertise and community-driven leadership in research and stewardship facilitating self-determination have been clearly demonstrated by the project team through long-term relationships with the Federal Government (INAC, DFO, and ECCC in particular) and recognized by prestigious awards and funding (e.g., Voices from the Bay, People of a Feather, 2017 Google.org Impact Challenge in Canada). Despite achieving a lot on minimal resources for many years, a key gap in capacity and infrastructure remains towards long-term large-scale stewardship of the region that is critical to address pre-implementation of this extensive protected area. The HTA and AES have been working for many years to address these gaps, saving and raising significant matching funds that this proposal will leverage to create a community research station, acquire necessary equipment, create training and employment opportunities for effective stewardship of the region, in addition to the planning and implementation measures.

Funding from the Nature Challenge will support:

- 1) The final identification and selection process for the actual area (including site assessment);
- 2) The feasibility assessment process; securement and agreement process; and regulatory process;
- 3) Critical infrastructure development to facilitate readiness for effective stewardship of the region once implemented and,
- 4) Stewardship management planning and development, training, education and employment of (Guardians style) community-driven monitoring with partners and stakeholders.

#### References Cited

Latour, P.B. et al. 2008. Key migratory bird terrestrial habitat sites in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Occasional paper 114, Canadian Wildlife Service.

MacDonald, M., Arragutainaq, L., and Novalinga, M. 1997. Voices from the Bay. Voices from the Bay: traditional ecological knowledge of Inuit and Cree in the Hudson Bay bioregion. Canadian Arctic Resources Committee; Environmental Committee of Municipality of Sanikiluaq, Ottawa, ON. xiii + 98 p.

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