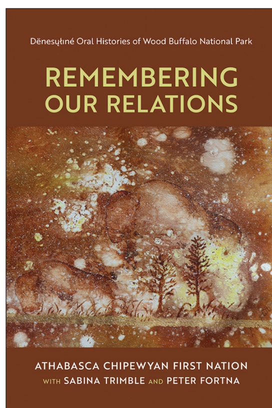

REMEMBERING OUR RELATIONS: DËNESŲŁINÉ ORAL HISTORIES OF WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK

Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation with Sabina Trimble and Peter Fortna

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Introduction: nuhenálé noréltth'er

So when the [white] people came to talk to [my Ancestors], they were saying the buffalo was declining down south and they wanted land for the buffalo. And they could use that land for a number of years, and First Nations people in that region, in the area, on the land, could just go on doing what they want to do. But after they got the land, things changed, yeah? They developed policies saying that 'you can't do this, you can't do that.' And the Elders were trying to tell the officials that it's not what the first official had said.

And then after that, they came back after with their document saying that you have to leave. Or you had to be with Cree Band, they said—all the people that were in those little settlements, those little camps . . . they were ACFN. Then what happened after that? They burnt their houses down, and they were never compensated for that. Also, [the AFCN people] felt that there was an injustice because they said they were going to not do this, not do this and they turned around and did it. And they were kind of upset with that and nobody talked about it because no one was translating.

And now they're saying, some of our Elders are saying that, that land is ours, you should just give it to us. There's no need for us to negotiate it. We let them use it for X number of years, and the use has expired. Now give it back to us.

—Jimmy Deranger

In December 2022, just a few days before the one-hundredth anniversary of the establishment of Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP), the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) issued a public statement indicating that it would rename one of its most prestigious awards: the Harkin Award, meant to acknowledge individuals "who have demonstrated a significant contribution throughout their lifetime through words and deeds to the conservation of Canada's parks and wilderness." The award was named after J.B. Harkin, who was the Commissioner of the Dominion Parks Branch from 1911–1936, and who is sometimes remembered as the "father" of national parks in Canada. Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) is a Dene community whose homelands were divided and taken up for the establishment and subsequent expansion of Wood Buffalo National Park in the 1920s. Explicitly wishing to challenge celebratory discourse around national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in Canada, the Nation urged CPAWS to rename the award because of Harkin's role in the expulsions and exclusions of Dene peoples and the violations of Treaty 8 that followed the establishment of the Park. As ACFN Chief Allan Adam stated, the community feels that it is critical to shift the way the public thinks not only of figures like J.B. Harkin but also of "the entire history of Canada's National Parks." CPAWS agreed to change the name of the award before the end of 2023.[1]

Public discourse around national parks and other such protective spaces tend to uncritically celebrate them as symbols of Canadian national history and identity and as important triumphs of twentieth-century environmentalism. Yet, as ACFN's work toward the renaming of the Harkin Award suggests, Indigenous experiences with national parks challenge the celebratory narratives. The oral history that opens this chapter—shared by ACFN Elder Jimmy Deranger in Spring 2021—highlights the exclusions and injustice at in the heart of WBNP history as it is remembered by Dënesųłıné[2] people. Jimmy's words suggest that, for the Dënesųłıné who had resided in the area since time immemorial, WBNP was an instrument of colonialism in their homelands. The Park boundaries, policies, and management throughout the twentieth century played central roles in what Andrew Woolford and Jeff Benvenuto characterize as colonialism's "very basic relation of dispossession, elimination and replacement" in northern Alberta.[3] In Dene historical memory and experience, the Park has been an important part of systemic efforts by colonial states to remove Indigenous Peoples, ways of life and societies from the land, and to deny of Indigenous connections and claims to place, in

order to replace them with settlers.[4] Dene people who had lived, travelled, and thrived along the Athabasca River, Birch River, Peace River, Slave River, and Gull River, and on the shores of other bodies of water within what became WBNP boundaries, saw their homes and harvesting areas taken up by the Park. Their families and communities were divided by Park boundaries, and their movements and ways of life were restricted by settler land and wildlife management policies, including strict and evolving harvesting laws governing Indigenous lives and movements throughout the twentieth century. The Dënesųłıné title of this introductory chapter, roughly translating to "it happened in front of us," points to the importance of telling the history of the Park as the Dene ancestors of ACFN members experienced and witnessed it—getting the story right.

The renaming of the CPAWS award was just a small part of a much larger campaign for justice in which ACFN has been engaged for many years. Starting in April 2022, the Nation initiated negotiations with the government of Canada to obtain a formal, national apology and compensation for the harm inflicted on the community and their Dënesųłıné ancestors since the establishment of WBNP. ACFN hired Willow Springs Strategic Solutions (WSSS) to undertake a collaborative research project to document the historical events and communicate the Park's widespread, intergenerational impacts. This work resulted in *A History of Wood Buffalo National Park's Relations with the Dënesųłıné: Final Report*, which ACFN shared with community members, government officials and policymakers, media, and the general public in summer 2021.[5] After formal discussions with the government began, Elders and community members who had been involved in the project expressed the wish that the story be shared in other ways that would reflect and honour the community's experiences and oral histories. As ACFN member Donna Mercredi emphasized, "It should be told. It should be out there in the open. People should know."

That is how we got here, to this book. A key difference between the original report and this book has to do with intentions: although the report centred ACFN oral histories, it was written primarily with the goal of informing negotiations with settler governments. This book came together primarily to highlight and honour the oral history and testimony of the community. The goal of the chapters that follow is to present a narrative of the Park's history that takes seriously the experiences, knowledge, and oral histories of the Dënesųłıné peoples whose lives it dramatically altered after it was established

Fig. 0.1 ACFN Elders discuss a draft of *A History of Wood Buffalo National Park's Relations with the Dënesųłiné* report and this book at the ACFN 2022 Elders' Meeting, Fort Chipewyan. Photo by Peter Fortna, June 2022.

in 1922. We see this as a community-directed work of research for justice, for land back, and for community empowerment that will challenge attempted colonial erasures of Dënesųłiné voices and knowledge. Jimmy's opening history—and the oral histories and testimony shared by many ACFN members and Elders in this book—present important challenges to attempted erasures characteristic of the history of national parks in Dene homelands and across Canada.

"Long ago there was no border": Building a park in Dënesųłiné Homelands

Wood Buffalo National Park extends over nearly 45,000 square-kilometres of northern boreal plains and forest, encompassing vast wetlands, grasslands, and salt plains, the Caribou and Birch Mountains and several key river systems in the region. It crosses the borders of the province of Alberta and the Northwest Territories. The Slave and Athabasca Rivers form its easternmost

boundary, and the Park also houses the Peace-Athabasca Delta, the world's largest inland boreal delta and its second largest freshwater delta, where the Peace and Athabasca Rivers meet with the Slave River and Lake Athabasca. This delta encompasses over 320,000 hectares containing eleven major habitat sites, freshwater lakes, and smaller river channels, and sustaining at least 215 species of waterbirds, eighteen species of fish, forty-four species of mammals, and thousands of species of insects and invertebrates.[6] With most of the Peace-Athabasca Delta contained within its boundaries, WBNP houses ecosystems and plant and animal life that are exceptionally diverse. As its name suggests, the primary concern of its original creators was to preserve North America's last remaining herd of wood bison, but its intentions and purposes have shifted over time. The Park earned UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1983 as the home of the only breeding habitat in the world for endangered whooping cranes and "great concentrations of migratory wildlife" including many species of birds, elk, bison, and moose.

The Park is also located in the heart of the traditional territories and homelands of at least eleven Dene, Métis, and Cree communities who have inhabited the region for generations and whose lands and waterways were taken up for the creation of the Park despite their clearly voiced dissent;[7] ACFN is one of these eleven groups. The Park is located in the heart of Dënesųłıné homelands, where Dene oral histories and archaeological records tell us the people have resided, travelled and seasonally harvested, settled, built homes, and thrived for thousands of years.[8] Elders and members stress that the environment taken up by the Park sustains Dënesųłıné identity, knowledge, language, and culture, and maintains cultural, spiritual, mental, and physical health. People's widespread movements on the land and water keep them closely connected to kin across vast distances. The Park also encompasses places of relatively recent significance to ACFN, such as two centuries-old settlement sites at House Lake/Birch River, where some of the ancestors of ACFN lived and seasonally until the 1920s and 1930s. There are gravesites and harvesting areas at Lake Mamawi, Moose Island, Lake Dene, and along the Birch Mountains and another centuries-old settlement at Peace Point, (which ACFN's Ancestors once shared with their nearest neighbour, now known as Mikisew Cree First Nation). Dene people moved freely in these territories, and their homelands were not defined by strict and artificial boundaries that curtailed their movements until after Treaty 8—but more so after the establishment of the Park in 1922.[9] As ACFN Elder Dora Flett explained, "I never

heard of anybody going hungry. Long ago, there was no border. You could go anywhere you want. Nobody said, 'you're there, you're there, you're there.' You're just free going. There was no border." After the 1922 establishment and then 1926 expansion of the Park, this all changed. As ACFN members wrote in 2003, the Park became a central part of the processes whereby "an originally healthy and relatively affluent society . . . has been colonized and disenfranchised and has been losing traditional lands."[10]

The Park was first established with the intention to preserve the last remaining wood bison herd. In a 1912 letter to Parks Commissioner J.B. Harkin, one of its early champions, a Parks Branch official named Maxwell Graham, characterized the need to establish protective boundaries for the wood bison as being in "the interest of the entire people of this Dominion, and to some extent that of the entire civilized world."[11] Ten years later, in December 1922, an Order-in-Council established the boundaries of the Park to encircle roughly 27,000 square-kilometres of Indigenous lands and waters on both sides of the Alberta/NWT border, and the federal Department of the Interior (Northern Affairs Branch) was granted administrative authority. Indigenous Peoples who had taken Treaty, including members of the Cree Band (today, Mikisew Cree First Nation [MCFN]) and some members of the Chipewyan Band (now ACFN), were permitted to live and harvest in the Park.

The Park was expanded south of the Peace River to take up a total of 45,000 square kilometres in 1926. This annex, which met with significant opposition from Indigenous land users in the region, immediately followed the 1925 importation of 6,673 plains bison from Buffalo National Park (which had been established in 1909) in Wainwright, Alberta. Soon after arriving, the imported plains bison migrated outside of the boundaries of the original Wood Buffalo Park to feed near Lake Claire, close to a Dene settlement where ancestors of ACFN had lived and harvested for many generations. The Park's administrators annexed these lands to expand the Park and provide state protection for the migrated plains bison. After the annex, a strict permitting system regulated access and land use in the expanded Park, including for those Indigenous Peoples whose rights were protected under Treaty 8. While treaty harvesters had been permitted to remain in the original Park boundaries from 1922–1926, only those living or actively harvesting within the expanded boundaries in 1926 could apply for permits to continue harvesting there or even to visit family in the Park. The Dene community was effectively split between those with and without access to the Park. Thus, after

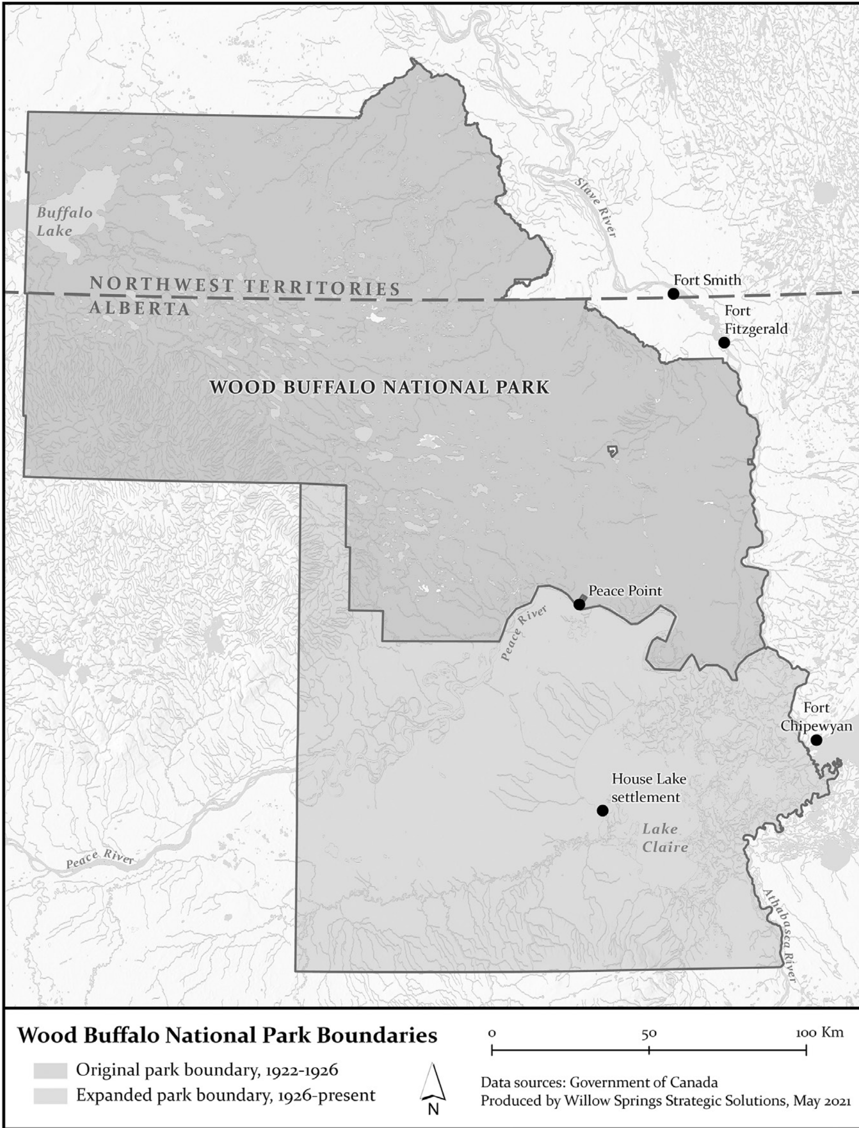


Fig. 0.2 Map of Wood Buffalo National Park Boundaries. Map produced by Emily Boak, Willow Springs Strategic Solutions, 2021.

this expansion many Dene families who had resided and harvested primarily south of the Peace River saw their rights and access to their homelands eroded and restricted.

After 1926, an increasingly strict suite of harvesting laws sought to control Indigenous lives and relation to land throughout the Park and province, and a growing warden system enforced the new laws. Working with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), wardens and their supervisors could revoke Indigenous individuals' permits to hunt, trap, and travel the land and had the power to fine and jail land users should they be found breaking the rules. In 1944, local Indian agent Jack Stewart transferred half the Chipewyan Band population still living in WBNP to the treaty annuity payment list[12] of the Cree Band, who had for the most part been granted permits to remain in the Park. This essentially split the Chipewyan Band in half and transferred many families to the Cree Band. This process is described in Chapter 4. Numerous Dënesųłıné residents and families were denied access to the Park or evicted from their homes after this transfer; if they refused to transfer bands, they had to abandon their land-use areas and homes in the Park. According to the oral histories, those who sought to return home later were not allowed to return; in some cases, wardens burned down former residents' cabins. As a direct result of these restrictions and displacements, and within the wider context of other drastic transformations in their lands throughout the twentieth century, Dene people denied access to the Park faced severe hardship and sometimes starvation, especially from the 1930s–1980s. Colonial officials usually ignored or dismissed persistent attempts by Dënesųłıné residents and leaders to assert rights, challenge unjust and contradictory policy, and attain some form of protection from the changes they faced. The oral histories and testimony shared in this book about what Dene people have suffered across the generations are a direct result of WBNP's history.

Wood Buffalo National Park's cooperative management efforts since the 1980s, which position Indigenous communities as partners in the management of the Park, continue to sideline Dene concerns and perspectives. As some ACFN members suggest, government officials make decisions that affect Dene harvesters, which has "fostered a climate of distrust and cynicism."[13] Historical distrust and a structure that tends to relegate Indigenous leaders to a secondary consulting or advisory position (rather than to meaningful decision-making positions) has limited the potential of new management efforts and left Dënesųłıné participants feeling sidelined and dismissed, as has been

the case in the administration of WBNP since its creation. Scholarly critiques of national parks have also demonstrated the challenges related to Parks Canada's co-management and attempts at consultation with Indigenous Peoples in recent decades across the country.[14] As J.W. Johnston and Courtney Mason point out, co-management schemes in national parks in Canada do not shift the balance of power—decision-making authority rests with Parks Canada, and while Indigenous concerns and priorities may be highlighted or considered, Indigenous communities are not the final decision-makers.[15] In many ways, therefore, ACFN's oral histories suggest WBNP's policy has played a key role in the history of colonial violence and elimination perpetrated against the Dënesųłıné peoples whose lands and waterways WBNP takes up. In effect, the Park became an instrument of colonial power in Dënesųłıné homelands after 1922.

Situating Our Story of Wood Buffalo National Park

Academic Discussions of Parks and Protected Nature Areas

One important area of influence for this book comes from the vast scholarship of national parks and other protected areas in Canada and around the world, especially their violent relations with Indigenous Peoples. From Canada's most famous national parks like Banff and Jasper in the Rocky Mountains, to smaller provincial parks like Desolation Sound on the southwest coast of British Columbia, the common story is that parks and their administrations often violently displaced, excluded, and impoverished Indigenous Peoples, with long-term, intergenerational impacts.[16] In line with much of this literature, we see national parks as instruments of colonialism. As Maano Ramutsindela writes, national parks across the world have been central to the enforcement of "colonial rules of behaviour."[17] Deeply racialized and gendered assumptions about Indigenous land use were driving forces in histories of protected nature spaces. Youdelis et. al. argue that parks officials have often "vilified" Indigenous lifeways, and resident peoples were subsequently "violently evicted or coercively displaced" from protected areas.[18] In turn, expulsions and restrictions were typically accompanied by high levels of surveillance and strict punishment to control Indigenous movements and restrict their ways of life. In the creation of protected areas in Canada and across the British empire, Indigenous residents were rarely—if ever—included in decision-making processes, and their knowledge was usually ignored,

dismissed, or discredited. Meanwhile, "nearly unbridled development and extractivism" taking place adjacent to protected areas are deemed acceptable by settler states and industry—amplifying existing pressure on Indigenous lands and evicted communities created by expulsions in the first place.[19]

In these ways, Indigenous Peoples globally have experienced protected nature areas as instruments of colonial dispossession and violence. Parks have been central to Canadian colonialism not only because many expelled Indigenous families and criminalized their ways of life, but also because they contributed to what Patrick Wolfe describes as colonial elimination: the forcible removal of Indigenous Peoples' presence, their connections and claims to the land, and the attempted dissolution of Indigenous societies, to make way for and justify settler dominance.[20] Woolford and Benvenuto write that the genocidal force of Canadian settler colonial policies has varied across time and across regions, but that even in this unevenness, at the heart of Canadian colonialism has always been "the very basic relation of dispossession, elimination and replacement."[21] Parks have been part of the genocidal colonial processes that, as these scholars describe it, aim to destroy in order to replace.[22]

Historians have analysed the intersecting and sometimes contradictory intentions and ideologies driving the establishment of protected nature areas, such as the desire to create and preserve an aesthetic of "pristine" and human-free wilderness,[23] wildlife and game conservation,[24] and tourism and other economic development and resource management activities,[25] all of which were aimed at the advancement of settler control over land and natural resources. Often, the expulsions of Indigenous Peoples for the creation of national or provincial parks went together with policies of assimilation and elimination. As some historians point out, in the context of more southerly parks like Banff and Jasper, the expulsion of Indigenous Peoples from their homelands and the restrictions on their ways of life for the establishment and management of national parks, directly reinforced Indian Affairs' assimilationist policies. Indian Affairs officials hoped Park expulsions would force Indigenous Peoples to take up a sedentary and agricultural existence on reserves.[26] In many ways, then, protected areas and the policies that govern them have led to profound and long-lasting impacts for Indigenous communities, lives, and homelands.[27] Ramutsindela describes park intentions and outcomes as "a complex entanglement" of national identity-building, colonial power expansion, and competition over natural resources and land. He explicitly connects this complex entanglement to colonial genocide and

elimination, which he calls "a broader process of extermination."[28] In this book, oral histories explicitly connect Park policy, alienations of Dene people from their homelands and kin, and the wider regime of colonial land and resource management with critical discussions of colonial elimination in Canada.[29] Dene oral histories of Wood Buffalo National Park suggest that the experiences of the Dene people with the Park shared commonalities with the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in the histories of other national parks, as described across this vast historiography. However, WBNP's history is unique in a number of ways.

The preservation of a pristine wilderness, a prevalent theme among historians of national parks in the 1990s and early 2000s, such as American environment historian William Cronon, was not the driving force for Wood Buffalo National Park for most of its history.[30] But preservation ideologies did play a role, especially in the Park's early years. Chapter 3 shows how early champions of a sanctuary for the wood bison employed explicitly preservationist language, paired with intentions to erase Indigenous Peoples from the land. Parks officials claimed that the only way to preserve the bison would be to establish a vast sanctuary where all harvesting would be prohibited. Even in the face of strong opposition from Indian Affairs, the vision of elimination was pursued. After the original Park had been created via with the rule that local treaty harvesters could continue hunting, fishing, and trapping within the Park boundaries, O.S. Finnie, then Director of the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch of the Department of the Interior, hoped to find "some means by which all Indians may be kept out of the area" since he felt their presence stopped it from being a true "sanctuary."[31] Proponents of elimination like Finnie and Maxwell Graham, a Parks Branch official and strong early proponent of the creation of the bison sanctuary, felt that the preservation of bison was in the interests of the advancement of "civilization," which, they implied, did not include the ways of life and presence of Indigenous Peoples. As Valaderes writes, "Canada's national parks are . . . a symbolic landscape used for identity formation whereby natural and cultural elements are inscribed with literal and symbolic value that result in an exclusion of communities and in some instances, a denial of access and subsistence rights in these landscapes held as a natural resource by the Canadian state" or by the Dominion or indeed by all of the so-called "civilized world."[32]

Some historians of Canadian national parks, such as Ted Binnema and Melanie Niemi, demonstrate how, in many cases across Canada, Indigenous

Peoples were expelled from their territories (which were subsequently turned into parks) to appease sports hunting and conservation societies, to establish a tourism industry in the area, and to alienate people from their lands and ways of life in order to subject them to assimilationist policies and institutions.[33] While some of the policies and intentions at the heart of these southerly parks were distinctive from Wood Buffalo, there are striking similarities as well, especially visible in the discourse of public officials, the outcomes of the establishment of parks for Indigenous Peoples and, ultimately, Indigenous Peoples' experiences with park policies and their outcomes. One central impetus for the creation of national parks in Canada, according to Binnema and Niemi, was game conservation—largely influenced in more southern parks by the strong lobbying voice of sports hunters and conservation societies. Conservation policy was typically intent on protecting game populations and habitats, not necessarily for their intrinsic value or for the sake of a pristine wilderness aesthetic, but rather to ensure they survived in the interest of sport hunting or to fulfill other economic needs in the future. Writing on Jasper National Park, Ian MacLaren says that those who "espoused the doctrine of conservation" usually demonized Indigenous harvesting practices. They "insisted on a distinction between subsistence and sport hunting; that distinction symbolized nothing less than the gulf between uncivilized and civilized humans that newcomers were anxious to mark."[34] As was the case in Wood Buffalo National Park, where false assumptions about Indigenous overharvesting played a role in eliminations of Indigenous Peoples from the land, this kind of rhetoric was rarely backed up with solid evidence, MacLaren argues.

In his history of Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba, John Sandlos writes that, like with other national parks, a "complex array of local and state-driven priorities" underwrote the forcible expulsion of Keeseekoowenin Ojibway Nation members from their homes for the creation of the Park. He describes this as "one of the most egregious incidents of coercive conservation in Canadian history."[35] In 1936, members of this community were forcibly expelled from their homes at Clear Lake, on one of their reserves, Indian Reserve 61A, which the Parks Branch expropriated for the expansion of Riding Mountain National Park. The Keeseekoowenin people's harvesting and ways of life were subsequently criminalized. At Riding Mountain, "the constant and very real threat of fines and expulsion from the park area reinforced the fact that the Keeseekoowenin Ojibway were now regarded as an alien presence on the landscape they regarded as home."[36] Similar processes

took place in Kluane National Park in the southwest part of the Yukon, where officials kept Southern Tutchone families out of their territories and policed their land-use and movements throughout the twentieth century. Tutchone residents were denied access to the region that became the Park, where they had lived and harvested for generations. This, David Neufeld writes, devastated their livelihoods and local economies.[37] Furthermore, in the establishment and management of Kluane National Park, the state "denied, not only the validity, but even the existence of the long tradition of deep local contextual knowledge shaping Southern Tutchone values, land use practices and their relationships with the newcomers."[38] Indeed, as Binemma and Niemi argue, "those responsible for removing peoples from parks have often been highly trained people who assumed that their knowledge and oversight were far more valuable than that of local people whose knowledge—accumulated over many generations—and constant presence on the land rendered them highly attuned to subtle changes in the environment."[39] In these ways, conservation policies in and around Parks ultimately have "had the effect of marginalizing local customary uses of wildlife, and in that sense [were] part of . . . colonization," as Tina Loo argues.[40]

Conservation ideology also often paired with an interest in developing a tourism economy. Valaderes describes conservationism as often "buttressed by broader commercial interests."[41] As Sandlos argues, the "pragmatic grab" for Indigenous land at Clear Lake was a necessary precursor to the development of the region for "a projected horde of visitors" who Parks officials imagined might turn the area into "a genteel tourist resort for middle- and upper-class whites."[42] Ultimately, Indigenous Peoples were "written out" of the land to make space for a "civilized" pleasuring ground. Animals protected by this Park were "redefined" as a recreational resource rather than "a source of sustenance."[43] Similarly, MacLaren writes of the transformation of Indigenous territories in what is now Jasper National Park into a so-called "cultured wilderness"—a protected nature area for the enjoyment of primarily white, upper-middle-class tourist families. It also became a thoroughfare for sports hunters. MacLaren writes, "the well-heeled began to make Jasper the departure point for their hunts farther up the eastern slopes," where hunting was not prohibited.[44] But, as he argues, the "establishment of playgrounds entailed the removal of native families who had suddenly become 'squatters.'"[45] Meanwhile, settler development was encouraged. For example, in Rocky Mountains Park (now Banff National Park), town centres were

established explicitly to *draw* settler visitors to the area, including permanent settler residents.

In the southerly parks, these processes were closely tied to the "civilizing" agenda of Indian Affairs. For example, as Binemma and Niemi write in the context of Banff, Indian Affairs officials considered the restriction of the Stoney Nakoda people's harvesting rights to be a "blessing in disguise" because it would force people into a sedentary and agricultural existence.[46] Jason Johnston and Courtney Mason write similarly that exclusions foregrounding Jasper National Park's creation supported "colonial processes of assimilation that were occurring across Canada" including "the forced removals of Indigenous Peoples onto reserves for First Nations, and onto Crown Lands for Métis people."[47] These forced removals, along with the theft of generations of Indigenous children from their families to forcibly move them into residential schools, worked together to sever Indigenous Peoples and families from each other, from homelands, and from their ways of life, languages, and cultures. As such, the creation of parks and expulsions of Indigenous Peoples were driven by colonial powers vying for control over land, waters, and natural resources while also explicitly working to eliminate Indigenous Peoples and ways of life as threats to settler normalcy and dominance.

There are a number of important similarities between Dene histories of WBNP and what the wider literature discusses. Like in other national parks, the vilification of Dene ways of life played a critical role in the development of Wood Buffalo National Park's policies and boundaries in the first half of the twentieth century. Theresa A. Ferguson writes that throughout the Park's history, settler officials developed a "literary tradition" that perpetuated an image of Indigenous Peoples as "non-conservers." This was a narrative that both ignored deeply rooted Dene knowledge and stewardship of the environment and claimed that non-Indigenous knowledge and wildlife management were superior. In turn, this narrative reinforced Park policy—including exclusions and restrictions of Indigenous ways of life throughout the Park's history.[48] As in other Parks, forced displacements, evictions, and the criminalization of Indigenous ways of life are central issues that emerge in Dene oral histories. Furthermore, histories of national parks that attend to oral histories reveal striking similarities between the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in other Park histories and the Dene experiences discussed in this book. Sandlos indicates that the archival documents contain little evidence of what occurred on the day wardens expelled Keeseekoowenin people from their homes at Clear

Lake. However, local oral histories clearly indicate that on that traumatic day wardens and RCMP forced people out with little time to gather their belongings and subsequently burnt down their homes.[49] These living memories are similar to what Dene oral histories tell us about expulsions from the Birch River settlements and subsequent burning of cabins by wardens—events about which archive sources are conspicuously silent. Similarly, Roberta Nakoochee writes that Tutchone Elders told her their families experienced aggressive intimidation tactics by wardens in Kluane Game Sanctuary (now Kluane National Park and Reserve)—something that, again, the Dene oral histories point to repeatedly in Chapter 5 but that archival sources tend to be silent on.[50]

There are some important differences between Wood Buffalo National Park and other national parks in Canada. Unlike in many of the other Canadian parks and sanctuaries, sports hunting and tourism were not central priorities for Wood Buffalo Park in its early years—although occasionally officials did mention the tourism potential of a sanctuary with the world's only known surviving herd of wood bison. Furthermore, unlike what happened in the southern parks, Indian Affairs strongly opposed the total expulsion of Indigenous Peoples for the creation of Wood Buffalo Park because sedentary agriculturalism was not a feasible alternative to subsistence hunting in the northern boreal climates of the region. So, whereas Indian Affairs generally agreed to the demands of Parks officials to displace Indigenous families and outlaw Indigenous harvesting practices in Banff, Jasper, and elsewhere, Wood Buffalo Park in 1922 became the first National Park to allow some Indigenous harvesting within its boundaries (but Métis hunters and trappers were excluded). Patricia McCormack has written extensively about Wood Buffalo National Park, describing its history as "conditioned by external political and economic considerations" that drove policy shifts in the management of bison (and, in turn, of people), which were usually reactive and often contradictory.[51] Because the Park was not intended to draw tourism or sports hunting, and because Parks officials were forced to allow Indigenous Peoples to live and continue harvesting within Park boundaries, some administrators did not consider it a "real" national park in its early years. Still, both Parks and Indian Affairs officials were keen to increase the state's oversight and control of Indigenous harvesting and ways of life, and (like in other Parks around Canada) the Park's boundaries, policies, and permitting system played important roles here. The intentions for the Park tended to shift over

the twentieth century to align more with state interests in wildlife and game management, control over local land-use, and resource development.

In the end, as the oral histories shared in this book demonstrate, regardless of the intentions of Parks officials, the outcomes of this Park ultimately were displacement and the increased state management of Indigenous lives. In her 2010 book, McCormack argues that the Park was instrumental to larger processes—especially in the twentieth century—whereby Indigenous Peoples and “their way of life, their knowledge, and their Treaty Rights would be dismissed by those with power over them.”[52] John Sandlos similarly argues that within one generation of signing Treaty 8, this Park became key to “the assertion of state power over a wildlife population that had been under the local control of Native hunters for generations.”[53] Tara Joly’s sensitive analysis of bison management in WBNP centres on the experiences of the Métis community in Fort McMurray. She describes the wood bison in the Park as “entangled in a complex web of government-defined harvesting rights and species protections, which come up against legal orders and territorial authority.”[54] Bison management in the Park was directly tied to the erosion of Indigenous sovereignty and authority over lands, waters and life, while colonial officials re-wrote bison as “productive units” rather than as “autonomous, spiritual actors in a shared environment” as they are understood under Métis legal orders.[55] Park policy, she concludes, played a critical role in the disruption of Indigenous governance and relations to bison.

The conclusions of these authors align with what we hear in the Dene oral histories: WBNP was in many ways a key instrument of colonial elimination and violence in northern Alberta. The intentions and ideologies shaping this park and its governing policies were a “complex entanglement”—they were never static, but shifted over time and were often contradictory and reactive; that is, they responded to the changing priorities of the provincial and federal governments. The Park ultimately became a key space where shifting (and at times conflicting) state goals of wildlife preservation, game conservation, and natural resource management were inextricable from state attempts to control, restrict, and erase Indigenous lives and ways of life—with specific and long-term implications for the Dene people of the region.

Literature on colonialism in Northern Alberta: "It was all part of it"

ACFN's oral histories tell us that the history of the Park cannot be understood without reference to the wider context of colonialism in the North. For this reason, another important influence for some parts of this book comes from studies of colonialism and resource extraction in the Canadian North—which, as some historians argue, are distinct from histories of colonialism in southern parts of Western Canada.[56] These distinctions are important for understanding the history of this Park as an instrument of colonial elimination in Northern Alberta.

McCormack demonstrates in her 2010 history of Fort Chipewyan that prior to the early twentieth century, direct colonial encounters (i.e. person-to-person) in what is now Northern Alberta were relatively scarce and centred around Roman Catholic missions and Hudson's Bay Company trading posts.[57] For nearly 150 years prior to the Park's establishment, the Indigenous Peoples of the region, including the Dene people, were deeply engaged in the northern fur trade—on which relations with non-Indigenous newcomers were primarily based. McCormack sees the Park and the surrounding game management system that took hold after 1922 to be central to the processes whereby colonial power took hold in the North – significantly shifting the nature of those relations. Whereas Indigenous Peoples retained their sovereignty, ways of life and mobility before 1922, after the Park's creation federal agents were "now empowered to introduce the full weight of the Canadian legal and political systems" in Dene territories.[58] Over time, the colonial state's "theoretical sovereignty" in the North "became real sovereignty . . . and an edifice of internal colonization was constructed."[59] Control over resource management and extractive industries took hold as the central focus of the colonial regime in what became northern Alberta.[60] In time, Indigenous People's rights, ways of life, and concerns "were largely disregarded when they clashed with initiatives intended to 'develop' the North."[61]

In time, what some scholars describe as "extreme extraction" became a key characteristic of twentieth-century colonial history in Northern Alberta.[62] Historian Allan Greer positions intensive resource extraction as a distinctive manifestation of colonialism in twentieth and twenty-first century Canadian history and "the predominant form of intrusion into Indigenous spaces in recent decades."[63] Drawing on Patrick Wolfe's definition of settler

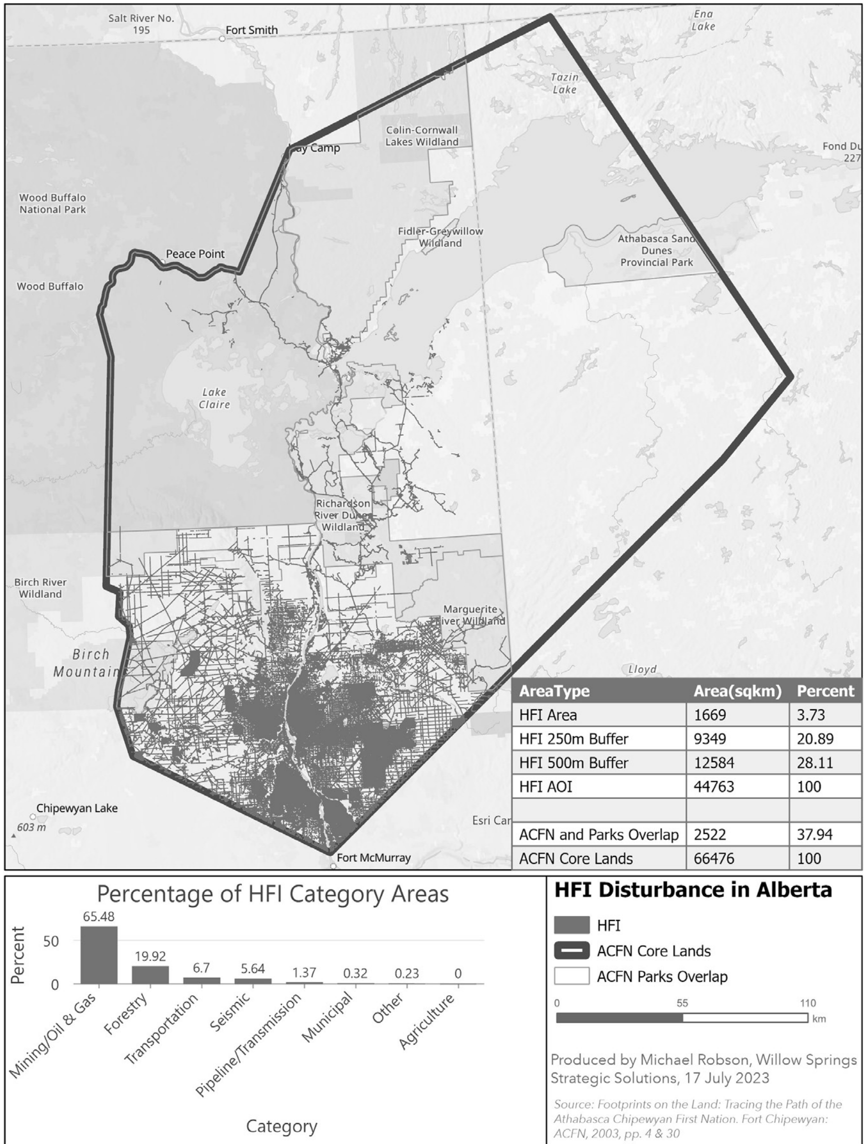
colonialism as elimination, Westman, Gross and Joly write that settler colonialism and extreme extraction are deeply interrelated processes that work together to transform Indigenous homelands and sever Indigenous connections to kin and place in the North. They argue that "settler colonialism seeks to erase multiple stories of and claims to the land, specifically those rooted in Indigenous legal orders, with the colonial goal of perpetual access to and use of the land: creating settler home on Indigenous land." [64] Further, they argue that extractive processes are distinct from, but entangled with, the eliminationist tendencies of settler colonialism. They conclude that "extractivism in northern Alberta represents part of the broader agenda of settler colonialism: acquiring territory, eliminating (or containing) Indigenous presence, and controlling land and resources. In short, extreme extraction can be a product of and an agent of these settler colonial relations."[65]

Zoe Todd also writes in the same collection that "the ebbs and flows of settler colonial resource economies stretch so much farther than the actual site of extraction" citing the example of oilsands activities over the past several decades, which transformed the environment around her family's cabin (at Baptiste Lake, roughly 300 kilometres south of major sites of bitumen extraction in the Athabasca oil sands region) as oil booms brought an influx of settlers building houses and busts, in turn, led them to desert the developments.[66] Like settler colonialism, extractive colonialism "tend[s] to erase local knowledges and understandings of relationships to non-human beings" and attempts to remove particular place-based relations from the land and water.[67] As Joly argues elsewhere, in the colonial extraction dynamic, "land use" becomes a settler colonial category whereby the "Athabasca region is represented as no longer Indigenous, but exclusively an extractive territory, in which Indigenous sovereignties are rendered invisible" so that land can be rewritten in terms of its extractive value. Such erasures and rewritings ignore treaty obligations and dramatically alter Indigenous People's ability to relate to their homes and homelands.[68] Some critics go so far as equating extreme extraction with genocide; Huseman and Short write that the elimination and extractivism in oil- and other resource-rich areas as part of a process of "slow industrial genocide" being committed against Indigenous Peoples in places like northern Alberta.[69]

In their discussions about the Park, Dene oral histories often refer to industrial projects, activities, and corporations at work in their homelands, with which ACFN members are intimately familiar. WBNP is located directly

north of the Northern Alberta oil sands, where extreme extractive activity across Indigenous territories has placed immense pressure on Indigenous lands, waterways, and communities—including through the extraction of bitumen and oil deposits, sand, gravel and other minerals (such as uranium) as well as through commercial fishing, and the harvesting of timber and pulp. As a central component of Alberta's energy economy and a focal point of its extractive activities, the oil sands industry is also one of the world's largest sources of energy and of fossil fuel revenue. It is understood to be one of the greatest contributors to global climate change and, according to both Western science and Indigenous Peoples' lived experiences, to environmental degradation in the region. Oil sands extraction refers to the extraction of a type of oil called bitumen, which is mixed with large deposits of sand, clay, and water through various techniques that are both energy- and water-intensive. The largest oil sands patch that is shallow enough to be mined is in the Athabasca region, north of Fort McMurray—upstream of the Park and ACFN's homelands. Canada initiated oil production in the Athabasca oil sands region in the 1960s, and it became a significant commercial endeavour for the province in the decades that followed, according to Hereward Longley.[70] Through a series of Treaty infringements and twentieth-century federal and provincial land-use policies that have privileged extraction over Indigenous rights and ways of life, Indigenous Peoples across the region, have lost access and connection to their homelands as a direct result of the oil sands industry.[71] Alongside other parts of the Alberta energy sector, as well as the many other extractive industries in the region, Westman et. al. tell us that oil sands have "complex synergistic and cumulative environmental and socioeconomic impacts . . . that are not well understood," as well as profound cultural impacts that are understood even less.[72]

Impact assessments commissioned by settler states and Indigenous governments—including some by ACFN and neighbouring Indigenous communities— have demonstrated the extensive change resulting from extractive activities in Indigenous territories.[73] The ACFN Elders' "Declaration of Rights to Land Use," included in the frontmatter to this book, give voice to this reality. As Elders wrote in 2010, "Alberta is not upholding their end of the treaty and is sacrificing our rights to industrial development. We have never been properly consulted and the federal and provincial governments have never accommodated our rights or compensated us for infringements. . . . It is time for governments to stop cheating us of our rights to land use



AreaType	Area(sqkm)	Percent
HFI Area	1669	3.73
HFI 250m Buffer	9349	20.89
HFI 500m Buffer	12584	28.11
HFI AOI	44763	100
ACFN and Parks Overlap	2522	37.94
ACFN Core Lands	66476	100

Fig. 0.3 Human footprint inventory map depicting some of the lands taken up within ACFN's core homelands in Alberta.

and livelihood, culture, and identity." Extreme extraction has proceeded despite, and indeed at the expense of, ACFN's Treaty and Indigenous Rights, health and well-being, connections to homelands, and ways of life. "ACFN has had enough with having our land destroyed; no one is dealing with it," the Declaration continues.[74] Oral histories and testimony shared in this book likewise typically position intensive and widespread extractive activities as critical in the landscape of colonial elimination and environmental destruction in Dene homelands.

Figure 0.3 shows Human Footprint Inventory (HFI) data from the Province of Alberta that is overlaid on a portion of ACFN's homelands. HFI is a digital representation of human-generated disturbances (e.g., agriculture, forestry, oil sands extraction) on the land. The portion of ACFN's homelands depicted in this map does not reflect the full extent of Dënesųłıné territories and homelands, but rather a portion that is described as the "Core Lands" in ACFN's 2003 publication *Footprints on the Land*. The HFI data demonstrates what percentage of those Core Lands (not including waterways and shores) has been disturbed or taken up for various human uses, including for protected parks. The data also shows a percentage of lands taken up with two buffer scenarios, one of 250 metres and one of 500 metres. While the data is helpful for understanding some of the colonial shifts in ACFN's homelands, the map should not be taken as a total picture of all change in Dene territories, since it does not and really cannot depict the complexity and far-reaching nature of the impacts of extreme extraction, especially in the upstream oil sands region. Indeed, the downstream impacts of extraction taking place far south of the ACFN Core Lands depicted here do not show on the map. The quantification of "human disturbance" in a percentage as shown on by HFI map also cannot clearly get at the interruption of continuity across Dene homelands. That is, it does not meaningfully display just how "cut up" the lands and waters are by Park boundaries, oil and gas sector mining, forestry, settlement and other industries. It also cannot depict the far-reaching and complex social and cultural impacts of various human activities in Dene homelands: the correlation between being unable to travel and harvest in a continuous and uninterrupted area of homelands and the interruption of intergenerational knowledge and language transmission. The map cannot represent impacts of the industries it includes (or of the intensive extractive activity upstream of the area displayed) on the health and abundance of fish, birds, mammals, and trees, or the quality of air and water. Many ACFN oral histories and testimony

shared in this book, especially those in Chapter 7, shed light on some of these complex impacts. The HFI map is not included here to suggest that colonial dispossessions can be quantified or understood as a percentage of disturbed versus undisturbed lands. Rather, it depicts in a limited way a part of the combined extent of colonial dispossessions and eliminations taking place in Dene homelands for the purposes of resource extraction and other industries, and for protected parks.

The unique history of colonialism and extreme extraction in Dene territories in Northern Alberta is part of the backdrop for the harms and intergenerational trauma that Wood Buffalo National Park's formation and management inflicted. The physical displacements and separations of Dënesųłıné families due to Park policies occurred within a wider historical context of drastic changes that Dene people in Northern Alberta were already facing by the 1920s. Oral histories and written archives alike shed light on the devastation of multiple influenza and smallpox epidemics in the 1920s and of the Residential School System on families and the community. The profound implications of an influx of settlers throughout the twentieth century, the growth of resource extraction starting in the 1950s and 1960s, the destruction of the Peace-Athabasca Delta and the many habitats it sustains (especially of fur-bearing animals) after the construction of the W.A.C. Bennett Dam in 1967, and the increasing power of the Canadian state over Northern Alberta are discussed at greater length in Chapter 7. These have all been important outcomes of the increasing power and surveillance of colonial governments and officials over Dene homelands and ways of life. The painful and long-term impacts of Park evictions and permitting regulations, put in place in 1926 to control and restrict Dene movements and harvesting in the expanded Park, as well as a strict system of harvesting laws, have combined with the ecologically harmful activities described above to erode Dënesųłıné connections to and sovereignty over the land and water.

Honouring oral histories

Dene oral history and testimony are the heart of this book, so we drew inspiration from the approaches of other Indigenous-led and collaborative works of oral history as *Remembering Our Relations* came together. Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Holders, and communities have done important work, sometimes in collaboration with academics, to gather and share oral histories and traditions and to tell their own stories on their own terms, for the benefit of the

community.[75] These works demonstrate the critical importance of oral histories for understanding communities' experiences and perspectives on the past. We agree with Greg Younging who argues that oral traditions, knowledge, and oral histories are legitimate forms of knowledge that can stand on their own without comparison to written knowledges. They must be understood, contextualized, and analysed on the terms of those who share them.[76] Oral traditions are "complex, multi-layered, sophisticated, and richly textured," literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice explains.[77]

Yet Dene Elders tell us that oral history and knowledge have too often not been taken seriously—treated instead as secondary or supplementary to other, primarily Western-produced, forms of knowledge. ACFN Elder Jimmy Deranger recounted an experience he had in the 1970s when interviewing Elder Johnny Piche for the Treaty and Aboriginal Rights Research program (TARR) in Treaty 8 territory. When Jimmy's co-interviewer Thomas Piche began the conversation, Johnny Piche expressed frustration about the tendency to privilege the written word. Jimmy recalls:

> He told us his name was Thomas Piche. That this paper he has is really, really important. With all the words written all over it. The Elder [Johnny Piche] couldn't read and write, right? So, he was telling him that on a paper. [Thomas] was looking at me, then he was looking at Johnny, so [Johnny] turned to me and he was flipping that paper around, like looking at the words. Flipping it around and looking at the words and flipping through the pages, where you can't read what was written.
>
> And he said to me in the Dene language, "I don't understand," he said, "How this paper's important. You know about the land" he said. "Because it's only paper. Look outside, the land is still there," he said. I don't see how these papers can say that land is important when the land has been there for a long, long time. And he said that: "I don't understand it. I don't really know why there's all these little black things all over the papers," he said. And it was the words on the paper, right? He said, "I don't understand," he said. The only thing I understand how important this paper is, if I took it in the bush and made fire with it. That's what he said.

Johnny Piche's frustration with the assumed dominance of paper was important, suggesting that it has coincided with denials and exclusions of oral knowledge and refusals of Dene ways of knowing, understanding and living on the land. Indeed, the chapters that follow discuss some of the ways that, as McCormack explains, "Aboriginal knowledge, which was extensive and richly detailed, was mostly ignored, overridden by assumptions" throughout the history of the Park.[78] These exclusions became central means and justifications for the violence colonial governments, institutions, industries and settlers committed against Indigenous Peoples and homelands in the hundred years following the Park's establishment. It is our belief that by taking oral history seriously in this book, we can challenge dominant interpretations of Canadian National Park history that have excluded Indigenous knowledge and voices. As historian Winona Wheeler points out, the best ways to refuse and challenge such colonial erasures often "can be found within the community itself."[79]

The oral history sections of each chapter are drawn from several places. First, most of the thirty ACFN, MCFN and Métis Elders and community members who were interviewed for the original 2021 research report wished to include some of their testimony in this book. The project team worked with them to ensure that their voices and stories were included on their terms. Elders and other ACFN members reviewed their testimony and, if they wished, revised their interview transcriptions or the sections of the manuscript where their words appeared. In several cases, those who wished to do so selected, reviewed, edited, and situated excerpts from their interviews in the book manuscript where they felt it made most sense to include them. *Remembering Our Relations* also relies heavily on transcriptions from past interviews in research previously conducted by, with, or for the Nation. With permissions from next-of-kin and other relatives, the book incorporates much oral testimony shared by Elders in 1974 for the Treaty and Aboriginal Rights (TARR) program, at the time a branch of the Indian Association of Alberta. Under this important research initiative, TARR employed local researchers to record Indigenous oral histories of Treaty 8, and of surrounding and subsequent historical events, including the creation of the Park. Along with several co-researchers, ACFN member Jimmy Deranger interviewed numerous ACFN (at the time called the Chipewyan Band) members, Métis people and, MCFN (at the time, the Cree Band) members – who, prior to the 1944 membership transfer, would have identified as Dene, even though they

were enrolled as Cree Band members because of the transfer. During their discussions, Elders shared extensively about the treaty, reserve-making and Wood Buffalo National Park, as well as many other related subjects. Their testimony is central to this book.[80]

Several other oral histories included in *Remembering Our Relations* were more recently recorded. In February 2010, ACFN Elder Rene Bruno, whose grandfather Alexandre Laviolette was a Dene Chief and original signatory of Treaty 8, and whose mother was present at the 1899 signing of Treaty 8, shared his oral history of the Treaty with Nicole Nicholls, who worked for the ACFN Industry Relations Corporation. This oral history was passed to Rene by his mother. An extensive excerpt of the transcription opens the oral history section of Chapter 2. Rene's oral history was in Dënesųłıné, so ACFN Elder Arsene Bernaille translated it to English. Another recording comes from Elder Pat Marcel in 2013. Working with Arlene Seegerts, he recorded his family's oral history of a 1935 Order-in-Council that was intended to protect Treaty Rights of those Dene people who had been denied access to the Park; this history is quoted throughout the book and then at length in Chapter 7 and in the Conclusion. Additionally, several excerpts included below come from Elder interviews for ACFN's Dene Laws research project in 2015, in which the Nation's lawyers worked with Dene Knowledge Holders and Elders to discern and record Dene traditional laws and legal systems. Finally, four ACFN Elders recorded responses to a written questionnaire about the history of Wood Buffalo National Park before the research for this project began. The date of this questionnaire is not indicated, but some members recall that it happened around 2008. Their responses provide critical perspectives and context to the oral testimony included in each chapter.

Our goal was to stay close to the words shared in original interviews, with little editorial interference beyond those interferences that are inevitable in the transcription process (e.g. the loss of intonation, gestures, facial expressions, pauses, and emotional inflection). When agreed on by the community steering committee and Elder reviewers, minor edits were made for clarity. For example, although the original interview transcriptions are "true" to the recordings and include all "false starts" to sentences, "ums" and "uhs", cross-talk, interruptions and interjections, these are not included in the excerpts in this book. In addition, where a speaker's intended meaning or emphasis would be more clearly understood if a reader had the full transcription or could listen to interview to hear the tone, pauses, or emotional context, we

have sometimes provided additional context. Sometimes, we do this through the inclusion of an explanatory word in square brackets. At other times, we add a brief statement in italics before the excerpt to provide contextual details that might not be clear without reading the full interview transcript. Occasionally we also include context in a footnote.

The reader will also note that some chapters contain more oral testimony than others, and that some of the oral narratives are extensive, spanning two or more pages, while others are very brief, no more than a few sentences long. This is because we wished to reflect the great diversity of voices and perspectives—and ways of communicating—that came across during interviews. For example, members and Elders sometimes spoke at length about a topic while weaving in their knowledge about related subjects. Some passages are included in one chapter but not in another where the theme of their interwoven discussions could fit. We felt it was more important to maintain the original flow of the discussion rather than to break things up in order to fit them into our thematic chapter structures (unless specifically requested by the interviewee during review of the manuscript). Elders and members do not disentangle their knowledge of Park history, or their family histories, from the wider context of Treaty 8 and colonization in Northern Alberta, or from their experiences with the long-term intergenerational impacts of Park history. We chose not to 'disentangle' discussions that cover a lot of ground (unless, as described below, a significant amount of time and dialogue had occurred in between thoughts)—because to separate them would be a type of disservice to the community's oral knowledge. We did on a rare occasion edit to address the passage of time in a conversation. For example, during an interview a speaker might have answered a question, proceeded to answering further questions, and then returned to the original question much later, emphasizing different points and details they had not previously discussed, which may have been prompted by the progression of the conversation over time. In these cases, we sometimes retain the original dialogical context to reflect the generativity of the conversations and of oral knowledge. These excerpts include responses or follow-up questions from the interviewer. At other times, however, we use ellipses to demonstrate that significant time has elapsed between related comments on a subject and that other, sometimes lengthy, discussions have taken place between them. We also use ellipses to remove sensitive or personal testimony or that includes references that could make it possible to identify a speaker who wished to remain anonymous.

On anonymity, almost one-quarter of the individuals who shared testimony for the report and this book requested to remain anonymous, including many of the women who shared knowledge for this project. Looking at the biographies of contributing members, which only include those individuals who wished to have their identities shared in the book, one might be inclined to conclude that it was mostly men who shared oral histories for this project. The number of women and men who shared their stories was comparable, but many women Elders who shared their testimony requested anonymity. Several explained that they desired anonymity because they felt fearful of repercussions of sharing their stories—whether potential retaliations from the Park or impacts on their relations with family, friends, neighbours, or others who might take issue with their memory of the events. During reviews of the transcriptions, report, and book manuscript, interviewees could review their anonymity preferences and update them if they wished to do so. Several Elders who had requested anonymity in the original report decided to include their names in the book after reviewing and revising their oral history excerpts and sections of the manuscript draft.

Elimination policies in Canada have shifted how the community is able to share stories from one generation to the next, as is the case for many other Indigenous communities. The very limited number of Dene language passages in this book—the majority of the oral histories were recorded and transcribed into English—is testament to the harmful intergenerational impacts of the Park's exclusions as well as other forms of colonial violence, especially in residential schools. ACFN Elder Alice Rigney, who is one of the community's few remaining fluent Dene speakers explained, "The language is pretty-well gone. You know, mostly everybody speaks English." She and other Elders from ACFN are working hard to revitalize the language. Alice teaches Dene classes to the Elders and does much of the Nation's transcription and translation work. "To me," she said, "the Dene language is so important that I'm going to be teaching it." For this book, the Elders determined that it was important to include audio recordings of Dene language passages with English translations wherever possible to honour the Elders who told their stories in their own language, and to demonstrate how some things cannot be communicated the same way in English. Several digital audio recordings of oral histories in the Dene language are available online. We have also included some excerpts that were recorded in English in some of the chapters. [81]

Centering Dënesųłiné Experiences and Understandings

A central goal of *Remembering Our Relations* is to present a narrative and interpretations of the Park's history that take seriously the experiences, knowledge, and oral histories of the Dënesųłıné peoples whose lives it dramatically altered after it was established in their homelands. Oral histories about the Park, passed down through the generations in this community, point to several key themes. In ACFN historical memory, early Park management oversaw colonial refusals of Dene knowledge and rights, as well as forcible removals of Dene people and ways of life from the land. Combined with restrictive conservation regulations and other colonial policies and processes, such refusals and removals resulted in traumatic intergenerational harm. Dispossession also coincided with the omissions from written records that are exposed when we center Dene oral historical interpretations. Examples include the oral history cited numerous times by Elders, but omitted from written records, of officials' promises that the Park would only be temporary and that Dene people would get the land back after a period of time.

Each chapter of this book touches on some of these themes and is divided into two parts. First, a summary of the chapter theme provides context, with reference to the oral histories, archival records, and secondary literature. Next, each chapter contains excerpts of oral history and testimony from the dozens of interviews that took place between 1974 and 2021. The community steering committee also felt it was important to include copies of some of the archival documents that were key to this history, so links to digital reproductions of some of these written sources are included in Appendix 3. By bringing together a wide range of oral historical, archival, and secondary sources, we build out several broad themes and conclusions based on the community's own critical interpretations of the history of Wood Buffalo National Park.

Dënesųłıné homelands and ways of life

The first crucial theme that emerged from this work is that Dene oral histories highlight the importance of Dënesųłıné relations to, and knowledge of, the land, air, and water and the human and non-human, sentient and non-sentient life they support. Chapter 1, nuhenéné hoghóídi, relies heavily on oral knowledge to provide this critical context to the history of the Park, discussing the community's deep and longstanding relations to the territories that it took up after 1922. Dene peoples have always upheld the traditions, teachings,

Fig 0.4 View of Lake Athabasca from Fort Chipewyan. Photo by Peter Fortna, 2018.

practices and relations necessary to ensure respectful stewardship of the territories and the protection of their Indigenous and Treaty Rights. Their respectful practices across a vast and rich landscape ensure people live healthy lives and maintain social connections and kinship networks throughout the territory from one generation to the next. Like other protected nature areas in Canada and worldwide, WBNP's history was characterized by officials who dismissed local people's knowledge, lives, needs, and concerns. As Ferguson writes, the dominant "literary tradition" in government thinking perpetuated a harmful and inaccurate image of Indigenous Peoples as irresponsible, and thus justified non-Indigenous power over the land, water and animals.[82] ACFN Elder Alice Rigney agrees: "There's this concept that the white people think different than the land users," so non-Indigenous conceptions and land management policies overrode Dënesųłıné people's longstanding relations to, and understandings of, the land and water.

Wood Buffalo National Park and Treaty 8

Oral histories also locate the Park firmly in the context of Treaty 8. This is the core focus of Chapter 2. For generations, Dënesųłiné Elders have articulated the view that WBNP's creation, expansion, and management were violations of Dënesųłiné rights to use and occupy their territories. These rights have existed since time immemorial and were enshrined in treaty when the Chipewyan Band signed Treaty 8 at Fort Chipewyan in 1899. Parks officials claimed that the land taken for WBNP had been ceded and surrendered in 1899, so the Nation no longer had rights to use the land in the Park. They also consistently re-framed Dënesųłiné rights as privileges that were granted by the state. Typically, the Park administration conceded to granting access to Dene people only because of pushback from Indian Affairs officials, missionaries, and Indian Agents, who feared that displaced families would be forced to rely heavily on federal social assistance—a fear that eventually materialized as a direct outcome of twentieth-century Park policy. Some community members have concluded, therefore, that Crown commissioners did not negotiate Treaty 8 in good faith but used it as an intentional means of cheating the local people out of their lands and resources. As ACFN Elder Victorine Mercredi succinctly said in 1998, "They broke their word long ago."[83]

"They weren't aware of WBNP being created"

Dene oral histories tell us that community members did not consent to the creation, expansion, or management of the Park in their territories, and that many people did not even know about it. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 argue that Parks and Indian Affairs officials proceeded to make decisions and changes with limited or no dialogue with the local people most affected. And indeed, archival and oral evidence shows that some Dene leaders actively opposed the Park and that the Park's administration consistently overlooked or dismissed Dene opposition and concerns. Elder Alec Bruno summarized, "The Elders said they weren't aware of WBNP being created . . . no government officials ever came to them for consultation or input from the trappers and hunters of the region. So this proves that they, the government, didn't intend to share this with our people. Trappers and hunters weren't given any say in the formation of WBNP."[84] Other Elders have suggested that, if Dënesųłiné leaders were consulted about the Park in the early days, they were led to believe that their lands would only be loaned temporarily for the bison sanctuary. Much

oral testimony suggests that Parks officials promised residents and land-users that the land transferred to the Park would be returned after a limited time—in some oral histories, after no more than 15 years, and in others after 99.

Oral histories express other important counter-narratives to what is contained in the written records. For example, if relying solely on the written records, a reader might be led to conclude that the 1944 membership transfer from what was then called the Chipewyan Band to the Cree Band took place without much impact on the community.[85] The oral histories shared in Chapter 4 challenge this assumption, suggesting that the transfer occurred without the consent or knowledge of many community members and resulted in serious harm to individuals, families, and the community that is still felt today. Government records and warden reports are also relatively sparse in details related to specific forcible removals of Dënesųłıné families from Birch River, or elsewhere in the Park, or to intimidation tactics used by wardens. Whereas Elders and members relate family histories of forcible evictions, warden reports and park memoranda tend to refer to permit refusals and revocations that resulted in exclusions from the Park rather than eviction. Yet, when read alongside textual archives, oral histories clearly demonstrate that, whether by eviction or permit restrictions or both, Dene residents and land-users were often arbitrarily excluded from their territories, homes, and harvesting areas.

WBNP, colonial eliminationism and Dene resistance

Elders and members have also emphasized the violent nature and harmful outcomes of the Park's and province's conservation and land management regime. Chapter 5 presents testimony about Dene people's relationships with wardens and the restrictive game and land-management laws controlling their movements and relations to the land throughout the twentieth century. Elders and members emphasize that Park policy prioritized preserving and conserving animals over Indigenous lives and was steeped in racialized rhetoric about Indigenous land use common to the time. As the late Elder Alec Bruno explained in a statement that is included at length in Chapter 3, "As I see it the government had eradicated our people from their homeland just to be replaced by bison."[86] Bruno's point about eradication is important. It helps us to understand the Park as an instrument of colonial elimination, which Patrick Wolfe has famously described as "the organizing principle of settler-colonial society"—ultimately, the striving for "the dissolution of native

societies."[87] Dene oral histories tell us that the Park not only advanced other colonial processes of dispossession and elimination in Northern Alberta taking the forms of residential schools, epidemics and extreme extraction, but also was in itself eliminationist. In the early years of the Park, officials were explicit about their desire to eliminate Indigenous Peoples and ways of living from what became the Park area. Later, permitting laws and other state land and resource management policies also played key roles in attempts at colonial elimination.

Throughout the chapters that follow, we discuss how alienations from kin, land and water, and erosions of Dene ways of life in the history of this Park, were "inherently destructive to Indigenous collectivities" and thus should be defined as colonial attempts at elimination. [88] Members and Elders draw causal lines between the Park and wide-ranging and intergenerational impacts on Dënesųłiné individuals, families, and community. Relying heavily on community testimony, Chapters 6 and 7 focus on these impacts and Dënesųłiné people's resistance and healing. Virtually all ACFN members who shared testimony for this book described in detail direct and cumulative impacts, past and present. The direct impacts of the Park were compounded and intensified in the wider environment of colonial elimination in Dene territories. Elder Edouard Trippe de Roche expresses this view succinctly: "We've been in prison since they set foot in America."

But Elders and community members also emphasize that throughout this history, Dënesųłiné people have also resisted and refused the violence of the Park in creative and diverse ways. As Elder Alice Rigney said when she reviewed the first draft of the book, "we are very resilient people. We are still here and will still be here." At times, Dene leaders made efforts to convince officials to revise government policy, using Park policies to fight against them. At other times, they openly protested Park policies and exclusions, and asserted their concerns through various means about the harmful impacts of Park exclusions. Dene Elders and members continue to assert their Treaty Rights and maintain their ways of life in the face of colonial violence. Furthermore, as many Elders indicated during interviews, Dënesųłiné people shared with one another in times of need. This principle has helped members of the community survive the drastic changes of the twentieth century and harms wrought by the Park and other colonial systems. ACFN's survival, Chief Allan Adam concluded, "is because of determination and hard work . . . The memory embedded in the heart gives us the determination to fight

for who we are today." In Chapter 6, we discuss some of the ways that Dene people refused and resisted colonial violence as it played out in the history of the Park.

Remembering for the future

Finally, ACFN members perceive Parks Canada's more recent attempts to address relations with Indigenous Peoples through co-management and reconciliation to be too little, too late. The concluding chapter discusses more recent changes to the management of the Park and Parks Canada's attempts to reframe its relationships with Indigenous Peoples. To many members, such attempts to rectify the relationship, rarely designed or approached on communities' own terms, are inadequate and disingenuous—more conciliatory talk than transformative action. Dënesųłıné people living outside the Park still find themselves on the periphery of discussions and co-management schemes. Yet Elders and members express the view that Parks Canada and the Canadian public can play a role in making transformative change. This is why the community has pursued this justice-oriented research initiative. By uplifting and amplifying local knowledge and experiences, the community believes that words can lead to action: reparative and compensatory action that is defined by Elders, members, and leadership—on their terms and in their timeframe.

"I want everything to come out in the open"

Chief Allan Adam told us in February 2021, "We just want them to know—sure, Wood Buffalo National Park wants to open up to the world . . . and brag about the beauty and the richness and the scenery and everything. But before they do that, we just want everybody to know the story that happened to us." The "them" Chief Adam is likely referring to is UNESCO, which designated Wood Buffalo National Park a World Heritage Site in 1983, describing it then as "the most important protected area within the Canadian Taiga biogeographical province."[89] In 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee requested that Canada develop an action plan for WBNP due to concerns that the impacts of oil sands and hydro-electrical development threatened the health and integrity and the Park's Outstanding Universal Value, including the Peace-Athabasca Delta. UNESCO has exhorted Canada to address its "lack of engagement with First Nations and Métis in monitoring activities," recommended "clear and coherent policy and guidance"

toward "genuine partnership" with rights-holding Indigenous communities and noted with concern "insufficient consideration of traditional ecological knowledge" as threats to the Park's World Heritage Site designation.[90] A 2017 UNESCO Mission Report on the Park highlighted significant changes to the Peace-Athabasca Delta in recent decades, resulting in "multiple, major and complex challenges, stressors and threats at very different scales" especially to Indigenous Peoples who call it home.[91] Nevertheless, to the best of ACFN's knowledge the history of violence and displacement on which the Park is based has not been explicitly addressed in UNESCO communications.

By explicitly centering Dene oral histories, this book aims to challenge colonial erasures and eliminations, bringing local and essential perspectives to bear on the wider critiques of Canada's National Parks system, and questioning the celebratory language often surrounding National Parks in the wider public discourse. Some of the testimony included in this book centres on personal experience and perspectives, while much draws on oral Traditions and histories that have been passed down through generations. Every word is critical to telling the community's story on the community's terms. Dënesųłiné members, Elders, and leaders remind us that this process of amplifying their histories is key for healing and the well-being of future generations. Explaining how he lives with the legacy of his granny Helene Piche's traumatic experience with the Park, Chief Allan Adam demonstrates the present and future significance of sharing the community's oral histories:

> Now ACFN is coming back in there, you got people pushing back against us because they don't want us there, because they've lived too comfortably not knowing the history about what happened. And if they know the history I don't think it would be so forceful in regards to how we were treated and how we're still being treated today. You know, I feel for my granny. She was the one that took it hard the most, you know, she was the one that lost everything. But she had heart and determination, probably didn't even realize that her grandson would be Chief of the Nation one day and how this would come back to haunt me, you know, and make me fight. That's what gives me heart. That [is why I] never give up—a grown man should cry. Chiefs should have to cry. It's through tears that the trail will never be broken again. That's what has to heal.

> And my granny left [passed away] in 1992. Everything that my granny told me when she was at home, probably about 60 to 70 percent of that information she gave me, I follow that and keep that dearly as a Chief. That's what makes me who I am. Everything that she taught me—everything; everything she told me, the stories, I've sat down with her listen to her about what she had to go through to make us who we are today. And you know what, I don't want that shame to continue to happen. I want everything to come out in the open and let's move on. Because that [shame] is what's tearing this community apart.

As Chief Adam suggests, and as the many oral histories in this book demonstrate, the voices of those who came before touch the lives and experiences of the people to this day. This book is one way that ACFN wishes to honour and amplify the voices and lives of the past, present, and future. Doing so not only fills gaps in the history of the Park, challenging erasures from narratives about WBNP and the wider history of Canadian National Parks. It is also crucial to the journey for healing and justice Dënesųłıné peoples have pursued for the past century.