

Blog: Wildlife Monitoring Project Starts off with a Bang in Whitefish Lake (Atikameg) First Nation

After participating in the Environmental Monitoring Technician Training Program in 2015, Fabian Grey, Consultation Manager for the Whitefish Lake (Atikameg) First Nation, had an idea to start a wildlife monitoring training program for his Nation so that the community could conduct its own monitoring.

Now, Fabian's idea is becoming a reality with support from the Government of Canada's Community Based Oil Sands Monitoring Fund which provides \$2 million annually for environmental monitoring initiatives in Alberta's oil sands region that are led by Indigenous communities.

The three-year Whitefish Lake wildlife monitoring project is a partnership between the Whitefish (Atikameg) First Nation, InnoTech Alberta and the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute and will train community members to set up a network of wildlife cameras across the Whitefish Lake First Nation to monitor deer, elk, moose, bear, wolf and other medium-sized predators. Traditional Knowledge will be important for selecting the locations in which the cameras should be deployed.

Once the cameras are deployed, community members will be trained to enter the data obtained from the cameras into an electronic database and tag species in the images using the database functions. This data obtained from the program will improve understanding of wildlife in various habitats and during various seasons and will be useful for management decision making including responding to industry development applications or deciding which species to harvest and at what level.

"I think Whitefish has broken the record, they setup 75 cameras in just 13 days!" says Dr. Shauna-Lee Chai, who works on the project. "They also advocated for a random sample design, which is an ecologist's dream. Usually, we settle for camera locations in proximity to roads or trails, but not these guys. They want the best sample design that will yield the best information, and that's a big plus we got in working with Whitefish. We look forward to what years two and three will bring."

"I hope First Nations Traditional Knowledge can be incorporated with Western science to better understand and monitor wildlife and the environment for future generations." Fabian Grey, Consultation Manager for the Whitefish Lake (Atikameg) First Nation.

The vision for the project is to create a sustainable monitoring program in which community members will have ongoing opportunities to continue to use their newly developed skills long after completion of the three-year project.