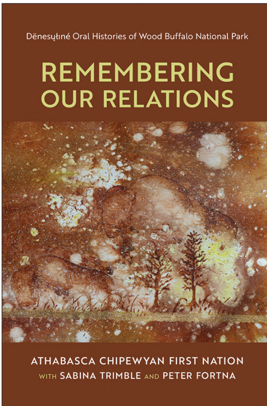
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press



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

Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation with Sabina Trimble and Peter Fortna

ISBN 978-1-77385-413-7

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press
press.ucalgary.ca

Acknowledgement: *We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher,* **re.press**, *and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy* http://www.re-press.org

6

t’ąt’ú náídé nuhghą hílchú łąt’e kúlí ąłų́ dene k’ezí náídé

Combined with the increasingly strict system of harvesting laws enforced by the warden system, exclusions from Dënesųłıné territories taken up by the Park created serious problems for people living outside the Park. Many people faced periods of severe hardship, some even to the point of starvation. Meanwhile, those who could remain in the Park fared somewhat better because competition was limited. Dene people in the Delta, however, did not benefit from the protections afforded to Park residents and faced serious challenges. Hunger and hardship became realities for Dënesųłıné people in the Delta, especially those who had been evicted from the Park. After the expansion of the Park, many were forced to take government relief, whereas only a few decades earlier they had provided for themselves from the land. Chief Jonas Laviolette’s 1927 letters to Indian Affairs officials emphasized the challenges people were facing: “There are lots of men here looking after the buffalo, no one looking after us. . . . No one seems to care if we starve or not.” His letter continued, “sometimes the Police give us a little rations . . . but we cannot live on that all the time. Since the fur has left the country, you don’t know how poor we are, not only in food but clothing and blankets too.”[1] As Indian Affairs officials had feared from the start, Dene families were often forced to rely on government assistance because they were unable to freely harvest as they had always done.

Faced with these challenges, Dene people frequently and clearly resisted government officials, asserting their concerns through protest, petition, and requests for government support. They indicated that new state-imposed regulations and evictions from the Park not only interfered with their livelihood, leading to widespread hardship and hunger, but also were violations of their Treaty and hereditary rights. As Sandlos describes, through letter writing campaigns, political delegations, protests, and subversions of harvesting

regulations, Dene residents and land users have always articulated "a set of cultural and political values rooted in the notion of customary use rights, hereditary land title, and . . . a treaty guarantee of the right to hunt and trap."[2] Dene oral histories allude to the strength and resistance of Dene people who used many different means and forums to express their concerns about restrictions on harvesting and the resulting suffering they experienced, and to resist and challenge attempts at eliminating their sovereignty and ways of life. As this chapter's Dënesųłıné title states, "the way we lived was taken from us; however we still live/stay there as Dene people."

Extensive letter-writing campaigns were a key form of Dene activism from the time the Park was created. Letters written by harvesters and leaders indicated that Indigenous residents opposed laws imposed from afar and without their consent or regard to their needs and rights. Letter writers repeatedly stated the concern that their Treaty Rights were being violated and that this was causing extreme difficulty. In 1926, several Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents contested the Park annex in a memorandum to Charles Cross: "So unnecessary is any such establishment in the area in question, and so harmful would it ultimately prove to be to those now resident in that area and vicinity that we pray that the above-described terrain shall under no circumstances be set apart as a Buffalo Park, or as an annex."[3] They continued, "As you are doubtless aware, when the Treaty was first made . . . the members . . . were given the solemn assurance that they would be as free to hunt and fish after the signing of the Treaty, as if they had never entered upon it."[4]

After the annex, a 1927 letter from Chief Jonas Laviolette called on officials to respond to Dene demands for the establishment of the reserves promised in Treaty 8 to his Nation, which would protect the people from increasing trapping competition and the hunger that resulted from game laws.[5] Numerous other letters throughout the period expressed people's frustrations with the regulations, encroaching white trappers, their fears of starvation, and concerns for their families' health and well-being.

Delegations made up of leaders and residents asserted Dene rights and concerns to government officials. Chief Jonas Laviolette travelled to Edmonton more than once to state his concerns directly to officials, sometimes taking a delegation of other leaders with him. A 1935 delegation of Cree and Dene chiefs stated their view to Austin L. Cumming, District Agent and Park Superintendent, that the revised permitting regulations were infringing on Treaty Rights.[6] At Treaty Days, leaders repeated their concerns to Indian

Fig. 6.1 Chief Jonas Laviolette, pictured here, spent much of his leadership defending the community's rights and interests in the face of stringent and exclusive colonial environmental policy in the twentieth century. He also frequently spoke out about the harmful impacts of WBNP's boundaries. *Jonas Laviolette, Ft. Chipewyan (1948–1954).* Provincial Archives of Alberta, A17118.

Agents on a yearly basis.[7] Some refused treaty payments to protest the Park and game laws.[8]

Another common form of resistance was to ignore or break state-imposed game laws. Some Dene harvesters continued trapping and hunting in the Park as a political act, "an attempt to return to the time before an arbitrary and largely impersonal state bureaucracy" dispossessed them and restricted their movement and lifeways, as Sandlos explains.[9] By harvesting as they had always done in areas currently restricted through colonial law and refusing to share information with Park wardens, he argues, Dene harvesters expressed "collective dissent against the arbitrary application of state power over traditional hunting rights in the region."[10] Historians connecting Parks with colonialism in Canada often draw this conclusion from their reading of archival sources; Wood Buffalo Park warden diaries and patrol reports from the 1920s to the 1940s contain evidence to support the assertion. In 1930, several Indigenous harvesters were tried and found guilty of hunting bison in the Park and were sentenced to three months of hard labour at the RCMP Barracks in Fort Chipewyan. The trial generated widespread interest

among local Indigenous communities; according to warden Dempsey's notes, roughly sixty Indigenous residents were in attendance. According to Finnie's summary of the proceedings, the convicted men argued that they would not have hunted bison if the government wasn't starving them, and further that "the Indians were not advised when treaty was made that buffalo from Wainwright Park would be imported."[11] Finnie dismissed this defence as irrelevant, missing the point. The harvesters' argument implied that they perceived the importation of plains bison and subsequent Park extension and accompanying regulations to be a violation of Treaty 8. By hunting bison, they were exposing this violation while also asserting what they knew to be their treaty rights.

Numerous other instances of harvesting in the Park and breaking regulations are evident from Park records; wardens tracked these instances meticulously. A 1935 report by Warden Dent to Supervising Warden M.J. Dempsey suggested that Dene residents in the Birch River area were hosting their kin from Fort McKay. Dent reported that Peter Ratfat and Vzckial Ratfat had visited Adam Boucher and his two sons at the Birch River settlement and that they were reported to be trapping without permits there. When Dent questioned Adam Boucher and his sons, they denied the reports. Dent wrote, "It is evident that someone is not telling truth. As you are aware, the Birch River Indians are related to some of the McKay Indians, so really it is difficult to get them to convict one another."[12] Two years later, in 1937, warden Dempsey reported people trespassing in the Birch River area.[13] These may have been assertions of Dënesųłıné harvesting rights in the area from which they had been removed or perhaps an attempt to return to the homes from which they had been evicted. One warden reflected in 1947 that in his interactions with local trappers, he learned that many were "extremely suspicious of new or proposed regulations" and that if those regulations were generally considered harmful, "individuals gain personal merit by breaking them and not being caught."[14]

The oral histories shared in this chapter also explicitly document these sorts of acts of resistance. Elders and community members shared examples of Dene people entering the Park to harvest despite the regulations banning them from doing so. Some Dene harvesters might enter the Park with a Métis or MCFN trapper who held a permit. Others recalled that some harvesters would wait until dark to enter the Park and harvest a bison and then store the meat throughout the Park, such as in rat houses or in residents' freezers,

Fig. 6.2 Photo of ACFN's Flag at ACFN Elders' Meeting, June 2022, Fort Chipewyan. Photo by Peter Fortna.

under a pile of moose meat, to avoid being caught. "They made sure it was all hidden," said one Elder. Other times, harvesters found that wardens did not know the difference between moose meat and bison meat and would capitalize on that ignorance. Two Elders shared accounts from the 1980s to the early 2000s in which they entered the Park to hunt or fish with the aim of initiating legal action. They notified Parks officials of their plans to harvest in the Park, including details of when and where, with the intention of getting arrested to initiate a lawsuit. While wardens met them and ordered the men to return home, they did not arrest the harvesters. Nonetheless, this is an important example of Dënesųłıné assertions of their uninterrupted and treaty-protected rights throughout their territories.

Assertions of Dënesųłıné rights and concerns like these were ignored, dismissed, or punished by provincial and federal authorities. The 1935 Edmonton delegation of Chiefs was dismissed by officials who told them that "there were no drastic changes in the Wood Buffalo Park regulations."[15] Officials sometimes responded to Dene activism by increasing warden surveillance. In 1937, after Dempsey had reported trespassers in the Birch River

area, one official wrote, "I am asking Park Warden Dempsey to have wardens patrol this area as much as possible this winter to try and prevent any trespassing by unwarranted persons."[16] When residents suggested revisions to the permitting and harvesting laws, they were often denied. For example, in 1937 leaders in the Northwest Territories requested permission for heads of families to kill a bison if their families were starving. They were refused on the basis that "the privilege would be abused" and that "the Government was preserving the buffalo for the Indians' own good."[17] Chief Jonas Laviolette's letters went unanswered. He described a generally dismissive attitude characterizing the federal administration's responses: "I have been waiting long to hear from you that I think you have forgotten all about me and my people from Fort Chipewyan. Four years ago, I went to Edmonton on purpose to see you about my people and my country. Times were hard then but now they are worse. My people are very miserable because they cannot make a living anymore from the fur."[18] Thus, a central component of the history of the Park's relation to ACFN, especially after 1926, was the dismissal of Dënesųłiné rights and concerns. Dene protests and petitions, as well as the intimate knowledge they had of the land and water, were mostly ignored, and the struggles resulting from physical displacements went unnoticed and uncompensated by the government.

Establishing Reserves: Delays and Denials

In addition to refusals and dismissals, government officials took decades to secure the reserves promised in Treaty 8. Families who were evicted from the Park needed protected space where could safely reside, harvest, and practice their rights. Although the park administration itself was not directly responsible for the long delays, park restrictions and evictions were a central reason Dënesųłiné leaders fought to secure reserves in the first place. They saw reserves as a key space where the people could survive physical displacements, restrictive game laws, and erosions of their Treaty Rights. As McCormack notes, without the potential protection of a reserve, and facing the influx of outsiders and newly imposed restrictions on land use and mobility, people found themselves living "in a condition of total insecurity, at the mercy of the park administration, which they distrusted."[19] Chiefs Alexandre Laviolette and Jonas Laviolette had lobbied the government for reserves since the signing of Treaty 8 to mitigate these issues. But as the Treaty and Aboriginal Rights Research report concluded, "repeated Indian demands for protection from

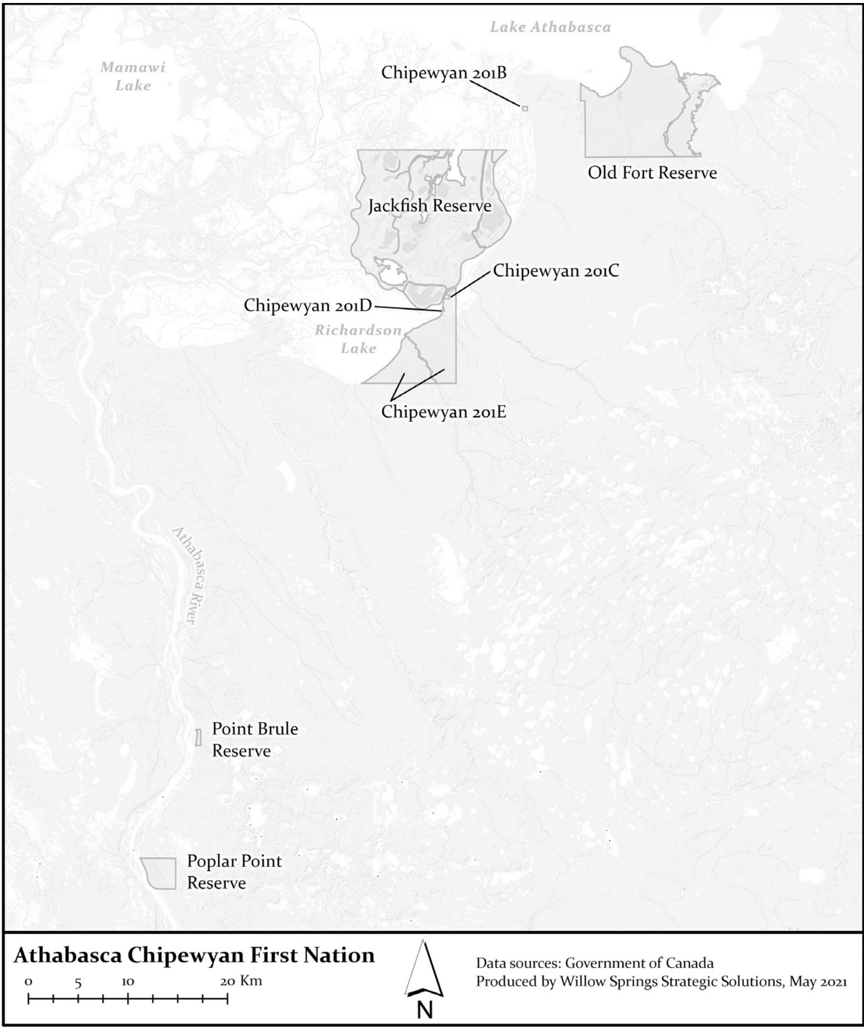


Fig. 6.3 Map of ACFN IR201 reserves. Map produced by Emily Boak, Willow Springs Strategic Solutions, 2021.

unregulated, irresponsible and sometimes illegal outside competitions—by the establishment of preserves—had been fruitless" for many decades.[20]

Indian Affairs eventually acted on Dene leaders' urgent and repeated requests for a reserve in 1931—thirty-two years after the Nation signed onto Treaty 8 and nearly a decade after the Park's creation. However, the province of Alberta challenged the proposed allotment size, which was almost 34-square kilometres larger than the Nation's Treaty entitlement required. The province was particularly reluctant to transfer control over prime muskrat trapping terrain in one section of the proposed reserve. It was not until 1937 that federal Order-in-Council 1399/27 granted certificates of title for the surface rights to 200 square kilometres of land for the Chipewyan Band (now ACFN) reserves in the Athabasca Delta. The province retained control over waterways, mines and minerals, and fishing in the Band's IR 201A-G reserves. Surface rights were not officially transferred from the province to the federal government until 1954.[21]

The negotiation of the reserve allotments occurred largely without the input or consultation of Dënesųłıné leaders and land users. The original, larger allotments that leaders had previously negotiated were ultimately reduced and re-negotiated by the provincial and federal governments without consultation. As one Elder explained, "when the Dene were kicked out of the park, the government gave the Dene a piece of land over here. . . . We didn't have a choice on where we wanted to be, you know. They put us over here by Jackfish Lake, Old Fort, and up the river a couple of other places. . . . So I was telling the chief we should pick some reserves or a piece of land or lands somewhere where we want to live, not where they want us to live. We want to decide rather than the[m] telling us where to live." As the various levels of government argued over reserve boundaries, Dene people who had been removed from the Park continued to face hunger and economic hardship with little recourse or help.

The 1935 Order-in-Council to protect Dene Harvesting Rights: Another Broken Promise

In 2013, Elder Pat Marcel related the oral history of another effort by Dënesųłıné leaders to mitigate the harmful impacts of the Park and the conservation restrictions after 1926. He explained that, as the IR 201 reserves were being negotiated, Chiefs lobbied the government for the establishment

of protected harvesting reserves outside the Park, in addition to the IR201 reserves. Indian Agent Card wrote to Indian Affairs in 1927:

> On behalf of the Chipewyan Indians, under Chief Jonas Laviolette, Jackfish Lake, Ft. Chipewyan, I would call the attention of the Department to the wishes of the band . . . to have, *independently of these special reserves*, the survey, in the coming spring of the reserve, for the band, guaranteed by Treaty, June 21st, 1899. I might add that they are very urgent on this matter, as there is a prospect of rats [muskrats] coming back and they wish to protect the marsh grounds surrounding their homes.[22]

By 1931, officials were still discussing the request: "For many years the Indians of the Chippewyan *[sic]* band at Fort McMurray have been pressing to have a game reserve set aside for them," wrote one official.[23] As Elder Pat Marcel explained, Dene leaders and land users were determined because they knew that "most of the better lands [outside the Park] would be taken up" by non-Indigenous trappers competing for harvesting space, and by a growing industrial presence in the region.[24]

Due to Dene activism, the 1935 Order-in-Council 298-35 set aside a large, protected conservation area in addition to the IR201 reserves. The Order-in-Council closed trapping to anyone but local residents in the following area:

> Beginning at a point where the Inter-Provincial boundary between Alberta and Saskatchewan joins the south boundary of the North West Territories, thence southward along the Inter-Provincial boundary to the 27th Baseline, thence west along the said 27th Baseline to the Athabasca River; thence north along the eastern boundary of the Wood Buffalo Park to a point where it joins the southern boundary of the North West Territories, thence east along the southern boundary of the North West Territories to the point of intersection of the Inter-Provincial boundary.[25]

The oral histories indicate that this area was exclusively intended for Indigenous residents, and Dene leaders saw it as an important space to protect Dënesųłiné people who had been expelled from the Park. As Elder Pat Marcel stated, "I am sure that Chief Jonas Laviolette convinced the government that

if we didn't have that agreement, then the white population would run rampant and kill everything off, and we would not have anything to survive. So this is what happened with the 27th Baseline and our land."[26] However, the province abandoned this Order-in-Council, likely shortly after the Registered Fur Management Area (RFMA) system came into effect in 1942.

A series of letters among government officials from 1935 to 1942 suggests that the administration struggled to manage the complex and sometimes contradictory trapping arrangements within and outside the Park, including for this new preserve. The 1935 Order-in-Council added controversy to confusion by excluding non-resident harvesters from trapping or hunting in the large preserve. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous harvesters who resided south of the Delta region were not permitted to harvest within the preserve boundaries, which frustrated Dene harvesters who resided south of the area but had relatives in the Delta.[27] After 1942, the province no longer acknowledged the Order-in-Council that set aside preserve land; trapping throughout the area was subsequently managed through the RFMA as with the rest of the province.[28] In this way, another attempt by Dënesųłiné people to protect themselves and their rights after being expelled from the Park was thwarted by government authorities. Pat Marcel's oral history of these events is quoted at length later in this chapter.

ACFN members continue to challenge colonial systems of land and resource management in Dene homelands. In Spring 2022, a WBNP warden ordered ACFN member Melissa Daniels to stop travelling to the Park's salt flats to harvest salt for wellness products she creates through her small business Naidie Nezu. The roughly 200 square-kilometre salt plains are a distinguishing feature of the region and are among the elements of Outstanding Universal Value for which Wood Buffalo National Park was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983.[29] Indigenous Peoples in the region have harvested in the salt deposits for various purposes such as for food preservation since time immemorial. Parks Canada took issue with Daniels' purpose for harvesting. Harvesting salt for personal use was not an issue, according to the communication, but "commercial harvesting" was not permitted. Indicating that she never had plans to mass-produce or widely distribute the Naidie Nezu products and that harvesting salt for any reason was a Dene right, Daniels took the exchange to the public. As she told a CBC reporter in April 2022: "The implication that my land-based, hand-harvested practice is a threat to the natural environment is insulting to me, our Nation, our

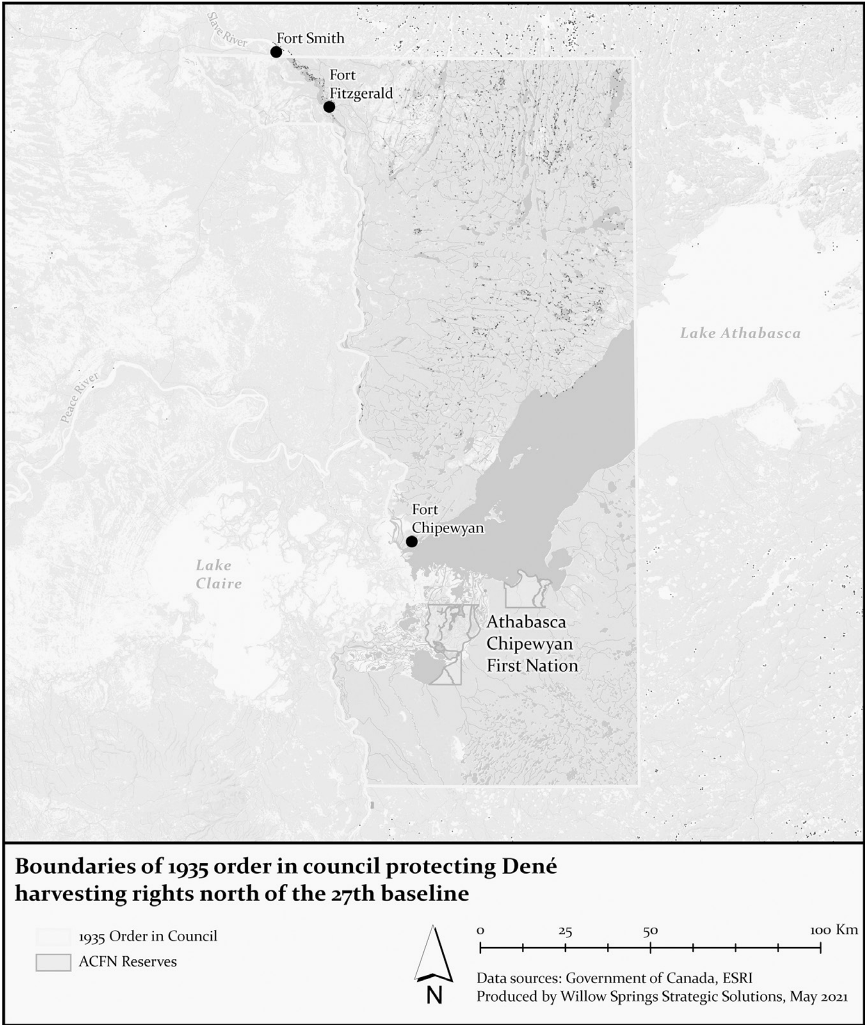


Fig. 6.4 Map of the boundaries of the preserve set by 1935 Order-in-Council 298-35 Map Produced by Emily Boak, Willow Springs Strategic Solutions, 2021.

Fig. 6.5 A Round Dance at ACFN's Treaty Days, 2018, Fort Chipewyan. Photo by Peter Fortna.

ancestors and the land itself."[30] Daniels argued that this was a blatant refusal of Dene people's Indigenous and Treaty Rights and their land-based ways of life, stating that she would not stop harvesting. As she noted publicly, "colonialism is colonialism is colonialism" and that this situation demonstrated the need for "a radical reconfiguration of environmental dynamics."[31] By excluding Indigenous Peoples from their homes and homelands and restricting their movements and ways of life, while supporting extreme extraction outside of Park boundaries, Canadian authorities continue a legacy of environmental racism. Daniels explained that she had no plans to stop harvesting and that supporting the business and soaking in "forbidden bath salts" itself could be seen as an act of resistance, of "soaking in a century worth of reparations."[32]

In the oral testimony shared in this chapter, Elders discuss efforts to challenge encroachments on Dënesųłiné rights and homelands, and to respond to the harmful impacts of the Park's and province's policies.[33] Dene people have engaged in activism and resistance in organized forums and in their everyday lives. Whether by harvesting salt, passing down oral histories, exposing tailings leaks that industry and regulators have kept hidden from Indigenous Peoples and the public,[34] teaching Dene language classes, or writing this

book—the Dënesųłıné have always resisted and challenged colonial attempts at elimination. They continue to express and maintain Dene knowledge, rights, ways of life, and relations to the land and water.

ORAL HISTORY

ACFN Elder Leonard Flett (30 April 2021)

In this discussion, ACFN Elder Leonard Flett described an interaction with Parks Canada in the 1990s. Leonard deliberately entered the Park and practiced his right to fish there in hopes of being arrested and charged, to initiate legal proceedings and thereby demonstrate and establish his rights to harvest in the Park in court. While he was ticketed and took the case to court, it was ultimately dropped.

LF: I was robbed. Yeah, highway robbery, I guess. Everything. Our culture and the land. We were there and stuff, right? And took years and years till I put my foot back in [the] national park. I kind of disagreed with it. I fought it back in the '90s for ice fishing so I can practice my right. I was charged by the National Park and went as far as the court door, didn't go anywhere else.

PF: They dropped the charges?

LF: Yeah.

PF: Or, they still charged you?

LF: Yup, they took my chisel away, they took my fishing rods, whatever else I had there. I went walking out there [to where I fished]. I didn't take my skidoo or anything. Cause I [knew] that was a challenge I took. My mother was very, very upset for me to go out there and that's the kind of guy I am, I guess. I want challenges.

PF: Can you take me back to that time when you were deciding—what made you decide that you wanted to go back to the Park?

LF: I just wanted to practice my rights, my hunting rights, my fishing rights, a lot I had before, right? I even called [the] national park, I told them I was going at a certain time and they met me out there while I was fishing, yeah.

PF: And so, was part of it you wanted to reconnect kind of with your past too?

LF: Yeah. I'm entitled to.

PF: And so, what did the parks guys have to say when they picked you up?

LF: They didn't say much. They just gave me a ticket and they offered a ride back to town. And I said, no, I'll walk. I came walking out here, I walk back to town.

PF: What did you think about on that walk?

LF: It's good, it was a challenge. It was. I defeated the national park.

PF: And then, I guess you got your tickets? So you're getting ready for court and stuff. What were other people, like your mom was upset, but what were other people thinking?

LF: My mom was very upset. Cause, anybody [who] violated the Park way back in the day they're probably jailed, right?

PF: So she thought that was gonna happen to you?

LF: Yeah. But I stood my ground. And I have people from Northwest Territories that were challenging [the] national park [WBNP] for their hunting rights. Like the Métis Association of Alberta. And I called them up and told them, and they backed me up and said, "go ahead, do it." And then when are you going to resolve it?

PF: And so, what about people in your community, were they backing you up too?

LF: There aren't much people involved, and I just involved my mother, that's pretty well it. And I got a hold of Indian Association out of Treaty 8, they got me a lawyer and stuff like that. So, I went to court. It didn't go anywhere.

PF: So you were getting ready to go to court. And then what happened? They just told you it was dropped?

LF: Yeah, it was dropped right at the court door that day. Yeah.

PF: Did they say why?

LF: No.

PF: What do you think?

LF: I think they were defeated. I don't think they had a chance. I don't think they had a chance, you know? And that's the reason why I took it [this cause] up. I took journalism before, so.

PF: Okay. Did you ever write anything about it?

LF: Uh, no, I haven't. One of these days, I will.

PF: Okay. Yeah, it sounds like it'd be a good story. So have you gone back since?

LF: Yeah, I built a cabin in the national park. I gave it to my son. There's other memberships that have built cabins in the park. My sister and her husband used to live in Peace Point, used to teach in Peace Point which is the national park back in the '80s. So we maintain our rights, I guess.

PF: How do you feel about having the cabin now and having been able to pass it on to your kids and, or your son and stuff?

LF: Feeling proud.

John H. Marcel (30 April 2021)

John was explaining to the interviewer that he often used to visit the Park and called it home, sometimes hunting there to assert his rights to the territory taken up by the Park. He suggested that sometimes when he does so, he gets resistance from some MCFN members who are permitted by Park policy to call the Park home.

I like going there [to the Park], but I don't. It seems like I'm not welcome in that place. And then I just bug them sometimes. I get this little thing that where—the hell with the way you feel—my granny was born up that way [at] Birch River. My granny is the one—she was born up that way. My granny and my other grandfather, her side was from that way so that they'd all come to the Park after, eh? But in a way, that's why, when I go there, I always say, hey, I'm coming back home, I always bug a Cree member. But them, they don't get what I'm saying. I never told them why I'm saying that, like, "hey, I feel like I'm happy I'm getting home, the way home, you know?" I'm just fooling around with them.

But, when you get there, you get, "what is this guy doing here?" Just like about that time when I'm saying I'm going back home, we stopped in a cabin, right about this time of the year [in the Spring], with a lot of birds going north, that's what we're going for. It was in the Park right by Lake Mamawi, and when I stopped there, I know everybody, they're all from here, Fort Chip, but they all look at me, "what the hell is this guy doing here?" Right? You know, I know right away, just by the look of it. But I didn't care . . . it doesn't bother me, if they think that way, to hell with them, it's no longer my land. I just laugh at them. That's all I do. I'm only there to hunt, right? I'm not there to go put a cabin right next door to you, so I'm there for two hours or a few days, then I go home. And I'm probably going to do that not too long from now, the next couple of weeks you know, exercise our right. I might go for a cruise [a boat ride] up that way and bring my little tent and stove and what I need. Talk about [how] I'm going to go for when the birds come in, eh? Yeah, go for a little hunt there.

Pat Marcel (2013)

The following is an extensive excerpt from Pat Marcel's oral history about negotiations for ACFN's reserves and the 1935 provincial Order-in-Council 298-35

setting aside an additional preserve north of the 27th Baseline to further protect the rights of those Dene individuals without access to the Park. In 2013, he shared this history with Arlene Seegerts, a researcher who, at the time, was working with Pat to record his family oral histories about Treaty 8 and the 1935 Order-in-Council. Pat's grandfather was Chief Jonas Laviolette, who, along with his brother Alexandre Laviolette and son-in-law Benjamin Marcel, Pat's father, was instrumental in negotiating the establishment of this preserve.

The story that I am about to recall [is] about Chief Jonas Laviolette, in negotiations for reserve land. Reserves like 201A to 201G.[35] When the government proposed these reserves, Chief Alexandre Laviolette saw immediately that the land was too small for ACFN to survive on. Negotiations continued, not only for N22, but also for a bigger area in Alberta, where we could practice Treaty Rights and use the land for conservation, because the land around the Delta was being invaded by people who had no regard for fur bearing animals, and the moose and other big game animals that the Chipewyan survived on.

When Chief Alexandre Laviolette first started negotiation for protected land, this was the outcome, in 1935. When most of the negotiation for land started, he knew that most of the better lands [outside the Park] would be taken up. . . . He wanted to make sure that there would always be game and fur-bearing animals because he was already preaching conservation, back then. The Chiefs, starting with Alexandre, always had an interest in the future, in order to survive off the land in fifty or one hundred years. He did not see ACFN surviving on agriculture. He did not see ACFN surviving on commercial fishing, as seen by McGinnis [fishery] bringing in their own people to fish, not ACFN.[36] So that is why he wanted to protect land for the sole use of ACFN into the future.

These negotiations went on and were picked up by Chief Jonas Laviolette, after his brother [Alexandre] died, and he and my dad, Benjamin Marcel [a Chipewyan Band leader , were able to negotiate with the province with the help of the federal government. It was through legislation with the Alberta government that this land was set aside for ACFN to practise our Treaty Rights and conservation. And [it] was set up as [a] huge tract of land, right up to the Northwest Territories. . . . This land, they talked about for many years. They [Dene Elders] called, time and time again, the importance of keeping this land, and to be sure that we would never lose this land for as long as ACFN needs the land to practise our Treaty Rights and conservation.

The Chief knew in those days—he was a very wise man—[that] what he puts in place with the Alberta government has to go right into the future, so we will always have a place where we can hunt. For the conservation, so we will always have game. This is what the Chief talked about all the time with my Dad. They had already signed the agreement, that legislative agreement. That was three years before I was born. And as I grew up, right until I was sixteen or seventeen, I trapped with my Dad, in the very same area, and he described this very same land. And he was very adamant: "You can never lose this land." That we must hang onto this—"forever."

I have not forgotten what my dad put into my head, and what Chief Jonas Laviolette used to come over and talk to my dad about; that that [1935] Agreement was an achievement for ACFN to practise Treaty Rights and also for conservation. I am sure that Chief Jonas Laviolette convinced the government that if we didn't have that agreement, then the white population would run rampant and kill everything off, and we would not have anything to survive. So this is what happened with the 27th Baseline and our land. And I tell the people, "Do you think it is coincidence that all of our traplines [RFMAs—the means whereby the province has managed trapping activities outside reserves since 1942] end on the 27th Baseline, but not outside of this land?" The traplines all ended on the 27th Baseline.

I heard Chief Laviolette speak about how we must not let Alberta Game take our land. He was looking at Reserve #201 to #201G, that those lands, called "the reserves," are so small that we could not survive off it. So this land [under the 1935 Order-in-Council] has been set aside by the Alberta government, by an Order-in-Council, by the *Games Act*, which was [the] first time at the agricultural side, but was put into the Games Act for enforcement.

In 1935, an Order-in-Council was passed by the Province setting aside the area in the Fort Chipewyan district, north of a line beginning at the south-east corner of Buffalo Park running directly east to the Saskatchewan border. This area is for the exclusive use of the Indians and settlers living north of the above-mentioned line and no trapping licenses have been issued to outsiders for that area since that time.

The Alberta government was not doing this—giving us land—from the goodness of their hearts. They were doing that because they knew that they had disrupted all family life at House Lake, by removing us from the park. So when we were given this piece of land to practise our Treaty Rights on, it was for us to pass the test of time—for our use—that Chief Jonas Laviolette made

sure that this land would be able to be there for us. To pass the test of time. It would still be there for one hundred or two hundred years into the future. That there would be somebody to speak for it, and that the government would support ACFN, to have this land that was set aside.

The fact that Chief Jonas Laviolette and my dad would always go back and talk about this land was to make sure that the future generation knew about it. And that we could still pressure the Alberta government, to make sure that this land was always there for us, for our use. Chief Jonas Laviolette was my grandfather, and he would come to my house and talk to my father and tell him, "That knowledge cannot be lost."

Edouard Trippe de Roche (25 November 2021)

Edouard Trippe de Roche described the establishment of reserves promised in Treaty 8. He suggested that, although the 201 reserves were important for protecting Dene rights as other areas in the territory were being taken up, the reserve allotments came together without the knowledge or consent of many of the Dene residents and land users. He concluded that ACFN's experience with unsatisfactory reserve allotments was not an isolated event—referring to the similar experiences of Blackfoot Nations in southern Alberta.

When the Dene were kicked out [of] the Park, the government gave us, or gave the Dene, a piece of land over here. We didn't have a choice on where we wanted to be, you know. They put us over here by Jackfish Lake, Old Fort, and up the river a couple of other places. And there's high water—we're losing so many acres. Even these last floods here, just this summer. Now, if you want to call land, land, you can't call our reserve there across the lake, 201, "land," because it's all under water, so we didn't actually have a reserve. So, I was telling the Chief we should pick some reserves or a piece of land or lands somewhere where we want to live, not where *they* want us to live. I know down south they've given the Blackfoots, they put them all in rocky hills, you know, rolling hills. They have places, sure they have small places to farm but not like where they were kicked out of the prairie. That's what happened out west here. So that's just one of my points.

Anonymous ACFN members (2021)

1. I think as you go along, you might find some—not just cautionary tales, but things that I would call passive aggressive. People going hunting bison

outside the Park and then inviting everybody outside the Park for two days while you eat the bison and have a really great time. And I've done it, I didn't shoot bison, but I've gone to the feast, and I had a great time. Everybody just crowds around—oh maybe I shouldn't say this, sorry—they crowd around the fire, and you know, tell tales and stuff like that and everybody just eats. But this is something, feasting is something that has always been there and it's a thing that people love to do. But they don't shoot inside the Park because of course the Park wardens, if they found out, would kick everybody out. And I think you'll find among the [Dene] there's been some very, very strong passive aggressive actions taken. Because you just can't live without resistance.

2. Yeah, I did hunt buffalo and buffalos used to come out from the Park, eh? But you can't go and hunt in the Park. But sometimes people they go in and get themselves a buffalo or two in the park too, well, in a bad storm. Well, you got to survive somehow, you know. You'll starve yourself. [They] tell you, "you can't go and shoot this buffalo in that Park" and what else is there to eat? And they had to poach buffalo out in the bush and then try to hide it. Everything they can hide, to survive. That was wrong, you know? That they'd [Parks officials] do that to other people.

Yeah, you keep it from the rangers, fish and wildlife. They [Indigenous harvesters] don't squeal on one another either. Somebody gets a caribou, everybody gets a piece of it. They help one another feed themselves. That was really good. Those were the good happy old days in one way. Oh, yeah, they help one another as much as they can for survival, to try to survive. Can't see a person starve to death, you know?

But Native People survive on the land. They had to do what they had to do to survive and sometimes they don't follow the white man's law. They can't, otherwise they'll starve their family. They go and poach too, we did. But still, we used to go and hunt. You had to survive. We had no choice.

3. I will tell you what I used to do, I mean, whether you bring it out [in the government report] or not doesn't make any darn difference—it's all gone now. But I—there was about three or four of us on a boat. We'd wait till Parks get to Chip and they're back [until the wardens have left the park], and they bring all their boats off. Well, I noticed about six o'clock, seven o'clock they're all in. And then we go out and hunt the buffaloes. Yeah. Oh, my God, I think I better darn keep quiet here. Shit, all of a sudden, the Parks, you come here one night, and they lay charges on me for all the information I've given you guys.

4. I shouldn't say that they never ever, ever come into the Park. There's a few of the guys went in just to go poaching—waterfowl.

5. Well, I think of one story my grandpa told me where they waited right till about dark. They knew where the buffalos are there, and then they took all the meat and they worked all night. . . . They cut all the meat up and stored it all over the place and even the buffalo they say, they took a [musk]rat house away and then put the buffalo into the rat house and covered it back up. Covered all their tracks and stuff to make sure there's nothing. They had the meat. I think they hid it from the dogs or they'd hide some meat for themselves and stuff. But they made sure it was all hidden. Or they made dried meat right away, you know, dried meat can be stored easily in a cabin and stuff. Yeah, they were kind of scared back in the day. But they did it, they poached them.

6. I'll tell you a little story. I used to live with my partner at the time. And they, well me too, I like eating buffalo meat, eh? We're not supposed to kill them, but my partner had killed one and then it just happened that the Chief at that time there, he came there with the Park wardens. They come to visit and so when they came there, in here, I was boiling a big pot of buffalo ribs and some moose meat. They asked me what it was, and I told the Chief, I said, "you should know it's moose meat," I told him, "have some." "Okay," he said. He just smiled and looked at me, big smile on his face 'cause he knew what it was. The Park warden, I invited him. I said, "have some moose with us." He said, "oh it tastes so good" and all that. He was eating buffalo meat, he didn't even know the difference.

Yeah, they went to an Elder's [house] here in Chip one time, because somebody reported he had shot a buffalo [in the Park]. And then, well, he did but already he had packaged the meat and put it in the bottom [of the freezer] and he had some moose meat and he put it on top. So by the time the Park came over there, Park wardens came there, they wanted to check his deep freeze. So the Elder opened the deep freeze, said, "okay, go ahead," he said. There's moose meat there and you could see outside there, like part of the moose, like the bones and stuff like that, he hadn't gotten rid of yet. So Parks said, "oh, okay, we just had to check." And he said, "I know not to kill buffalo," he said. Closes his deep freeze and he left, but at the bottom was all the buffalo meat. So yeah, they don't know—these people.

ST: And what would happen if they did get caught?

Elder: They'd get charged, you're not supposed to, I guess. I don't know what they did now, but you're not supposed to kill buffalo. Yeah, because

you're not supposed to kill it in the park because it's considered endangered or whatever they say. But you know, if they come this way towards Alberta, we're gonna go, not me, but you know, the guys are gonna head out there. Yeah, it tastes good that buffalo meat.

7. I mentioned earlier my father was sixty-one when he perished, and he left thirteen in our family and for sustenance purposes—my mother didn't have any advanced education, and it was difficult. So, I had uncles who would harvest a buffalo or a moose, but most of the time it was buffalo. We weren't allowed to, but they did anyway, and they would provide for my mother who was their sister, and they would bring food, which would be buffalo and fish and that sort of thing.

And in the summers, I know that on one occasion, and I'll never forget it, we went into the Park. I had an older brother that was going to get a buffalo in the Park because we needed meat. So away we went, and he dropped me at a place called Salt Plains which was west of Fort Smith. It was in the Park, and in order to get in there, there was a couple cabins near a place called Salt River and we had to sneak around those cabins with the vehicle so they wouldn't hear us or see the lights or turn us in.

So we went and we got into the salt flats and he gave me a pot and something else, and he dropped me off, and he said, "when you see me flash the lights you start coming towards the lights and make lots of noise, okay?" So I did that. What I was doing was pushing buffalo to him and then he'd turn the lights on, and "bang, bang," and we had a buffalo. So, then we would carve it up and load it up and get out of there. But that was in the Park.

So, I would daresay, we weren't the only ones doing that. I mean he must've learned it from somebody else too. But most of it was for subsistence reasons. That was our meat. That's how I grew up.

8. I mean, you know there's been cases over the years where people hunt bison or they hunt geese. Even when I was younger to go hunting in the Park, we knew it was illegal, we knew it was illegal, but it was where all the birds were. It was where the migratory route was—was in the Park. So you know you risk being criminally charged from the federal government through the warden services for doing activities like that.

7

t'a nuhél nódher sí nuhenéné bazį́ chu t'ąt'ú nuheba horená duhų́, eyi beghą dene hél hoílni

The Dënesųłıné title of this chapter translates to "what happened to us regarding our land and how we are in difficulty today, about that we tell our story to people." The title highlights the central intention of this chapter and of *Remembering Our Relations*: to tell the story of the intergenerational impacts of the Park on the Dënesųłıné people.

During much of the twentieth century, Wood Buffalo National Park was one of the only national parks in Canada that allowed some Indigenous Peoples to harvest within its boundaries. Yet, despite Parks officials' contention that the Park and its policies existed for the good of Indigenous Peoples, exclusions from WBNP were especially damaging to Dënesųłıné residents and land users. Dënesųłıné oral histories emphasize that the impacts of Wood Buffalo National Park's creation, expansion, and management throughout the twentieth century have been severe and long-lasting, complex, and multi-layered. Virtually all ACFN members who shared testimony for this project described in detail direct and cumulative impacts, both past and present. The impacts of the Park touch on many areas of Dene lives and well-being, with demonstrable long-term effects on the community's connections to Dene homelands, sovereignty, community dynamics, family connections, identity, and overall health—physical, spiritual and mental. The oral testimony shared in this chapter describes these complex, multidimensional, and multigenerational impacts cut "of Park policy."

A Holistic Understanding of the Impacts of Wood Buffalo National Park

Dene oral histories place the impacts of the Park within the wider context of colonization in Northern Alberta. The physical displacements and separations

of Dënesųłıné families due to Park policy occurred within a wider historical context of drastic changes that Dene people in Northern Alberta were already facing, including the Residential School System, devastating epidemics, the influx of settlers and extreme extractive activity, 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. Because ACFN members do not separate the impacts of the Park from this wider context, describing instead how other colonial processes, institutions, and policies compounded issues created by the Park, the oral histories in this chapter include excerpts that may not appear to directly pertain to WBNP's relationship with Dene people. These are indicated by subtitles like "On Residential Schools" or "On the Bennett Dam." It is important to honour this testimony because, as Chief Allan Adam puts it, "It was all part of it. Everything played into it. Residential [school] was created there to take the people off the land and everything because the government knew that land was full of resources, rich in resources—that people were living good." Chief Adam's statement suggests that the wider context of colonial eliminationism in Dene territories was directly tied up with the specific impacts of the Park. According to the oral histories, the Park was a major player in a history in which "an originally healthy and relatively affluent society . . . has been colonized and disenfranchised and has been losing traditional lands" over the past 250 years.[1]

A series of influenza and smallpox epidemics from 1916–1928 devastated Dënesųłıné communities in the region. Tuberculosis also devastated the community at various times throughout the twentieth century. In some cases, entire families were lost. As one ACFN Elder explained when recalling the oral history he had learned, Elders and children were the most vulnerable to these diseases. The loss of Elders was profoundly harmful to the well-being and continuity of the community because it is the Elders who hold and pass on the language, knowledge, ways of life, and oral histories and traditions. Further, he explained, if diseases hit the residential school, many children died as well, but priests and nuns usually survived the epidemics. A strain of the Spanish flu in 1920 hit the Holy Angels residential school and also killed Chief Alexandre Laviolette at age 41 in 1921.[2] Another flu epidemic arrived in 1922, taking the lives of children, Elders, and sometimes entire families. Roughly ten percent of the population was killed by this epidemic. It is probable that Dene leaders Julien Ratfat and Sept Hezell, both of whom

were active at the negotiation of Treaty 8, died from influenza.[3] Another tragic flu epidemic hit Dënesųłıné families outside the Park again in 1928, leading to such population declines that Indian Affairs agents feared it would be impossible for many families to provide for themselves in advance of winter.[4] Several Elders spoke of epidemics and mass graves when discussing the oral histories of the Park. Numerous gravesites including one in Fort Chipewyan and others near the Birch River settlements and elsewhere in the Park are physical markers of these devastating losses. As ACFN's oral histories suggest, throughout the history of the Park, the Dënesųłıné population shrank, and leadership, families, and communities were devastated by disease. The severe impacts of Park policies throughout the twentieth century only amplified the tragic situation.

Elders also spoke of the genocide caused by the Residential Schools System. Many Dene families in Northern Alberta and Saskatchewan have their own traumatic histories with residential schools, with many children forcibly taken from their homes and sent to Holy Angels Residential School in Fort Chipewyan. In 2021 and 2022, ACFN undertook ground-penetrating radar research to confirm the presence of numerous unmarked graves to which Elders and survivors have been pointing for decades. A number of Elders interviewed for this research are residential school survivors. Several shared their personal stories, while others described the experience in more general terms. Elder Ernie "Joe" Ratfat explained:

> They never asked anybody about the residential school [Holy Angels] too. They just decided to put it there. Yeah. That messed up so many families . . . And also they lost languages and our cultural ways. You know, they had a really big impact on us. I was in the residential school. We had no choice. And if we didn't go there, then our parents would be thrown in jail.

The testimony about residential schools encapsulates the devastation they wrought on families and the community at large. The loss of children and the Dënesųłıné language, the restrictions on cultural practices, the violence and abuse teachers and administrators committed against children, the deaths that often went unreported, and separations from family and land created harmful, intergenerational impacts.[5] These were only enhanced by the Park

restrictions after 1922. Displacements and treaty violations related to the Park went hand-in-hand with the trauma of residential school and epidemics.

In addition, significant economic and environmental transformations occurred in Northern Alberta from the 1920s to the 1960s; these had serious impacts on Dënesųłiné lives and livelihoods and were acutely challenging for those who were evicted from the Park. Victor Mercredi's diary described some of the impacts of these dramatic shifts in the 1960s:

> Many years have pulled by. Time passed. Old Fort Chipewyan was affected by the tide that swept past it. The fur trade has diminished. The wavies [snow geese] are leaving the place, the fishing is not as good as years ago. The old place of the H.B.Co. [Hudson's Bay Company] near the rock is abandoned. All the buildings are now worn and a store more modern was built in a situation more convenient to the people. Fort Chipewyan was the northern Indian life play[ed] out. Nowadays Crees and Chipewyans keep more around the Fort and they give up the ways of their fathers.[6]

Dene participation in the fur trade declined significantly after the Park expansion, in part due to declining fur populations, and in part due to increasingly restrictive conservation policies imposed from the 1930s onward and the establishment of the registered fur management area (RFMA or trapline) program across the Province in 1942 (discussed in Chapter 5). Dënesųłiné trappers also found themselves competing for trapping areas with an increasing number of trappers from the south, which peaked in the 1930s. Archival and oral sources alike suggest that, whereas Dënesųłiné trappers struggled to secure enough furs to feed themselves and their families, white trappers were often reported to be over-trapping to maximize profits. They used poison, destroyed Dene harvesters' traps, ignored conservation practices, and depleted fur stocks; their aggressive approach put Dënesųłiné land users at a significant disadvantage. As provincial fur supervisor J.L Grew summarized in 1945 Indigenous harvesters outside of the Park were being "crowded out." "It must be remembered," he wrote, "that these people for the past thirty or forty years and particularly in the past fifteen or twenty years, have been losing their hold over extensive trapping areas by white settlement and the intrusion

of white trappers and have felt that at any time they might be crowded off their traditional hunting grounds."[7]

The influx of trapping competition also brought a wave of tensions and violence that particularly affected people who had become excluded from the Park after 1926. Newcomers aggressively protected the trapping areas they claimed within Dënesųłıné territories. For example, an extensive series of official memoranda and letters described the activities and behaviour of Grant Savage, a white harvester who moved into the Park to trap in 1926, as well as his interactions with local Indigenous harvesters. He frequently complained to the Park administration, claiming that Indigenous locals were encroaching on the trapping area he had claimed. Due to his aggressive behaviour, the administration eventually wearied of him, and Savage was banned from the Park in 1941. This forced him to move his enterprise outside the Park, where he continued harassing the Indigenous residents and harvesters who had been pushed out. Wardens and Park officials documented his behaviour. Although Savage may be an extreme example, the frustrations expressed by Dene letter-writers and leaders, and recalled in the oral histories, suggest that he was probably not the only white trapper violently oppressing Indigenous harvesters in the region during those decades.[8]

The "nail in the coffin" for the northern fur trade—indeed an environmental catastrophe with sustained impacts on life at the Peace-Athabasca Delta—was the construction of BC Hydro's WAC Bennett Dam in 1967 on the Peace River. This dam destroyed the habitats of fur-bearing animals and many other species, resulting in irreparable damage to Dene trapping economies, relations to land, and the community's health and well-being for generations afterward. Several Elders lamented the total loss of the ways of life they had grown up with. Alice Rigney's poignant discussion of the profound, intergenerational impacts of the dam is quoted at length in this chapter. Some members also mentioned their current concerns about the new Site C dam, a $16 billion project under construction about eighty kilometres downstream of the Bennett Dam on the Peace River and slated for completion in 2025. Members fear the impacts of this dam will be as bad or worse than those of the Bennett Dam and perceive it as an infringement on their Treaty Rights and a threat to the well-being of future generations.

Amidst the decline of the fur trade in the mid-twentieth century, other intense extractive activities took centre-stage in the landscape of colonialism in Dënesųłıné homelands. What Westman, Gross and Joly call "extreme

extraction" has had significant impacts on the many ways that the Dene people have always related to the land and water and all life they support. State-supported extractive activity—including the extraction of bitumen, oil, sand, gravel, and minerals such as uranium as well as through commercial fishing and harvesting timber and pulp—across Indigenous territories has placed increasing pressure on Indigenous lands, waterways, and communities. Some ACFN members and Elders see extreme extraction as colonialism in its most recent guise—further restricting where and when they can safely travel and harvest and resulting in harm to the health and quality of the animals and plants that people harvest. Leslie Laviolette concluded, "the land was healthy. Now the land is polluted today." With waters warming and increased air pollution, the migratory patterns and movements of both migratory birds and river fish have shifted; fish have also become too toxic to eat.

One ACFN Elder indicated that few benefits from the extraction economy flow to Dene people: "You know, people they don't use the land very much anymore . . . we're poor, everything's polluted, and there's no water, nothing, they killed it, the government." He continues, "But there's still more, more, and more, you know, more industry, more companies, like that's what happened, we get nothing—we should get something out of it. Government's getting all the money." As the Dënesųłıné have watched their livelihoods and lands harmed by intensive industrial activities, they have also had to manage the impacts of being evicted from their homes and harvesting places within the Park since 1922. Park evictions and permitting regulations, 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.

Impacts of the Park

Displacement

Displaced from their homes at the Birch River/House Lake and Peace Point settlements and from other areas throughout what became the Park, such as at Moose Island, Lake Dene and Lake Mamawi, along the Birch Mountains and all the rivers identified in Treaty 8 as Dene territory, Dënesųłıné people lost the freedom to practice their deeply rooted land-based ways of living. Not only were many forced to leave their homes in the Park as a direct result of its creation and expansion (and many were refused the ability to return).

The permitting and harvesting laws also restricted access to their hereditary harvesting areas in the wider territory, including places where people harvested fish, mammals, birds, medicines, and other plants. Displacing Dene people from their homes and harvesting areas within the Park—fragmenting their wider homelands and territories—Park exclusions and the colonial land-management regime as a whole caused harm on many levels. ACFN Elders and Members' testimony shed light, for example, on erosions of Dene sovereignty and self-determination; losses of physical homes and belongings; alienations from Dene ways of life; interruptions of the intergenerational transmission of language and knowledge; losses of some members' senses of identity, pride of culture, and self-esteem; and separations of families and the fragmentation of widespread kinship networks. In turn, as the oral histories in this chapter show, Dene people have suffered at physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels.

One significant outcome of the displacement has been an erosion of Dene sovereignty and self-determination. The oral histories shared in Chapter 1 suggest that Dënesųłıné stewardship laws and legal orders have guided Dene ways of life and relations to the territory, as well as governed the active management of lands, waters, and wildlife for generations. After 1922, evictions from the Park, permitting and harvesting regulations, trapline arrangements, and the warden system worked together to limit and erode the community's sovereignty over a substantive portion of their homelands. As Sandlos writes, "decisions that had previously been made locally about what species to hunt and the best time of year to take particular game animals were now at least partly circumscribed by a formal legislative and regulatory framework that emanated from Ottawa."[9] Park policies and boundaries that excluded and alienated Dene people, as Joly and other scholars of WBNP describe, were part of a system intended to eliminate their legal orders from the landscape.[10] In these ways, Park policy was key to attempted erasures of Dene authority over land-based decision-making, sustainability practices, subsistence harvesting, seasonal mobility, and wildlife management.

Displacement also led to hardship. Archival and oral records demonstrate that some families removed from the Park experienced scarcity and hunger, sometimes to the point of starvation, especially from 1930s to the 1970s. In *Footprints on the Land,* Elders confirm that for those who were denied access, "the park eventually became a major contributor to hardship."[11] Hunger and economic strain became a reality that Dënesųłıné people in the

Delta, especially those who had been evicted or otherwise refused access, faced throughout the twentieth century. Steep competition for dwindling furs, restrictive game laws, and a lack of alternative economic opportunities made for challenging times for Dene people outside the Park after 1926.

Park officials largely remained obstinate, and policies remained the same. When missionaries and Indian Agents petitioned on behalf of those facing starvation, officials often dismissed their concerns. As one official flippantly claimed, "with regard to an Indian starving, the word 'starving' with the Indians here, does not necessarily mean total hunger."[12] When, in 1937, some hunters requested permission to kill one bison in the case of very serious need, they were refused because the officials believed people would start to fake "a starving condition very quickly" if given the opportunity.[13] Elders and members quoted in the oral histories in this chapter draw direct connections between the creation of the Park, and the evictions that followed it, and the severe hardship people faced. Their testimony clearly connects Park policies and exclusions with colonial elimination in the form of starvation; something that scholars of genocide and elimination in Canada argue was central to colonial politics of genocide.[14]

Furthermore, much of the oral history indicates that families and individuals who were forced to leave their homes within the Park, or who were refused access through the permitting system after 1926, lost their houses, cabins, and belongings. Some members said that their families' cabins were burned down by Parks Canada after they were forced to leave the Park. Through threats and intimidation, Parks Canada officials kept Dënesųłiné residents from returning to their physical homes in the Park after evictions. This was a reality that many other Indigenous Peoples in Canada faced throughout the history of national parks in Canada. For example, Dene oral histories about being forcibly removed from the Birch River area and leaving behind belongings—and coming back to find their cabins burned down—are strikingly similar to what happened to members of the Keeseekoowin Ojibway Nation in Manitoba during the creation of the Riding Mountain National Park in their territories.[15]

In some cases, the oral histories make direct connections between being denied freedom to move and live in the lands taken up by the Park and the physical, mental, and spiritual health and challenges that ACFN sees in the community now. Loss of access to Dene homelands not only cut harvesters off from trapping, hunting, gathering, and fishing areas within the Park

that were key to Dënesųłıné lives and subsistence but also led to alienation from sacred places, areas of cultural and spiritual importance, and access to medicines.[16] Being able to gather medicines, carry out cultural practices, and access spiritual sites, as ACFN Elders explained, is fundamental to Dene relations to the land and water and is critical to health and well-being.[17] As Keltie Paul noted, "you can't put a price on that. So where do these people . . . who get thrown out [go]? Well, where would you go for that? It's like . . . it's not just a pharmacy, it's a hospital. It's a spa." Some oral testimony in this chapter demonstrates the deep significance of being cut off from the cultural and spiritual resources of the land and water within the Park.

This is only compounded by the mental, spiritual, and emotional trauma resulting from strict Park policies of exclusion and accompanying warden surveillance and policing practices. Community testimony indicates that, even today, fear and stress about entering the Park or harvesting persist, as well as feelings of landlessness, disconnection, a loss of home, sadness, and deflation. Some Elders explained that even though Dene people have been allowed to go into the Park after the laws changed in 2005, a sense of caution and trepidation persists. One ACFN Elder stated that people are still afraid to enter the Park, and they are keenly aware of ongoing surveillance as Cree residents and Parks officials watch who enters and exits the Park.

Another significant impact that is described in the oral histories has to do with the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, language, and ways of life. Elders and members explained how Park-imposed displacements and boundaries have limited the abilities of Dene people to share knowledge and to learn and grow through travelling and using the land.[18] As McCormack notes, "on-going land use is critical to the transmission of the historic stories, to understanding the relationship of these stories to specific places, and to maintaining the spiritual relationships between people and land. . . . The very government regulatory systems that alienated Chipewyans from much of their traditional territory have over time contributed to a diminished ability . . . to learn about new lands by personal experience, the most important source of this knowledge."[19] The intergenerational transmission of Dene knowledge includes the transmission of the Dënesųłıné language, which some Elders and members note was interrupted in the twentieth century as a direct result of displacements from the land. This only compounded the deliberate work of residential schools to eliminate Indigenous languages and ways of life. Park displacements and restrictions have led to alienation not just

from the physical land and water, but from language, way of life and senses of identity since the continuity of these are intimately tied to relationship to homelands.

When combined with the membership transfer in 1944, the effect of the Park's displacements and restrictions on people's senses of identity is also a critical theme expressed in the oral histories. As ACFN writes, "The identity of a people is ultimately defined by their relationship to the land. . . . The core of their [the Dene people of Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation] identity and culture is still tied to their traditional use . . . and spiritual understanding of the land."[20] Relations to and knowledge of the land and water is both a key determinant of Dene health and well-being and a central part of Dene identities. Many members express the view that, being cut off from their kinship relations, homes, and territories within the Park, the community's connection with the "core of their identity and culture" has been affected. This loss has led directly to profound, intergenerational harm. ACFN social worker Lori Stevens explained that she sees this impacts in her work every day. She noted that disconnection from the teachings due to Park policy and boundaries has "huge implications" for the mental health of ACFN members to this day: "you're no longer who you are. You're no longer allowed to be what you know. So it definitely shows the mental, spiritual, emotional impacts [of] uprooting somebody." Elder Joe Ratfat's story of the impacts of landlessness on his identity poignantly summarizes how alienation from homelands, Dene ways of life, and ways of knowing the world led directly to intergenerational trauma with serious implications on individuals' and families' health and well being. In his oral history, Joe described the profound impacts of displacement on his mental health, his sense of self-esteem, and his pride in his identity and culture. He discussed his battles with alcoholism and his time being houseless as a youth and explained this was all because of the harms caused by the creation and expansion of Wood Buffalo National Park. "They really wrecked a lot of families," he concluded.

Separations of families and severance of kinship connections

Park regulations restricted and impeded Dënesųłiné connections to land and water, but also affected the family and kinship connections on which the health and resilience of the community depend. The permit system divided families between those who were allowed to stay in the Park and those without access. Even immediate relations between parents and children, siblings

and spouses, were severed if one family member was denied a permit. The 1944 membership transfer extended and reinforced these separations. As such, Park policy led to “dramatic changes to community, kinship, and cultural relationships.”[21] “Our families are all connected,” ACFN member Lori Stevens stated, “but kind of like split up now because of the Park, right?”

Members identify several layers of harm cascading from family separations, especially emphasizing disconnections from Dënesųłıné identity that some people have experienced. Park exclusions and the 1944 membership transfer explicitly contributed to colonial attempts at what Matthew Wildcat calls “social death”: the eliminationist processes that “undercut or destroy the collectivity of Indigenous Peoples” and the destruction of the “social vitality of a community that gives meaning to life.”[22] He describes disruptions of social and kinship relations that have sustained Indigenous communities, like those of the Dene people of the Peace-Athabasca Delta for generations, as an enactment of eliminationism on the part of the colonial state.

Oral testimony shared in this chapter suggests that the forced identity changes and family separations resulted in deep emotional trauma. After the implementation of the 1926 permitting system and the membership transfer in 1944, some families whose lands were taken up by the Park were split in half, and many extended families experienced fragmentation. These separations happened in both a legal and physical way: on paper, Indian Agents and Parks officials kept track of family members with and without access to the Park, while wardens maintained the system whereby people were physically barred from entering the Park, even to visit family. Many ACFN members and Elders are working to reclaim their Dënesųłıné identity and address this profound impact of the membership transfer. Relatedly, some Dene families for generations after the membership transfer learned to speak Cree rather than Dënesųłıné as their first language; this created generational communication divides among community members who could speak both languages and those who could only speak one. This affected families’ capacity to transmit knowledge, language, and cultural practices, especially after the prohibition on Indigenous language use in residential schools. Few fluent Dënesųłıné speakers remain in 2021 and language revitalization efforts are being keenly pursued by some Elders.

Population losses

Finally, some members and Elders note that the permitting system essentially cut the community in half in the 1930s, separating those with and without access to the Park, and then the 1944 membership transfer enshrined this separation in the treaty payroll lists. As a result, ACFN lost roughly half its recorded population. As Elder Pat Marcel related in 2013, "so, what you see here is the government being guilty for forcible removal from the Park, but also reducing our membership, by forcing our members to join the Cree band. The numbers of the Cree band, right now to the present day, I would assume that almost half are of Dene descent and are Dene members."[23]

Drastic population changes like this have social and political impacts. Some Elders concluded that the loss reduced ACFN's political weight and bargaining power in negotiations with government and industry. In part, this is because the loss of membership meant a loss of potential leaders. Elder Charlie Mercredi wrote that if it were not for the membership transfer, "ACFN membership would be bigger and we would have stronger voices in all negotiations. . . . Due to the loss of our members to ACFN we are a much smaller band and for that we tend to have a weaker voice and get fewer benefits from the feds."[24] He continued: "Elder William Laviolette use to say if we didn't lose that many people to MCFN he was sure that most of Birch River area would have been included in our reserve land."[25] Other members stressed that a loss of membership translates directly to reduced per-capita-based transfer payments from government for the Nation. Finally, some oral testimonies suggest that the divisions resulting from the Park boundaries and permitting systems exacerbated tensions between members of AFCN and MCFN. Some community members feel Mikisew Cree's claims to the Park were privileged over ACFN's. While members generally maintain respectful relationships, resentment remains.

In 2018, Stoney Nakoda Elders told historian Courtney Mason that exclusions from Banff National Park have had traumatic and long-term impacts, similar to those that Dene people experienced throughout the history of Wood Buffalo National Park. As one Elder said, "It cut off all the circulation that was providing us of life . . . when we lost access to the area this meant straying away from all of our roots and our physical and spiritual energy."[26] Like in the context of other Parks, the impacts of Wood Buffalo National Park's creation, expansion and management throughout the twentieth century on

the Dënesųłıné are complex and multidimensional. The oral history and testimony shared below indicates that these impacts are direct and cumulative—compounded in a wider history of changes in Dënesųłıné territories after Treaty 8—and intergenerational, experienced by individuals, families and the community as a whole to this day. They touch on relations to land; Dene language, culture, and knowledge; Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty; community and family dynamics; and health and well-being. Given the diverse range of impacts discussed in the passages that follow, we have occasionally indicated specific topics using sub-headings, noting for example, when members are discussing the impacts of specific aspects of the Park's history, residential schools, or the W.A.C. Bennett Dam. The permitting system restricting movement and harvesting in the Park after 1926, the suite of strict harvesting regulations and the powerful warden system, and the 1944 band membership transfer had direct, profound impacts on Dënesųłıné people on both sides of the Park boundary. As Alice Rigney said, the community's strength, resistance, and resilience have ensured their survival throughout this history—but the impacts are still keenly felt across generations.

ORAL HISTORY

Allan Adam (2 February 2021)

But there are quite a lot of people that were affected by it—in ways where we did lose our belongings and lose our stuff. We lost a community basically, two communities: House Lake and Birch River. And those were Dene-populated, the water people. History was removed. But the legacy still lies within myself and my brother, my family. Lies with the stories that are still there. And you probably can see for yourself that just thinking of the hardship of what my granny went through still touches me, even though I wasn't there, one hundred years later. And when I tell this to my kids, my kids get very feisty and they want to fight. Because they see. And I tell them, "just leave it alone. I'll take care of it." Maybe that's my job. Maybe that's why I was given so much information. And that's why I'm still the Chief today. I'm a human being like everybody else. I'll keep on promoting that I'm a human being. I feel, I hurt, I cry, I laugh. You know, it's all part of human growth. Some had it tougher than others. Some had it better than others. You know, and I'm just grateful that the good Lord always looks after us and keeps on guiding us where we're supposed to go, and there will be closure on this one day. It might not be [in] my time but it's very close. Could be even sooner. I don't know. That's what we're working on. . . .

The impact that happened was that our people were displaced. Like I said, my granny had everything and then she struggled for a while, moved five times, five locations back until 1958. She struggled to maintain and everything, but the impacts were hard on everybody. The ones that were affected deeply. They had to move, to go places. In 1920-something, I forget what year, 1930-something, ACFN chief Jonas Laviolette wrote to Ottawa and said "I want to create reserve 201 out of Delta because our people are all over the place. We don't have no fish and everything." And it's all highlighted. It's all written in the archives. And he pleaded with the government. He said that "my people are starving because we're being encroached [on]." We got kicked out of over here and people are still coming over here. And we have no land base.

I remember now because I read that story. I read the letter that Chief Jonas sent to Ottawa and that's when they created the reserve. And it was officially mapped out I think in 1935. I've seen all the legal documents and everything and stuff like that. So it was hardship, and it was—people were

just being pushed around. Ever since Wood Buffalo National Park kicked us out of the Park, out of our homeland, it just seemed like anybody else that just came along and seen our people just pushed us around.

And now you're making me mad, now I get really pumped up here because I don't like being pushed around, and I see this that's happened and what they've done in the past and how they've done it. And I'm glad that Chief Jonas Laviolette, he did what he did. And he secured our homeland. He put us back right there. And you got to remember Alexandre Laviolette, his brother, who was the former chief who died in the pandemic in 1918. Our Chief, original Chief, was buried in Edmonton with four other bodies on top of him. You know, and how do we bring them home? This happened, like it just happened. We lost our Chief in 1918, we didn't get another Chief. I forget when he [Jonas] became chief, in 1922 I think. . . . So we were without a chief for a while in that span of time when they'd taken the Park over from us. We had no representation, nothing whatsoever. A pandemic was going on. A lot of stuff were happening back in the day. No communication, nothing like we have here today.

So there was a lot of people that were impacted by it, because I still talk to all the Mikisew First Nation members who were supposed to be ACFN. They tell me that today, "you're my Chief, you're supposed to be my chief." How much of Mikisew members suffered the burden that I suffer when our people got ripped apart? My heart just got torn. I still feel it today. You know, I look at them and I feel for them and I see the hardship that they go through. You know, the struggle of being Mikisew Cree First Nation when their heart belongs to Dene. How do they feel when they walk around every day? Knowing they belong to the Mikisew Cree First Nation, but their identity tells them who they are. Their DNA tells different story.

And look at all the wealth and all the benefits that are generated over the years. It was one of the richest prime lands of hunting, trapping, and fishing. You know, everybody that lived in the Park benefited from it. But ACFN we plummeted. We lived in poverty, our people struggled.

ON RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

It was all part of it. Everything played into it. Residential was created there to take the people off the land and everything because the government knew that land was full of resources, rich in resources, that people were living good. The thriving people, the Dene people, were very healthy at the time.

Horace Adam (19 March 2021)

ACFN Elder Horace Adam described the implications of Park boundaries on the seasonal movements of Dene people whose traditional harvesting practices depended on access to extensive and well-known routes along the rivers that were taken up by the Park. For many who could no longer access the Park, well-known travel routes had to change, and harvesters had to go elsewhere.

Oh yes, it was hard for them. Because, the Fort Chip people, it used to be [that] there was no Park [but then] the Park's at their back door. And they can't go out the way they usually go on the west side of the river. Both sides, the west side of the Athabasca River, Peace River, and the Slave River, all those were in the park. Our people used to go all the way up, a far way to our territories, they'd go to Fort Resolution . . . then they had to go to Saskatchewan, on the west side, to go hunting moose and that. It was pretty hard for us First Nations to go.

Alec Bruno

Our people, [ACFN] members, probably felt like they didn't exist in reality. Not only did they lose their rights to their traditions and way of life, they were told to leave the area of Birch River. Trappers were the ones that had the bigger loss [if] they refuse[d] to change bands, so they had no choice but to move elsewhere. This was their home base; families were raised from one generation to another.

I mean, mom used to cry sometimes wanting to go back there. Nothing but the things she lost. She wanted to go back and see the gravesites too, her two boys [who were buried at Birch River] and she wasn't allowed to do that. Till today I always think about it.

Jimmy Deranger (24 March 2021)

Jimmy Deranger described what he sees to be the biggest change resulting from the creation of the Park.

JD: The land use. Over the park boundary, which we had used for hundreds of years, we were no longer allowed to use that area of land. And because of that, there was some degree of scarcity on our side, regarding animals for food and the use of the resources for ourselves. When I say resource, I mean

that the living resources—not the mineral resources—the living resources like the different animals and also the berries and the vegetables, the natural vegetables, and also more importantly, the medicines of the land.

PF: So, sounds like it caused pain that was felt at the time but still felt today.

JD: Yeah, there was pain at that time. And then the young generation never got to understand it. Because they were in a residential school, Holy Angels residential school, throughout the land, all the land knowledge was never given to them. Traditional land use knowledge of the resources, the living resources, were never given to them. Only in pieces. But not the full.

Dora Flett (19 March 2021)

ON RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND BEING CUT OFF FROM THE LAND

I was raised up in residential school and taken from my home, my bush life, from 1946 to 1950 [from the ages of six to ten]. After that I lived in town, so I forgot my traditional ways of living off the land. I didn't know nothing about bush life—I forgot. By my 20s is when I learned how. I had lots of fun because I made lots of mistakes. I learned how to make moose hide, and dry fish and dry meat. I was learning how to make moccasins and mitts. I had lots of fun doing them. Oh, the mistakes I made making moccasins!

My husband came back from hunting on the trapline, and I said, "here's the moccasins I made for you." I gave them to him, and he put them on. The moccasins were big on him, they were just round. He just laughed at that. Then, I made him mitts with the other hide, I told him to put them on the table. The thumb of those mitts didn't go down, they just stayed sticking up.

I didn't know nothing. Then I made him a fur hat. It was supposed to cover the ears. He put it on, and it only covered his head, the ears were just sticking out. I'll freeze my ears, he said, you go to fix it, he old me. Because I didn't know nothing, I had to learn. I had lots of fun doing things though, making mistakes and then I learned after.

Garry Flett

Garry talks about a Group Trapping Area within the Park that belonged to his grandfather, Isidore Simpson, who was once a Chipewyan Band Member but was transferred to the Cree Band along with many other Simpsons in 1944 (as described in Chapter 4). Because of the rules that later excluded his mother

from re-entering the Park, Garry and his siblings have never shared access to his maternal family's harvesting areas, while his cousins maintain their rights there.

The main piece that really affected me on how all this came to light was . . . all of my relatives that were in the Cree Band and the Mikisew Band were able to hunt and trap on that line, but culturally and historically that line had belonged to my grandfather. But when I went to Parks Canada to get a hunting license for [the Park], what they call the Parks hunting license, I was denied because I had no affiliation with Parks Canada. And they said, "no, maybe try becoming a member of the Métis and you could try again. But ACFN, no, you're not [allowed]." So I was bewildered by it. I knew little of the history and approached my mother, and she was livid about it. But there wasn't much we could do.

So, I spent my years—if you were going to hunt in the park, I couldn't go with you. Even if they were my first cousins. They can all go but I couldn't. And members of my family could. So yeah, that's the piece that when I said that it affected me personally, that's what it is. So, I had to stay away from there, from the Park side.

But, you know, it affects everybody uniquely I suppose. . . . I would love an apology from them to say, "I'm sorry that we denied you access to exercise your rights in the Park." My mother went to her grave being denied access to the Park and without an apology. Without doing anything wrong. She, I'm not saying that was front and center of her thinking, but I know it was. She hated the park because of it. I think it was just the alienation of the parks to members of the ACFN and where she grew up—she was unentitled to be, to have any further affiliation with that area. For that, I think that the Park missed the boat in apologizing to my mother.

I just know that she was wronged, and she went to her grave being wronged. So, not just her, if you look at others that were raised in similar situations. It's just wrong.

John Flett (18 March 2021)

Back in the day, this was twenty years ago, us ACFN, we couldn't even go to the park and hunt and anything like that. We were restricted back in the days . . . there's one place where like, you were born [but now] you can't go [to] the river and exercise your rights there. They're just taking [it] away from

you—it's our land. I've been rerouted. And yet, that land up there belonged to ACFN. Yeah, and that's good, good land up there, it's high ground. That's why we should be up there.

The Park formation wasn't good. Way back in those days, the members, they wanted to go back there, and they wanted to live in the Park back then. It was our Elders and that's how they talk about it when they would sit around having coffee. They'd talk about the bush, and a lot of them, that's where they wanted to be, in the Park, back then.

Leonard Flett

I lost knowing the country that my mom was born in, Birch River and that area. I would like to go back there and look at it. Maybe camp out there. . . .

That's why you call it Indian discrimination. It's just unacceptable. They had no rights to do that, you know? Absolutely none. It's just, what they did to my mom, it's unacceptable.

Scott Flett (17 March 2021)

I heard some stories about—they had to come back into town here and go to Indian Affairs and try to get some food and stuff [after being denied access to the Park]. Some flour, I guess, and maybe, I don't know if they had meat or something to give away or some rations I guess, from the stores and stuff. That's the only thing I heard about.

[It's] like the same feeling when they get kicked out of your home or something. And you've been there for so long and then, that's your home, and then you have to go live someplace else. I guess, back in the day, it's lucky that our reserve, 201, had plentiful of rats back in the day, eh? So that, when they made that reserve there, people were forced over there, they had, especially at Jackfish, they had fishing right there. And then they had their muskrats and you're right in the Delta. . . . But they weren't allowed after, back in the Park. Even I remember back in the day, people from ACFN couldn't even go in the Park to hunt. I mean to hunt birds or anything in the spring. Or even moose hunt. And like I said, the next thing is some person comes in here and marries, or even stays with a Native girl here that belongs in the Park, they could go into [the] Park and then these other people that were born and raised in Fort Chip couldn't go. How do you—how does that make you feel? Makes you feel not so good.

How you could word that is, you know, it was always yours and then somebody else comes out and takes it away from you, but still it's yours and you're a part of it. Like it [the Park] was part of the culture and part of the traditional harvesting areas that you could use.

ON EPIDEMICS

My grandfather was born in 1899 and he . . . got enlisted to join the army . . . him and that other guy, John Gladue, I think his name is, enlisted in the army, the barracks or something in Edmonton. And they were like going for training and stuff then the next thing the war was over, eh? In 1918. So they came back through Fort McMurray by train or something and sit around McMurray. I think they got the flu there. I think they were kind of sick or something and they were wrapped up with something, with this Hudson Bay blankets and stuff and they finally made it back to Chip. But that's when the flu, well like it came after, that's why they call it the Spanish Flu . . . because it came mostly from the war veterans, eh? Brought it in from, well they came back from fighting in Europe.

But he came here and then, he used to bury like at least, the cemetery just behind the northern ridge over there. They have, you know, sometimes there's six or eight people buried in one grave because he couldn't dig fast, dig it right fast enough when the ground is frozen, eh. No backhoe back then, eh. They had to dig a hole . . . burn the wood and thaw it out and dig it down and burn again. Like it takes, a long process to make a grave, eh? Yeah. There's so many dead there and then like six people in one grave so when the spring came along, summer came along, you smell the stench of the decaying people, eh? But they said that in Birch River, like somebody went over the Birch River and they, I guess this cleaned out the whole community that was there.

Fred "Jumbo" Fraser (12 March 2021)

When the Park kicked them out, they [the Dene people who were kicked out] just said "to hell with you" and they went. You know, never even bothered trying to come back in because I just don't know of anybody that tried.

Leslie Laviolette (22 March 2021)

It's all bush and different country that you see and you know, you can start on the east side of the lake [Athabasca] and end up at the west side in the Park. Like we used to travel. And all that was taken away. Once the Park came up,

that was shut down for us. And then we moved to Richardson area, Jackfish Lake area, Old Fort area. And then we had Point Brulé and Poplar Point. We had those areas that we could go and harvest whenever we wanted. As long as you were on the reserve back then. If you are off the reserve, you had to watch because if it wasn't Fish and Wildlife, it was Parks down on your back. . . .

And even to get into the Park back in the day, you couldn't. You had to go through the paperwork and everything. And it was a certain group that didn't want us in there. They kept avoiding our application. There was a lot of rules and regulations that we had to learn and how to get around all this stuff to get our food. We shouldn't have had to hide or sneak around corners to get our food.

Now we're just in the corner now. And the government made more profit off our land than we did. We're still struggling today, and the Park doesn't want to acknowledge that, that they did wrong to us because compensation-wise they would have to pay lots . . . whenever they admit it, that they did wrong to us.

ON RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

They said that if we didn't come out of Jackfish or out of the bush, the cops are gonna come there and get all of us kids and put us in jail. So the parents right away, "well okay, go on to the mission." And when you got in the mission, man, you got a bunch of abuse there. From the father that's supposed to be working for God and the nuns giving you a lickins and abusing you. That's all we had to learn, cause we didn't talk then.

I went home and told my parents what was happening in school. [They responded] "oh those are God's people, don't talk like that, it's not nice." And I said, "why, why are they allowed to do this then?" That's why I keep saying like . . . I've seen some nuns there and the priest and I thought man you know, if I had a big stick right now, boy I'll give you guys a good lickin, just to give you that licking that you gave me. You know, show them how it feels. But then right away, a little light went off and "no, don't do that. Forgive and forget." But I still have to hold the pain.

I went, and my grandpa is the one that got me out. I just went through the door. I just made it through the door and two of my buddies were ahead of me and they had long hair too like me and all of a sudden they come out around the curtain and they're bald. Then it was my turn and all of a sudden, somebody tapped me and I turned back and my grandpa right there, he said

they could take me home, they could look after me he said, so let's go. "You don't belong here," he said. But I ended up in day school for ten years. And went through all the abuse. Or had the priests and the brother abusing you and the two school teachers. Two male school teachers, and that still haunts me today. That's why I say today, now when I'm around kids, it's like, kids are gonna get whatever they want because I didn't have it. And I went through the abuse part. And it took me just about forty years just to talk about it. I could talk about it now. Before I couldn't—it was something that made me cry.

Big John Marcel

Well, as far as I know, when Parks took over [is] when everybody had to get out of there. If you don't belong to the Park, they were burning houses and everything as far as I know. Parks did that.

ON EPIDEMICS

Big John and many other Elders shared stories passed down to them by their relatives who worked as gravediggers during the epidemics in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Many of these stories emphasize how emotionally and physically traumatic it was for gravediggers to face the number of casualties they did on a daily basis. In many cases, they resorted to digging mass graves. ACFN has recently commissioned archaeologists to identify these graves in their territories.

My grandfather was telling me when I was young when that flu came around, he said, people were just passing out. One time he said, there were seven boats [carrying] people they brought to Chip that had passed away and that they were buried there. And, in one spot he said, "my boy," he said, you know what he said? "There were seven people [who had died in one day], they couldn't keep up with it, so they have this one big spot. They put several people in there."

Charlie Mercredi (n.d.)

I do feel the loss of membership to MCFN had a big impact on our membership. Elder William Laviolette used to say if we didn't lose that many people to MCFN he was sure that most of Birch River area would have been included in our reserve land.

If WBNP was not created, many of these people would still have access to their traditional land. Because of WBNP, these people were denied access to their homeland. This to me is not right, people should come first before the bison.

Marie Josephine Mercredi (1998)

It would be better to live like old times, live off the lake—the land. The children used to listen to you. We used to all pray before bed. If things were the same, my children might have been still alive—better off.

Keltie Paul (25 November 2020)

I think identity is our core. I think that they [the government] sold their [ACFN's] identity [through the membership transfer and the displacement], and they made them assume another identity. It messes up with everybody's identity. "Who am I really? Who am I?" People spend their whole life trying to answer these questions that become a psychological problem, because people who lose their identities lose their footing, their space, their reasoning sometimes. Identity is our core. And when you just pick up and steal somebody's identity and then force them to live like somebody else, it's going to cause all kinds of psychological problems, networking problems, problems within families. . . . You become something you're not and then somebody says, "Well, if you're not this, I'm going to disown you." I mean, that's a horrible thing to happen.

ON RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Well, they moved a lot of people out of different areas in the Park when the public schools came into existence. And one of the tactics that DIAND [Department of Indian and Northern Affairs] and other people used, was to threaten to withhold the family allowance. And the family allowance, I think came in '48? Am I right on that? It was around that time, I know it was post-war, and the family allowance came in, and it was a godsend for people. You gotta realize they have big families, and then they got family allowance. So, they really had a stake, that they could use that money for food, for the nutrition for the family. And to be threatened with having [that taken away], I mean, nowhere else in Alberta were people threatened to have their family allowance taken. My parents were living out on a farm, we never got threatened with something stupid like that.

And yet, they threatened to take this monthly allotment away from them if they didn't move into Fort Chip or Garden River, because they wanted kids to be educated [assimilated into the colonial system]. So, a lot of people came in off the trapline. That doesn't mean they didn't go out; they did go out in winter, and sometimes, that they had to have like a residence in town in order to be counted for the public school, enumerated for the public school. So that was going on at that time. . . . So, it's just one thing after another that they're trying to use to get people to sedentarism. Because they believed that sedentism is, quote, "civilizing the savage"—those are in air quotes. And that's what they were trying to do even up into the '60s and '70s.

Ernie "Joe" Ratfat (19 March 2021)

Joe Ratfat's family's experience with the 1944 band membership transfer is described in Chapter 4. The harmful impacts of the transfer also combined with the intergenerational trauma of residential school that took Joe away from his family and homelands for his adolescent and adult life. His story is a clear example of the ways that park displacements and the forced membership transfer worked together with other colonial institutions and residential schools to alienate people from their lands and families, disconnecting them from their lives, histories, and homelands. A portion of this interview is available online as a digital audio recording.[27]

I've lost a lot of things. As far as my pride and things like that. I didn't know who I was, I couldn't speak Cree and I was supposed to be a Cree member. And I was too brown to be white. So, I didn't fit in anywheres, you know. I ended up on the street, you know, like —alcoholism. Through alcoholism, like I said, a lot of my family members passed away from alcoholism. I'm the only one left now in my family. Everybody else has gone and they all had a really rough death of alcohol.

So I looked at different areas to look after myself, to forget alcohol and drugs and other things. And, through Sweat Lodges and other ceremonies that I ran across when I was out—I've never heard of before in our hometown [St. Paul, Alberta, where Joe was sent for school as a youth]—that's how I got a sense of pride So, that's where I'm at right now, and even my marriage broke up because of alcoholism. And that's all coming from being displaced. Yeah, going back and being displaced, and having—don't know who you are. It's all

from that. And those people should pay for it. Those people should do something about it because they really wrecked a lot of families. . . .

And myself, I had no land base. It really hurt. It hurts me. It does hurt.

ON RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Yeah, they never asked anybody about the residential school too. They just decided to put it there. That messed up so many families. . . . And also they lost languages and our cultural ways. You know, like they had a really big impact on us. I was in the residential school. We had no choice. And if we didn't go there, then our parents would be thrown in jail.

Alice Rigney (16 and 17 March 2021)

A portion of Alice Rigney's interview is available as a digital audio recording online.[28]

SCAN TO LISTEN

Well, one thing that happened because of the dislocation and being evicted is loss of trust, once again. And maybe it wasn't, you know, our Elders were not so verbal in those days. Because my granny did not speak any English at all. She never had any formal education. Her education was on the land. She was very good. She was a very excellent land user . . . but they lost trust [in] the white people again.

ON THE W.A.C. BENNETT DAM

A portion of Alice Rigney's interview is available as a digital audio recording online.[29]

SCAN TO LISTEN

The Bennett Dam was a curse to our land, to our people. I mean by them taking our water at this end and flooding it by the man-made lake and other side of the Bennett Dam, where they totally destroyed Aboriginal homes—you know graveyards. I mean, that was all, I think they were given like forty-eight hours to move out. I mean, I talk about power of the Europeans. I don't know what else to [call] it, but you know, for them to write a letter to us saying that our Delta would not be affected, makes us feel—my Uncle Fred [Marcel, a member of leadership at the time the dam was built] believed them. And we saw the results almost right away. The lake here has dropped at least three meters. And this is the lake, and so the Delta, which depends on the floods, not every year, but every other year. So, we would get a flood that would replenish the

Delta, the snyes, and inland lake. You know, so the muskrats and beavers were plentiful. And that was all taken away. The water dried out, the lakes dried out, and my dad saw that. Not only my dad, most of the people here who are land users noticed that.

Because, in the early '70s we were swamped with scientists that came to check, they called it the Delta project. And we had scientists doing fish count and duck count and all kinds of samples of what was happening to our land as the water dropped. The reports are someplace out there. We've been interviewed to death about the death of our Delta, there've been documentaries made about it, stories told about it. And this was before the influx of the tar sands. So our water from the Peace River was held back by the Bennett Dam, which did damage to the farmers there. With no consideration because they saw the water as a way—[as a] resource. . . .

And you know, issues like the Bennett Dam was just another tactic that they used—that our say was not worth anything. So, the Bennett Dam did a lot of damage. That was just like the resources. But when you think about the people that were affected, the families that were affected by a loss of a way of life, where trapping was taken away from them, they had to move off the land. Well, they were more or less forced to move off the land and into the community. And idle hands turn to the wrong things—alcohol and that.

And many of those trappers were the best. We used to call them the riflemen and because they were such sharpshooters. Their families were well off, living off the land. And then to have that taken away and forced to move into matchbox houses, and our way of life that was on the land diminished over time. People start eating less and less traditional foods and going with fast foods. Of course diabetes is on the rise. We have a community of 1200, [and] I think we have about 200 diabetic people. And so, I mean a lot of children do not want to eat the food from the land, they prefer chicken nuggets and fries and stuff like that.

So, the impact of the Bennett Dam is not just the loss of the water, it's all that and more that happened after the fact, when you think about it, and it's still ongoing. It's getting to the point—last summer we had lots of water, we all got flooded out you know, which is an unusual year. There was a lot of snow runoff in the mountains. I have a home in the Delta and my clearing where my husband and I had our tourist campus totally destroyed. And I mean, I'm a widow now and so I'm not going back to move there. I'm just going to move out, but everyone that had a cabin out in the land in Wood

Buffalo National Park, we were all flooded out. I was not flooded out as bad as those in the Park because they built on flat ground and so they were—their homes—they had water in the houses. So you have all those things from the Bennett Dam. . . . And so, the Bennett Dam changed our way of life here. Took away our resources, created a lot of social problems for many families, a lot of alcohol related deaths, alcoholism on the rise, and drug use now. . . .

It's just, everything has changed because we have our water taken away from us. But last summer, we had high water, I mean we talk about global warming. This is the winter that the lake never fully froze. It's open. Right now, I can see open water and usually we don't have open water until probably the end of April. I remember when they were first building it [the dam], my husband and friend and I always talked about how we knew—we were quite young—but we knew what was going to happen, because we could see it happening.

I was a social worker, I dealt with a lot of the issues that came out of all the damages done by the Bennett Dam, by the family breakdowns. You know, the trappers having to sell their snowmobiles, their boats, their guns, their traps, you know, for alcohol. And now a lot of them, now the new trapline is the oilsands [where people now go to make an income].

ON OILSANDS EXTRACTION

I'm an environmentalist. I strictly oppose the dirty oilsands. It hurts to see what they're doing. It's a destruction. It's not a blessing. I live at Jackfish. I'm still a land-user. I'm seventy years old. My son is buried there. It holds dear to me. But the changes I've seen of the land really hurts. But every day is a blessing—that is how I see it.

Mary "Cookie" Simpson (11 March 2021)

They were robbed of their land, they were robbed. Robbed of their traditional land. And for many years, they couldn't even come to the Park because only Cree Band hunters and trappers were allowed to hunt in the Park, right? Allowed to have their trapline in the Park. And so, the Chipewyan lost out on that, they lost out in going into the Park.

ON RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

They said that everybody had to put their children in. They had to move to Fort Chipewyan so their children can go to school. They had a residential school there. And then if you didn't put your child in residential school,

because education was the law, then you'd end up in jail as long as your kids were not in school. And then they would come and throw you in. And take your kid anyway. There was so many wrongs.

And then my dad said he had a brother named Marvin. And they all had to go to residential school. There was about four or five of them that had to go to residential school. All of a sudden, my dad said, they took Marvin, and then they never seen him ever again. And then when my mushum, my grandpa, went to pick his kids up, Marvin was missing. They said that he died of influenza.

There was a lot of impact on everybody. Because all of a sudden now you had to move to Fort Chip because your children had to go to school, right? So you weren't in the bush too often. And then, you kind of lost your children, I suppose. Because they were all now in residential school, otherwise, you'd go to jail. So that was a big impact on the people. And then when your children were in residential school, then they couldn't speak their language. So they'd go home and you'd try speaking Dene to them and then of course, they wouldn't understand you because they had to block it in order for them to survive it in residential school. They'd have to block their own language. And so, it had a big impact on the families.

Lori Stevens (25 May 2021)

Portions of Lori Steven's interview are available as a digital audio recording online.[30]

SCAN TO LISTEN

ON THE MEMBERSHIP TRANSFER

LS: Just how, you know, mixed up people are because like Cree and Dene are two completely different people with different values, different family systems. . . . And then you're switching these families into different family structures. So those roles are different. So where does that leave those people? What does it look like for traditions and medicines, prayer, spirituality? We are not the same and a lot of the Elders they'll tell me, you know—ribbon skirts, like everybody's buying ribbon skirts and everybody wants it. And the first thing they tell us is, "you can get that, you can show it for your ceremony, but that's not our way." I'm constantly hearing, "that's not our way. That's not our way." And then it's like, well, jeepers, what is our way? Because it feels like this *is* our way, but in my opinion, it's because of that transition of some of those Dene people going to Cree. Because now

they're muddled, and they're passing on those traditions. And saying, "this is our way," but in reality, you know, 100 to 150 years ago, it wasn't our way. So, that's what I hear the most about is, "that's not our way. That's not our way. That's not our way."

ST: So it's impacting on people's identities, really, and how they're understanding . . . culture and their heritage?

LS: Yeah, and our drumming. Our prayers, when we're giving thanks to the land, we do it differently. Medicines. So a big one that an Elder told me is . . . skunk pee? I don't know if you've ever heard of skunk pee. She was like, "we don't use that. Everybody's using it. But that's not our medicine." And I'm like, oh, thank gosh, because I'd never want to drink it. But little things that are popping up and then it's like, well, jeepers, what is our identity? Okay, we don't Pow Wow but we Tea Dance, and what are the dances for the Tea Dance? Who knows these tea dances because all we're seeing is Pow Wow right? So, the jingle and the fancy [dances], and that's not us. So, it's kind of like well, what is us? What is the Dene people of Fort Chip? Because it feels like we're just so muddled, for lack of a better word.

ST: Have you heard about any connection between the loss of language speakers as well because of the transfer? The loss of Dene-language speakers?

LS: Yes, for sure. Because now you have all these individuals who have to identify as Crees, so they're all speaking Cree. So they're not passing down Dene. They were passing down Cree. And like a lot of those Indian Agents, they all spoke Cree because Dene is a hard language to learn, right? So more people were going with Cree than actually our Dene language. Yeah, there's not a lot at all, especially with what it would have been like in our dialect. Because, if you go to Janvier [a small rural community 123 kilometres south of Fort McMurray], they speak real fast and nasally and they can understand each other, but somebody else speaking Dene, trying to understand what they are saying, they have to slow it down. And then when you talk to the Dene in the Dene-Zaa area[31], they're slow [speakers]. I did some training with them and when they were speaking, I was like, "oh, my, I could probably learn from you because you're speaking so slow that I can probably pick it up now, right?" And so, it's kind of, what was it [the dialect of Dene spoken] here? We don't have that many people. We also have Elders who spoke it but didn't pass it down because they married somebody who was Cree. So, if you were a female, you went to Cree Band [i.e. because they married a Cree man]. So, they passed on that Cree language versus that Dene language. So, there's not many—I

can only think of a handful of people who actually speak it. My adopted dad does speak it, and he's from Fort Fitzgerald. So, he can speak it, but he doesn't pass it on. And there's shame in that too from him, right? Like, when we're like, "oh, teach us," he's not about to, but when it relates to this, I don't have anybody in my family close to me—I have cousins who are relearning it, but I don't have any Elder who speaks it.

ON DISPLACEMENT

Well, from then, [some members of the community] probably didn't even realize [the displacement was happening] because of the different types of—we didn't have that type of ownership, right? They probably didn't understand at all that you would not allow us to come back to where this really good hunting ground is. "You're trying to starve me" is basically probably what was going through their heads, and then also trying to relocate their families. So, these are a lot of families who had multiple children. What did that look like for them to move? And did they even know where to move? Like we hear stories of the Métis and Big Point and Alexandre Laviolette giving space on ACFN land to the Métis because they were like "where do we go?" And so, it was probably the exact same thing. So that's why you would see a lot . . . of the families just outside of the Park and trying to stay close to those better hunting grounds that were in the Park without stepping on that boundary.

And now, there's just this unsung rule of, you don't pass that [Park] boundary. Don't really know why, or there's not given much of a definition as to why you can't, it's just, "you're Chip Band and so you don't get to go there." Basically, you don't get to hunt there. You don't get to have your traveling there. Just that boundary has just hindered that cultural aspect of the trapping and the fishing and of that migration of following the animals. And then culturally, like I did [already] say, you're going from one identified person of Dene to now Cree, which is completely different. Different way of talking, different way of knowing. Just because everybody is Indigenous does not mean that they are the same. . . . And like, did that contribute to so many Dene people getting sick with the flu and that, because they did not have access to the wildlife or the hunting grounds that they knew? So, they had to go and try and figure out where to hunt now. So, there's most likely a correlation as to why so many Dene people were sick and when they were forced out. . . .

With respect to their identity, we see a lot of addictions, mental health, trauma from just identity—where do I belong? So a lot of people will speak of

it, like with CFS [Children & Family Services], like these people don't know where they belong. Well, that could be incorporated for being pushed out of your homes and your traditional hunting areas, just the same. Like you're no longer who you are. You're no longer allowed to be what you know. So it definitely shows the mental, spiritual, emotional impacts that uprooting somebody [has]. And not only for some people who chose not to become Cree, uprooting them and changing everything about them.

But also, for those who now have to identify as a completely different person. That's like me going and saying "I now identify as Australian" or something, right? It's completely different. So, they'd have probably a lot of stress, of one minute I'm this, next minute I'm not. So, I've definitely seen it. And you can see it in the compounding issues of what we see today with mental health issues or addiction issues, people just don't know where they belong. And this definitely plays into it.

ON EPIDEMICS

Growing up, I remember the mass graves in Jackfish for the children who passed away from the Spanish flu, and my uncle, Charlie Voyageur, who's passed, he was telling us about how the kids were just all dying, and that it was mostly the Dene who had passed. It wiped out a big population in Fort Chip. And they talked about there was like, big strong men that at the beginning of the day would seem like they were okay and by the end of the day, they were dying. Ones who were like helping to dig these graves and stuff like that, didn't show any signs and by the end of the day, they had the flu, and . . . the next day they were gone, is what they were saying. It just hit them fast. And these were, according to Uncle, strong, young, healthy people, right? . . . I just remember we went to go clean the graveyards and there was lots of like the last name Laviolette . . . and then there was like these big, long fenced off mass graves. And then there's multiple little kids in there. And then, they died so quickly that they had to put the fence up.

Beverly Tourangeau (21 March 2021)

Well, a lot more people moved into town. You can't really just go out there just hunting, whatever, because everything was just kind of drying up . . . their traditional way of life. They had to come into town and there was no more like trapping and all that. Because the Delta and that was all drying up. So,

all—like where do you go for all the fur-bearing animals? Can't trap, so people just went different places to go look for work. . . .

Well, it's kind of like, my sense, the way I felt was we didn't belong there. You know? So it's kind of like, there's separation even though some people are getting married Cree. They're slowly—that separation between ACFN and MCFN, there's still that separation.

Edouard Trippe de Roche (25 November 2021)

I just know one incident where this woman was married to this guy and they were trapping in the Park. Her husband died, so she remarried another guy who trapped at the Athabasca Lake, and she went back to retrieve her belongings. They both went over there, and her cabin was burnt. I guess her marrying somebody that's trapping out in the Park didn't sit too well with the Park wardens or the Park guards or whatever you want to call them.

Leslie Wiltzen (21 January 2021)

Well, I think, you know, always the big part [is] the people being disconnected from the land. That's a big thing, right? Because I mean, like I said when I go back to the words of Treaty [8], where it says "the Athabasca, the Chipewyan people, the Athabasca, the Birch River, the Peace River, Slave River, Gull River," those are all territories that were once ACFN members,' right? That's where they always— that was their homeland. Now imagine being taken away from your homeland and forced to go outside. Long ago in—when you go back to the 1920s—getting around wasn't an easy thing. Most people traveled by canoes. You know, fast machines weren't around. Fast boats weren't around like today. I mean today, you can go from Fort Smith, Fort Chip, in one day—four hours. Just going from Fort McMurray to Fort Chipewyan. But you know, if you go on a map, and you start looking at the size of Lake Claire and you start looking at [the] size of Lake Mamawi and that traditional territory now, when you're familiar with an area where to go hunting, you know how long it takes to get there. You know how many days you need to get there, how many days you need to get back. You know how many days you need to hunt. So by removing ACFN members, you force them to learn a whole new area of the Park that traditionally [they knew] . . . But to force everybody to relearn things like that, that's a hardship.

And you know, that's one of the hardships but for me, enduring being disconnected from the land. That's a big thing. It's hard to describe. And it's

hard to say how you’ve been affected because you’re affected—you’re affected. I mean, all your life, you grew up knowing that you’re not allowed in a certain area where traditionally, for thousands of years, the generations before you lived there, then all of a sudden now you’re not allowed. And people tell you you’re not allowed there and then you become a criminal by even thinking about it. So now I mean, so how do you put—how do you describe that in words? How do you justify something like that? I don’t know. It’s a good question.

Anonymous ACFN Elder (16 March 2021)

ON THE W.A.C. BENNETT DAM

Elder: Oh, that’s a big one, that one there. Put it this way: at that time, us Indians, when I was young, we set up a garden at Jackfish Lake, okay, we had potatoes growing. We had the whole field full of potatoes and it was waiting for growing. Then we come back to Chip on Friday, Saturday, we went back Monday, and it was covered with water. The Bennett Dam said nothing of reopening the water. So we come back Sunday night, and it was covered with water. All that work for nothing.

ST: You lost everything?

Elder: Yes, we lost everything. They never said a word to nobody. I mean, we didn’t know, eh? So we put our guts into that garden because we were going to start a five-acre farm in those days. So we lost everything.