



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

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Conclusion: t'at'ú erihł'ís hóhłj eyi bet'á dene néné chu tu ghą k'óilde ha dúé

Much of the history of Wood Buffalo National Park has been driven by outsiders vying for control over Dene homelands—people who held the firm belief that their management plans were in the best interests of the land, water, animals, the Dominion, and, at times, the planet. The sentiments at the heart of Maxwell Graham's 1912 proclamation that creating a human-free bison sanctuary was in the interest of the “entire civilized world” have carried weight even today.¹ As the oral testimonies shared in this book demonstrate, such perspectives have almost always resulted in systemic exclusions and harm to Dene people who since time immemorial have stewarded the territories the Park takes up.

Federal management practices of this and other national parks shifted in the second half of the twentieth century, and provincial and international authorities advanced their own concerns about the Park. However, ACFN members have experienced what appear to be changing (and sometimes competing) layers of management of their homelands as a continuities in the longer history of exclusion and displacement of which WBNP has always played a central role. One ACFN Elder summarized the community's frustration with this: “Like now, I'm baffled: who's the Park? And how come they got to own Dene Nation land? And this control? And they're in control, I'll tell you that much.” Likewise, the Dēnesųłné title for this chapter translates to “the way that laws (papers) were made, because of that we cannot manage Dene lands and water.” From many directions over time, external entities have imposed their intentions and desires for the Park, resulting in erosions of Dene self-determination and of disconnections from Dene homelands and ways of life. This has also coincided with ongoing refusals of Dene knowledge and experiences—something this book, and the research that preceded it, has actively aimed to address.

Shifts in Park management and co-management arrangements

In the early 1960s, the Park's administrative structure was transformed. Until then, it had been largely administered by the Northern Affairs arm of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. From 1964 to 1969, however, full administrative responsibility for the Park was gradually transferred to the National and Historic Parks Branch. McCormack explains that after decades of intense government interference, the Park management policy shifted once again to embrace an ethos of "non-interference, allowing natural processes to proceed unhindered."² That non-interference approach was not new—it was simply another iteration in the ongoing program of state control over Dënesųłné territories.

In a 1963 memorandum to cabinet, Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources Walter Dinsdale wrote that "the management of this last great buffalo herd—which must be regarded as a national responsibility—requires [Federal] control of the land over which they range."³ Dinsdale was responding with hesitation to formal requests from Alberta ministers to "return" the land within the Park to the Province, transferring to the Province control over resource management, including development and extraction, in the significant land mass taken up by WBNP. Alberta Minister of Lands and Forests, Norman Willmore, had proposed in 1962 that the status of the Park be changed to a provincially managed buffalo conservation area "which would recognize the multiple use principle in resource development and exploitation."⁴ Willmore's recommendation and Dinsdale's response reflect one of the many ways that outsider perspectives on and interests in lands and resources in Dene territories—whether to exploit or conserve them—have almost always taken priority over Dënesųłné people's knowledge, concerns, and interests by excluding, dismissing, or silencing them.

Only two decades after the province's request was denied, Park administrators introduced the concept of co-management. This concept had first appeared in the 1984 Wood Buffalo National Park Management Plan, the Park's first long-range management plan, a result of efforts to conform WBNP policy and management with management structures common across other national parks. A Northern Buffalo Management Board was established in 1991, conceived as a multi-stakeholder committee for community-based planning, and it included nine local Indigenous representatives. This management plan,

however, was never approved. The Park's management plans have since been revised several times since 1984. The 2010 WBNP Management Plan incorporates commitments to reconciliation and co-management with Indigenous communities and other stakeholders in the area. Parks officials meet annually through a cooperative management board that includes representatives from ACFN and all other local Indigenous communities and governments with ties to the Park.⁵ In 2014, the Committee for Cooperative Management of Wood Buffalo National Park (CMC) was formed to align with the 2010 Management Plan and provide space for dialogue and information sharing between Parks Canada and Indigenous communities with claims to the Park. The 2010 Plan indicates a commitment of the Park to collaboratively revise game regulations and work toward resolution of various park-related issues through more Indigenous engagement. It states, "efforts are underway to expand working relationships given the impact of the park on the region and there is great potential to coordinate park activities with neighbouring provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments."⁶ As Parks has moved toward co-management arrangements and commitments to reconciliation, they have invited ACFN representatives to the co-management table.

ACFN members contend that recent co-management arrangements do not adequately acknowledge or address their unique experiences or the history of displacements, exclusions, and elimination over the past one hundred years. Since 2005, the Park has conceded that all members of Treaty 8 Nations have the right to enter and hunt in the Park, but feelings of disconnection and experiences of exclusion remain for many ACFN members. Despite stated intentions of collaboration and reconciliation, community members' oral testimony suggests the new co-management regime continues to push Dene concerns to the sidelines. Government officials continue to make decisions that affect Dene harvesters, and this style of management has, as East puts it, "fostered a climate of distrust and cynicism which continues to this day."⁷

Leslie Wiltzen, who has been involved in co-management and advisory roles for many years, described his experience:

The federal government did what they wanted to do. Right from the get-go. And you know what, even today I'm heavily involved with the events of Wood Buffalo National Park. I represent ACFN on anything that has to do with the UNESCO recommendations. I mean, whether it be with, where we're dealing

with hydrology . . . and science and monitoring, or cooperative management committees.

I still get discouraged. I am discouraged with the federal government's inability to adjust, to accommodate what First Nations wish for. All we want is an opportunity to sit equally at a table and to have input that will benefit our people in a proper way. But time and time again, the federal government has an ability to overlook that and do exactly what they want, even though we can be sitting at the table.

He continued:

I'll tell you a good example . . . I sit on the Cooperative Management Committee of Wood Buffalo National Park. That committee is made up of eleven First Nations that utilize Wood Buffalo National Park, right? So it's the Mikisew Cree, [ACFN], Métis from Fort Chip, you have the Little Red First Nation from Garden River, you have Smith Landing, Salt River, the Métis from Fort Smith, you have the K'at'l'odeeche and so on, so forth from Fort Res[olution] to Hay river.

So, at this table now, for years we've been talking about trying to implement something in Wood Buffalo National Park from an employment perspective [that] would benefit and hire local [Indigenous people] . . . We aimed for years on entry level jobs with Wood Buffalo National Park, to a place where local Indigenous people, whether it be from Fort Chip, Fort Smith, Garden River, Hay River, Fort Res, it doesn't matter, as long as their traditional territory's in the Park, they'd have a first chance at these entry-level jobs.

Do you know what? Time and time again we told that to Parks. And they say 'yes and yes, yes.' It's so hard. It's like pulling teeth. It's just a process that they say yes, turn around and say one thing and the next day turn around and do another and you say, 'why did you just do that? Why did we just all discuss this whole thing and agree to do this, and you turn around and do this?' So . . . when they negotiated Treaty in 1899. Again, same thing, you sign one agreement, and then fifteen years later, you'll

[the government will] say, ‘nope, sorry. Even though we faithfully negotiated this treaty and we agreed on these terms, but now they’re no good. Get out of the Park’ . . . I mean, we say we want local employment, but you know, they’ll bring in people from southern Canada and eastern Canada to fill these entry level jobs. Why? Because they do what they want to do, when they want to do it, and to whom they want to do it.

As Leslie’s testimony demonstrates, co-management and reconciliation talk can conceal broken promises, a general lack of interest to address Indigenous communities’ desires and concerns especially when they do not align with state priorities, and the ultimate reality that the state continues to control land management in Dene territories.

Leslie’s uncle, Elder Pat Marcel, shared this perspective 2013:

I’ve been trying to push co-management, from way back. From about 2000 and on, I’ve been working with the Alberta government, and I’ve been denied and told that, “We will never agree to co-management with any band.”

So I said, “How can we survive?”

And they said that we have reserves. But that reserve is so small, there is no way we can survive with that many membership. The government had us in a really bad place. They know that there is nothing that we can do. They are the law . . .

But what my dad taught me, many years ago, I have never forgot, because he was pushing on that. And because of my demands, they have come to know that what I am saying is true . . . My grandfather and my father must have known why they kept harping on this story . . . That is what it was: “Co-management.” That’s the memory of what made me remember this [1935] Agreement. All of my lifetime, I have a story in my head that I have never forgotten. I can talk about a meeting that happened twenty years ago and I have never forgotten. That is what oral history is about. I never take notes because this is how I have learnt. This all comes from Chief Alexandre Laviolette and was passed onto his brother, Jonas, who was my grandfather.

Pat Marcel worked extensively as an Elder and Indigenous Knowledge Holder with governments, industry, and Western scientists to co-monitor wildlife health and assess impacts of extractive industry on animals and their habitats. He described two monitoring programs for woodland caribou and the bison herds in the 2013 passage that follows. He noted that non-Indigenous authorities rarely took his knowledge seriously, as has been the case in many other parks. He explained:

If you want our cooperation, work with us. We will help you collar the animals and track them. But when professors come from Calgary and don't understand the animals in our traditional territories, they don't understand what they see. Moose is not like caribou. I have seen moose in the spring of the year when they have all these ticks; some of them have no hair on their bodies, and it is actually bleeding where the collar is. They never ask the Elders what is happening. They suffer enough without having collars on them. I would also not agree to collaring the bison. My belief is that the bison is there, across from Poplar Point, are the true wood buffalo that have to be protected, because they are endangered.

And these oil companies, their whole plan: they have to come through us. Teck [Resources, Ltd.]⁸ was hoping the whole herd [of Wood Buffalo outside of the Park] was diseased and they commissioned the study but they [the buffalo] came back healthy, just like I saw. We got to a discussion of numbers of possibly diseased. And I told the story of way back, we tested 198 and only 3 were diseased, way back in the 1960s. The [Ronald Lake] bison herd never had contact with Wood Buffalo [National Park Bison], and they are disease free. I told him I'll make him a bet. He said no bets. So I told him to take me with them, and they moved their kill zone closer to Wood Buffalo, but they ended up not getting anything. I explained to them that "when you see this herd here, when you see the bulls, you will see that they don't look nothing like the bulls around Fort Chip."⁹

Pat Marcel concluded that in interactions with Western scientists, government officials, impact assessors, and industry managers, Dene knowledge

is often overlooked and silenced. During his leadership, Elder Marcel urged governments to consider a more empowering relationship “because the Dēnesųłíné have always had the responsibility of living in balance with the natural environment, and there is much that both provincial and federal environmental resource managers can learn from them if they take the time to listen.”¹⁰ He was consistently ignored by Parks Canada administration, and co-management activities have rarely taken Dene leadership seriously.

Members of ACFN suggest that the new co-management and reconciliation agendas must do more to acknowledge and amend the past and work toward genuine, transformative efforts that centre Indigenous governance and self-determination. There are meaningful collaborative and Indigenous-led initiatives that could provide guidance for shifting the engagement model that has been in use until now. For example, the Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership (CRP) is an Indigenous-led organization that, with support from Indigenous and non-Indigenous institutions, aims to advance Indigenous-led conservation initiatives. A key element of the CRP’s work is the Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA) program. IPCAs are Indigenous-managed stewardship initiatives, through which lands and waters are designated and set apart for protection, and Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving them through Indigenous laws, knowledge systems, and governance. Several IPCAs have been established in Dene homelands in what are now called the Northwest Territories.¹¹ Another is being established in unceded Mi’kmaw territories near what is now called Cape Breton.¹² The CRP works with the IISAAK OLAM Foundation, which shares knowledge and builds capacity for IPCAs. In 2021, the Foundation secured \$340 million dollars to establish and manage IPCAs. CRP also partners with the Indigenous Leadership Initiative (ILI), an organization focused on Indigenous land, water, and resource stewardship. The initiative runs a guardian program that trains and supports Indigenous Peoples to manage protected areas and to lead restoration and management projects.¹³ IPCAs and the various initiatives supporting them elevate and advance Indigenous rights, responsibilities, ways of life, and knowledge. They present critical alternatives to the colonial conservation systems that provincial and federal governments have maintained.

To date, Indigenous communities’ participation in the management of WBNP remains advisory in nature, and, as Sandlos notes, “the absolute power of the state to regulate the Native harvest remains intact.”¹⁴ In spite

of the urging of Indigenous Peoples and even of the United Nations, Parks Canada and provincial governments maintain that existing co-management systems are working well, implicitly sidelining calls to the more rigorous and meaningful Nation-to-Nation arrangement that Dēnesųhné leaders desire. Historical distrust and a structure that tends to relegate Indigenous leaders to consulting or advisory positions, rather than to meaningful decision-making positions, has limited the potential of these approaches and left Dēnesųhné participants feeling dismissed, as has been the case in the administration of WBNP since its creation.¹⁵

International Oversight

WBNP gained international notoriety in 1983 when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) granted it status as a World Heritage Site. As the home of North America's largest population of wild bison, the world's only breeding habitat for the endangered whooping crane, the location of the world's largest inland delta, and "the most ecologically complete and largest example of the entire Great Plains-Boreal grassland ecosystem of North America," UNESCO points to many factors that make the Park worthy of the designation of "outstanding universal value" (OUV). The 1983 World Heritage nomination also indicated that the Park's size and remoteness provide "ample room for most ecological processes to continue undisturbed."

With the designation comes ongoing monitoring and regular recommendations to Canadian authorities to improve Park management, increase formal protections and address issues of concern that may threaten the integrity of the site's OUV. Since 1983, UNESCO has released twelve State of Conservation reports addressing the recommendations. These reports note for example UNESCO's concerns about proposed development projects adjacent to the Park, the cumulative impacts of upstream industrial activity, and the ongoing issue of tuberculosis and brucellosis infections in the bison herd. Most recently, in response to the formal petition Mikisew Cree First Nation submitted in 2014 to the World Heritage Committee (WHC) requesting that WBNP be moved to the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger, the WHC and International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) undertook a mission to assess threats to the Park's OUV. The final report stated that "considerably more effort will be needed to reverse the negative trends at a time when climate change combined with upstream industrial

developments and resource extractions are intensifying” if WBNP was to avoid inclusion on the Sites in Danger list.¹⁶ UNESCO listed the potential impacts of the Site C dam and downstream impacts of oilsands growth as key concerns that were not being adequately assessed by Canadian authorities.¹⁷ In June 2021—the same month ACFN publicly released the initial report resulting from the WBNP research project—UNESCO reiterated its 2016 warning call. Despite federal promises to finance further protections for the Park, significant upstream impact of oilsands development and “governance challenges” have prolonged the risks UNESCO identified in previous years.¹⁸

UNESCO’s discussion of Indigenous Peoples in relation to WBNP has changed over time. The technical evaluation preceding the 1983 World Heritage designation included Indigenous harvesters among the reasons the Park’s ecosystems needed protection and international management: “the ecosystems also support populations of Native Americans who still continue some of their traditional ways of life, thus adding the human element to the completeness of the ecosystem.”¹⁹ Indigenous Peoples’ presence in the Park and surrounding area, and their relations to the land, were positioned as evidence for the need for WBNP’s inclusion on the World Heritage list—perhaps driven by what Sandlos describes as the common paternalistic position for Canadian Parks management through much of the twentieth century that assumed Indigenous Peoples were “as much in need of management [or, at times, protection] as the animals they hunted.”²⁰ Restrictions on Indigenous harvesting were listed among conservation management practices important to maintaining the Park’s integrity. In 2014 though, language in UNESCO publications shifted and began to position local Indigenous communities among those who should have authority to manage the Park, rather than being managed by it. Among the overarching concerns listed in the 2016 mission’s final report, the authors point to “longstanding and unresolved conflicts and tensions between Aboriginal Peoples and governmental and private sector actors which call for a coherent management response in line with the legal framework and unambiguous commitments to reconciliation.”²¹ Every *State of Conservation* report following the 2016 mission has listed “lack of effective engagement with First Nations and Métis in monitoring activities and insufficient consideration of local and Indigenous knowledge” as factors affecting the OUV.²²

UNESCO urged the Canadian government to reassess and reconfigure its relations with Indigenous residents in the management of the Park. In 2021,

UNESCO's Decision Statement re-urged Canada to "Adopt a clear and coherent policy and guidance to enable the transition to a genuine partnership with First Nations and Métis communities in the governance and management of the property [the Park]." It also noted "with regret" that the government's responses to date had been insufficient despite the "severe threats" to the property and its conditions of OUV.²³ Canada has consistently responded to UNESCO's concerns by pointing to work undertaken under the 2014 CMC, which, as Pat Marcel and Leslie Wiltzen discussed, has thus far demonstrated insufficient engagement with ACFN and has not addressed the unique and harmful impacts the Park has had on ACFN and their Dene ancestors.

Sandlos writes that the 1983 World Heritage Site designation has contributed to Canadian public discourse that celebrates the Park's "unique natural history" while also effectively masking its "more ambiguous human heritage: the litany of injustice inflicted" on Indigenous residents throughout the twentieth century.²⁴ And indeed, while UNESCO's more recent position on the Park's relations with Indigenous Peoples appears to have progressed since 1983 (and since Sandlos published his book), some ACFN members feel it is not enough. They perceive UNESCO discourse about the Park, like co-management arrangements advanced by Parks Canada or the Government of Canada's professed commitment to meaningful action on reconciliation, to be continuities in the century-long colonial patterns of land and wildlife management that have largely excluded Dene people's knowledge and perspectives and privileged those of outsiders.

Chief Adam spoke to ACFN leadership's hesitancy to partake in the new, reconciliatory management structures proposed by Parks Canada and recommended by UNESCO: "Now after one hundred years they're going just you know . . . they want ACFN to participate . . . And yet, all the years prior they did not want ACFN to participate in anything." The "unresolved conflicts" the 2016 mission report referred to must first be addressed, but members suggest that the experiences of each Indigenous community affected by Parks policy must be acknowledged and addressed individually rather than being lumped together. For them, the history of displacements and exclusions, with its particular impacts on Dēnesųłné land users and families, must be formally acknowledged—truth, many members suggest, is necessary before reconciliation. Beyond such formal acknowledgment, they also argue for specific and substantive reparative measures for the unique harms Dēnesųłné peoples suffered. For many members, this involves not only

compensation and a restructuring of Park management and policy, but also a return of the land to those who lost access to it and sovereignty over it after 1926. As ACFN Elder Alice Rigney put it, “never mind the apology. Just give us back our land.”

In closing: “For our relatives to be remembered”

In addition to their goals of obtaining reparations, ACFN members have emphasized that a central intention of this work has been to recover and re-centre their community’s stories and experiences. Indeed, since the establishment of WBNP, non-Indigenous authorities—whether federal or provincial officials, international bodies, private sector representatives, missionaries or Indian Agents—have exerted control over narratives about the Park and surrounding environment, and thus over its management, for a hundred years. This had had specific implications for Dënesų́híne peoples who have witnessed their knowledge and experiences being misrepresented or ignored, their homelands “taken up” and connections to place interrupted, their families separated, and their rights and sovereignty eroded. Getting ACFN’s story out there is key to challenging colonial omissions and the material harms they underpin. Chief Adam said, “You know that now ACFN is coming back in there, and you’ve got people pushing back against us now because they don’t want us there, because they’ve lived too comfortable not knowing the history about what happened.” Not knowing (or refusing to know) Dene histories and experiences with WBNP, colonial governments have avoided acknowledging the harms committed by the Park in Dene territories, thus avoiding addressing ACFN’s claims. Control over the narrative leads to control over the land.

The oral histories and testimonies in this book demonstrate that Dënesų́híne people have never lost sight of their connections to and knowledge of their homelands taken up by the Park, even after one hundred years of exclusions and displacements. This book is testament to the community’s collective memory of Wood Buffalo National Park’s history and its relations to the Dënesų́híne peoples whose lands and waterways it takes up. The history and testimony shared here are part of a century-long work led by Dene leaders, members, Elders, and land users to keep that memory alive in the pursuit of justice, land back, healing, and reparations. Dënesų́híne oral histories challenge exclusions of local knowledge and attempted erasures of Dene voices from the historical record and Dene people from environment. They are a means to reclaim a narrative that has consistently been told without

Dënesųłné knowledge, experiences, and rights at the centre—and to do so without “allowing the government to turn it all around,” as ACFN member Donalyn Mercredi remarked. They are a call, Elder Ernie “Joe” Ratfat eloquently told us, for “our relatives to be remembered.”