A decade-long bid to see a huge tract of land on the east side of the province designated as a United Nations World Heritage Site got a little shot in the arm today.

Delegates at UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee meetings in Doha, Qatar discussed possible changes to the evaluation process for the nomination of proposed sites that have both cultural and natural values.

Efforts by the five First Nations to secure World Heritage site status for Pimachiowin Aki suffered a setback last year when UNESCO’s world heritage committee deferred its decision. The committee said it was unclear whether the area is unique and requested more information from its proponents, which include the provincial government, Ontario and the federal government. Lobbying for the designation started in 2004.

UNESCO said last year it wanted more information on the cultural value the 33,400-square-kilometre area has to First Nations people.

"This nomination raises fundamental issues in terms of how the indissoluble bonds that exist in some places between culture and nature might be recognized on the World Heritage List for the cultural value of nature," the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a body affiliated with UNESCO, said in its report.

The Pimachiowin Aki project is a collaboration of Poplar River, Bloodvein, Little Grand Rapids, Paungassi and Pikangikum, which is in northwestern Ontario.

The Manitoba government has already committed or spent more than $14 million on the project. Ontario has also provided funding. The two provinces have signed a memorandum of understanding to protect and manage the site and surrounding natural resources to strengthen the site's application.

A second attempt to get the UNESCO recognition may not come until 2016.

At a meeting last year of a UN group in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, delegates discussed issues in the UNESCO evaluation process that limited evaluators from looking at the interrelationship between culture and nature.

Mat Jacobson, a conservation officer with Pew Charitable Trusts, which supports the Pimachiowin Aki bid, said delegates in Qatar wanted to know how the criteria for the current evaluation process for mixed nominations might be changed. They called for a report on the subject. Jacobson is attending the meeting in Qatar.
"I was very happy with the way the discussion went here in Qatar and I think it's going to lead to some positive outcomes, not just for Pimachiowin Aki but in the long run for sites like this and for the recognition of indigenous land-use management across the world and their role in the protection of large intact landscapes," Jacobson said.

Jacobson said the report is to be discussed at the next meeting in Bonn, Germany next year.

He said the German delegation supported Pimachiowin Aki's efforts to revamp the evaluation process.

Tim Badman, director of the World Heritage at the International Union for Conservation of Nature, also commented on the process.

"The Pimachiowin Aki nomination has triggered a much larger revision process that is going to make it much easier in the future to have sites like this be adopted and really open the door for other indigenously-led world heritage nominations to not have to go through the difficulties this one has gone through," he said. "Everybody wants to see this work."

UNESCO recognizes more than 900 areas across the globe as world heritage sites, including the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the historic fishing town of Lunenburg, N.S. Most are recognized for either environmental qualities or cultural history.

Canada now has 17 such UNESCO sites, including the Rideau Canal in Ottawa and Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump in Alberta. Red Bay National Historic Site in Labrador was approved as a World Heritage Site last year.

Pimachiowin Aki would be the first such UNESCO site in Manitoba. It's hoped it will lead to a rise in ecotourism for the area.

bruce.owen@freepress.mb.ca