



REMEMBERING OUR RELATIONS: DĒNESUĻINÉ 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.



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>

edegha k'óíldé íle ajá ú nuhenéné thų́ bek'e náidé

In addition to the permitting system that accompanied the 1926 annex, the extensive suite of game conservation and land management policies governing Indigenous lives across the Park and province grew significantly after 1926. These were upheld through increased surveillance, enforcement and punishment measures overseen through a warden system that also began to expand after 1926. As the oral testimony shared in this chapter suggests, many Dene people perceived the new, and frequently changing, restrictions as infringements of Treaty 8. Furthermore, the hardship people outside the Park experienced after the annex and membership transfer was only amplified by conservation and wildlife management regulations. By the 1930s, parks officials perceived that the bison population in the Park had been sufficiently restored for the Park's central policy focus to shift from preservation of bison to developing a state-controlled wildlife management structure intent on conserving other game populations, especially fur-bearing animals, and on controlling and restricting Indigenous People's lives and movements, and ultimately, eroding Indigenous sovereignty and attempting to erase their presence from the land.¹ This shift proved to be especially challenging for those Dēnesų́lné people who were excluded from the Park after the annex, who watched as fur-bearing populations dwindled and competition for furs increased significantly, and as their ways of life fell increasingly under the surveillance of administrators and wardens within and outside the boundaries of the Park. Dene people found themselves less free to live, move, and stay on the land, as the Dēnesų́lné chapter title indicates: "We ceased being free or in charge of ourselves, and we couldn't manage to stay on our land (to use it)."

As ACFN Elder Alice Rigney's oral testimony shared in this chapter relates, the creation of the Park precipitated the development of a colonial

regime of wildlife management intent on removing Dene people from the land and waters, separating them from kin and culture, eroding their ways of life and stewardship practices, and restricting their freedom and movements. Alice Rigney explained: “When Parks was created, it became a whole new level of government with their rules and whatnot. No one was allowed—you could not hunt at certain times.” As Alice’s oral history suggests, policies that increased provincial and federal control over the environment went together with attempted erasures of Dene people, ways of life, stewardship laws, and sovereignty.

This is something with which Indigenous Peoples barred from or restricted in parks and nature sanctuaries across Canada were familiar. As Tina Loo writes of Canadian conservation in the twentieth century, these kinds of policies ultimately had the effect of “marginalizing local customary uses of wildlife” as well as Indigenous stewardship laws and ways of relating to the land.² David Neufeld writes of similar experiences for the Southern Tutchone peoples in what became Kluane National Game Sanctuary in the southwest Yukon: colonial governments both denied and dismissed “not only the validity, but even the existence of the long tradition of deep local contextual knowledge” that shaped Indigenous ways of knowing the environment.³ In WBNP, colonial officials increased restrictions and surveillance of Dene lives and relations to the land, based on the assumption that they had the claim to superior knowledge about land, water, and wildlife.⁴ In these ways, Park exclusions and the other conservation laws that provincial and federal governments imposed contributed to processes of colonial elimination through the erosion of Dene connections to homeland and kin and refusals of Dene knowledge and connections to place.⁵

New or evolving regulations included bag limits—restrictions on the total number of animals people could harvest in a season— and closed and limited seasons for fur-bearing animals, birds, and large game.⁶ Bison hunting remained prohibited throughout the twentieth century. Across Canada, the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* in 1916 had banned egg collecting, imposed game seasons on some migratory birds, and closed hunting of some birds altogether.⁷ Within the Park, big game and non-migratory bird hunting was restricted by seasons (and prohibited altogether for some species).⁸ Laws were particularly stringent when it came to fur-bearing animals, especially muskrat and beaver, whose populations had declined steeply in the 1930s and 1940s. Beaver season was closed for several years during the 1930s and

1940s, and occasionally marten and muskrat season were closed as well. At one point, muskrat season was shortened so much that Dene leader Benjamin Marcel (Elder Pat Marcel's father) complained to authorities in 1942 that the people could barely survive on what little trapping was permitted.⁹ As Elder Magloire Vermillion told interviewers in 1974, restrictions had serious implications for Dene people: "we were slowly being restricted with game regulations, preventing us from trapping, hunting, and fishing. [Before the Treaty] there were no such people as park wardens. . . . [After] we were not as free to hunt and trap as we were used to because of these regulations that were made."

It was not only subsistence harvesting that was limited. Dēnesųłné burning practices, which had been essential to the creation and maintenance of bison habitats, were outlawed in 1925 (and discouraged by the pre-Park buffalo rangers before that). Park law dictated that anyone responsible for starting a fire in a National Park would face fines, imprisonment, or hard labour.¹⁰ Harvesting timber within the Park for fuel was also restricted. Such laws criminalized the Dene stewardship practices described in Chapter 1 that had been a critical part of the Dene people's ways of living and caring for the environment. As Cardinal Christianson et. al. write, this kind of interruption of Indigenous stewardship practices "can be thought of as *cultural severance* . . . an act, intentional or not, that functionally disrupts relationships between people and the land."¹¹

Decades-old assumptions that Indigenous land users were dangerous and irresponsible underpinned many of the twentieth century's conservation and land management policies within and around the Park. Further, as McCormack observes, "Aboriginal People were never allowed to be managers of the programs that were supposed to protect the resources on which they relied."¹² Conservation proponents often claimed that new harvesting regulations were being imposed "for their own good."¹³ As one official wrote in 1947, "We can not [*sic*] . . . allow the Indians to hunt and trap indiscriminately if we expect to provide animals for him to hunt and trap now and in the future."¹⁴ Furthermore, Park officials often took the position that Indigenous harvesters—especially those who had permits to trap and hunt in the Park—had been granted special "privileges" that white trappers and hunters did not enjoy. For this reason, R.A. Gibson wrote to Secretary of the Indian Affairs Branch, T.R.L. MacInnes, in October 1939 dismissing Indigenous leaders' concerns about the restrictive laws: "We are at a loss to understand," he wrote, "why

the Indian chiefs consider the regulations unfair.”¹⁵ Changes to policy also usually proceeded with little communication or consultation with the resident Indigenous communities, and was “enforced . . . with inconsistency and whimsy.”¹⁶ Policy was often imposed from a distance, . . . communicated through written notices in English, distributed on paper through Indian Agents or missionaries, and rarely translated to Cree or Dēnesųhñé.¹⁷ Considering that breaking regulations could result in the loss of a Park permit and, potentially, one’s source of subsistence, the failure of the administrator to clearly communicate consistent rules to Indigenous residents could have dire consequences.

Regulations were often generated or updated reactively, with little standardized order or unity between the Park and provincial regulations. This caused confusion for harvesters and administrators alike, who sometimes struggled to reconcile disparate game laws between the Park and the province.¹⁸ Indian Agent P.W. Head and Park Warden Dempsey both recognized the potential consequences of such inconsistencies and confusion. Dempsey noted in 1935 that “there are doubts as to what the regulations really are, which may be the cause of so much friction.”¹⁹ Head wrote to Secretary MacInnes in 1938 that harvesting laws were causing harm to people within and outside the Park:

After hearing all the complaints that come from one source and another I would strongly suggest an investigation of the whole trapping situation and a drawing up of a uniform set of laws for both the Park and all of Alberta north of the 27th Base Line. The situation is becoming very acute and I fear that unless something is done in the near future the outlook for the Indians will be very black [sic] and we will have to carry a large number on relief.²⁰

As Head’s remarks suggested, inconsistencies and arbitrary policy changes were often deeply frustrating to harvesters. For example, where beaver season might be limited outside the Park, it was at times closed altogether within. In these instances, Park permit-holders could leave the Park to continue trapping beaver and take advantage of the longer provincial season.²¹ This loophole created a double standard, as the option was not available for those who lived outside the Park without a Park permit because they could not enter the Park to harvest if they were unsatisfied with provincial game laws.²² At one point,

trappers complained that the open beaver season only applied to “heads of families,” leaving out trappers who were single or did not have dependents.²³

Oral histories point to Dene residents’ frustrations about the double standards and inconsistencies embedded in harvesting policies, which tended to disproportionately affect Dene residents and harvesters. For example, Elder Edouard Trippe de Roche explained that people relied on burning wood for energy, and only a small percentage of families used other sources of fuel when he was young. But after the Park was created, Dene people were denied the ability to harvest firewood in the Park. Meanwhile, those who remained in the Park were granted permits to harvest firewood, and some commercial sawmills operated in the Park throughout much of the twentieth century to provide fuel for the residential school, Indian Affairs, and other nearby institutions. Commercial fisheries were permitted to operate in some lakes within the Park, depleting fish stocks, but Dene people saw their own harvesting rights denied and eroded. Warden reports in 1947 and 1948 point to the friction this caused. For example, Dene people living in the Park petitioned against the establishment of a commercial fishery at Lake Claire, one of the important places in Dene homelands in the Birch River area, where some Dene families were allowed to continue to fish and hunt even after most Dene people had been displaced from their settlement there. Wardens and Indian Agents kept records of local opposition and of the sometimes sour relations between Indigenous fishers and the company, but commercial fishing activity continued.²⁴

In addition, although bison hunting was prohibited, Parks administration allowed for a limited number of bison to be hunted each year (usually by wardens) to provide meat for the Fort Chipewyan hospital and residential school, and eventually, as described below, to sell meat in the south of the Province—to the Province’s profit. While Parks officials continued to express the view that “as long as we allow the Indians to hunt in [the Park], it can never fulfill its full purpose,” they did approve of the scheme for a limited number of non-Indigenous hunters to slaughter some bison to distribute meat to the hungry.²⁵ According to oral histories, the bison meat ration program also had inconsistencies that put Dene people at a disadvantage. Edouard Trippe de Roche noted in his oral history that the bison rations distributed through the Indian Agents or residential schools often did not reach Dene children but were given only to Cree children. He recalled that his sister, who was married to Indian Agent Jack Stewart’s son, was able to get bison meat for her

family only because of that connection. Such double standards embedded in the management regime within and around the Park demonstrate that colonial policy frameworks were as much about controlling Indigenous People's lives, movements, and ways of life as they were about maintaining control over resources.

A related example of inconsistencies in the policy governing Dënesųhné territories took the form of a commercial bison slaughter program after World War Two, that lasted roughly from 1945 to 1967. Sandlos, who describes the program in detail, notes that after the war, Park officials shifted their discourses "from an appeal to save an endangered species to a contention that the buffalo must be exposed only to certain kinds of regulated butchery."²⁶ They set out to commodify bison meat through agriculturalized herd management, partial bison enclosures and a regulated slaughter program. Officials saw this program as a lucrative economic opportunity with a potentially large consumer base to the south. Wardens, and occasionally hunters from the south who were permitted to enter the Park to hunt bison for this program, slaughtered hundreds of Park bison from 1946 to 1967. Meat was either shipped south for sale or distributed as rations at the hospital and residential school in Fort Chipewyan. Indigenous harvesters were usually excluded from the hunts and from receiving meat, and subsistence bison hunting remained illegal. The controlled slaughter program demonstrates the contradictory and fundamentally racialized logic that drove conservation policy in and around the Park. While Indigenous ways of life were disparaged and prohibited, some harvesting activity, undertaken typically by white settlers, was considered an acceptable form of "efficient and controlled exploitation."²⁷ Meanwhile, subsistence harvesters were prohibited from hunting bison in the Park to feed their families and communities. As McCormack concludes, "except for the Department of Indian Affairs, all government agencies gave priority to economic activities that involved the exploitation of northern resources by outsiders."²⁸ These priorities took precedence over the rights and livelihoods of Indigenous residents and placed additional pressure on the Dene families and land users who were excluded from the Park after 1926.

In the oral histories shared in this chapter, Dënesųhné Elders explained that reactive, poorly informed, and inconsistent regulations contributed to the attempted erosions of the sovereignty and a disconnection from knowledge for Dene land users, who intimately understood the patterns and ecology of the area. As such, regulations played a critical part in the colonial elimination

that guided policy in Alberta's north in the mid-twentieth century. Elder Pat Marcel said that through most of the twentieth century, Dene knowledge was never considered when designing conservation policies. The ban on controlled burning and regular Park-sponsored wolf culls, which some Dene people strongly opposed,²⁹ are examples of this disconnect. Wardens and parks officials frequently wrote about how they struggled to convince local Indigenous hunters to kill wolves—some of the oral testimony in this chapter explains why. Some harvesters were also concerned with the use of poison to cull the wolves. As Ed Trippe de Roche explained, the way that wolves were culled often had devastating impacts for many other species; introducing poison into the environment put smaller, fur-bearing animals at risk of poisoning as well. Furthermore, according to McCormack, wolf culling in the 1930s and 1940s may have increased the rates of tuberculosis and brucellosis infections in the bison as the diseased portions of the bison population grew without wolf predation.

In the 1940s, officials dismissively argued that “every Indian who is not entitled to trap in this area is always ready to give advise [*sic*] and criticize Wood Buffalo Park management.”³⁰ Indigenous experiences, concerns, and knowledge about the environment were treated as suspect rather than taken seriously.³¹ Not all conservation policies regulating Dene land use were directly imposed by the Park, but the full suite of federal and provincial conservation and land-management policies from Park's Canada and provincial regulations exacerbated the existing impacts of the 1926 Park annex and permitting system. Chief Jonas Laviolette's 1927 statement clearly articulated the impacts: “If this country had been left to us here there would still be fur today and we would not be so poor and miserable today. Thirty years ago, it was a fine country because just the Indians lived in it.”³²

Registered traplines

Alongside the imposition of harvesting laws governing land use in the Park and province, the province's Registered Fur Management Areas (RFMA) program, colloquially known as the trapline system, emerged in the 1940s. The program fundamentally altered how and where many Dënesų́níné harvesters could interact with the land and water. In an effort to more systematically control the trapping economy throughout the province, Alberta established a system (not applicable in the Park) in 1942 under which fur trappers paid for annual permits to trap in designated areas. Proponents of the trapline system

felt it could protect Indigenous trappers from the growing encroachment of southern white trappers in their territories. “Having regard to the welfare of these people we are anxious for a solution of the difficulties with which they must contend,” wrote one official in 1938.³³

Yet Dēnesųłné trappers outside the Park struggled to obtain a trapline under this system and had to compete with white harvesters who often applied for and received the best trapping areas.³⁴ After travelling through northern Alberta to assess the new trapline system, provincial Fur Supervisor J.L. Grew wrote that white trappers probably had the advantage over Indigenous trappers in identifying their trapping areas:

A great deal of work remains to be done in Alberta before the Indians become firmly established on registered lines that are extensive enough to provide them with a sufficient amount of fur with which to support themselves and their families. . . . As previously stated many of the lines now registered should be reviewed in order to ascertain whether the Indian trapper has been provided with his traditional hunting ground or whether this ground has been pre-empted by white trappers.³⁵

Some trappers and Indian Agents also complained that officials favoured the applications of white trappers, who were more interested in profits, over Dene applicants, who were trapping to feed their families. As Fortna finds in historical studies of traplines in Alberta, “the provincial government refused to provide any special consideration to Indigenous trappers, who continued to treat trapping as a vocation.”³⁶ The province also had the power to revoke trapping certificates and redistribute them.³⁷ Sometimes, lapsed, cancelled, or revoked certificates held by Dene trappers were redistributed to non-Indigenous trappers.³⁸

Although suggested as early as 1939, it took until 1942 for officials to recommend the establishment of larger group trapping areas that protected more land from encroaching non-Indigenous trappers and could stay within families long-term.³⁹ This approach eventually became the primary trapping management system within the Park, and Parks officials opted to establish group trapping areas within the Park as well.⁴⁰ During talks leading up to the establishment of traplines in the Park, Indian Agents and park wardens reported that harvesters residing within the Park generally wanted

their traplines within the Delta area, where harvesting was better. As one warden wrote in 1947, “very few would consider other regions in the Park.”⁴¹ Group trapping areas were officially established in 1949; under this new system, Indigenous harvesters within the Park found themselves with even less freedom to move and harvest across the area.⁴²

Dënesų́nė people were gravely disappointed with the trapline arrangement. As Indian Agent Head wrote in 1940, “the commencement of a Registered Trapline System in Alberta has led to a lot of controversy and complaints from the Indians in the Delta.”⁴³ The provincial trapline system created unique problems for harvesters who had originally harvested in the Park but were later evicted or otherwise lost their permits to harvest there. As Indian Agent Melling wrote to Indian Affairs in June 1942, “before the registered trap-line area and trap-line system was in force in Alberta, these expelled Indians had little difficulty in finding new trapping grounds. . . . But since the institution of the registered traplines it has become impossible for these newly expelled Indians to find lands or lines upon which they might make anything that approaches a living,” and the area where they might move has “all the hunters and trappers that it can now support.” As a result, “these families are destitute or near destitute and it is essential to provide them with relief.”⁴⁴ Melling’s remarks suggest that the RFMA system led to hardship and hunger for some and exacerbated growing tensions between residents and harvesters within and outside the Park, creating significant difficulties for people on both sides of the Park boundaries.⁴⁵ Restrictions on access, previously produced through the permitting system and now enhanced with the new trapping areas, placed further restrictions on the capacity of some Dene people within and outside the Park to access the places that had always been part of their homelands. This resulted in greater competition between harvesters within and outside the Park, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous harvesters over the environment and resources.

Traplines remain important spaces where people stay connected to Dene ways of life, land and waters, and language and identity, despite a wider environment of colonial policies that have dispossessed and sought to erase Dënesų́nė lives and cultural traditions. Much of the oral testimony and history shared in Chapter 1 discusses the ways of life and connections to land that Dene families have maintained on their families’ traplines. Yet the RFMA system has also continued to present serious challenges, adding to the harvesting restrictions and limitations on movement and access that were

already eroding Dene Treaty Rights. Over time, as Treaty and Aboriginal Rights researcher Bill Russell writes, “the Indian trapper and hunter was forced . . . to comply with the provincial registered trapline system, which in its early years did not even fend off the itinerant trappers [trappers who travelled temporarily into the region to trap for profit] . . . the majority were left to scramble for placement in a Provincial registration system imposed without their understanding or consent, and indeed without even the full co-operation of the DIA [Department of Indian Affairs].”²⁴⁶ Combined with other wildlife management policies, Park restrictions, and the growth of the warden system, the fur management system became a means of shoring up state control over wildlife resources while eroding Dene sovereignty and connections to the land.

Wardens: “It was like living very, very stressfully under a nasty regime”

The Park’s warden program, first established in 1911, expanded over time alongside the growth of the wider wildlife management system, with wardens in Wood Buffalo Park granted significantly more power over surveillance and enforcement by the early 1930s. At the time of the Park annex, supporters of expanding the warden system felt it was necessary for keeping a close watch on Indigenous Peoples. As Supervising Park Warden J.A. McDougal wrote in 1926, “the present warden system [should] be increased to such an extent that every Indian in the Park could be closely watched, no matter what place in the Park he might be.”²⁴⁷ In a similar way, another supervising warden’s letter to the Superintendent of Forests and Wildlife twenty years later suggested that a key impetus for the operations of the warden system in Wood Buffalo National Park was the surveillance and control of Indigenous lives. “Unless we have many more wardens to keep a constant check on every Indian,” Warden I.F. Kirkby wrote, “it is impossible to know whether game birds and animals are taken out of season, so long as the Indian can roam the entire park at will.”²⁴⁸ McCormack explains that, shortly after the annex, wardens became “the immediate agents of supervision” over Indigenous land use and harvesting within and around the Park.⁴⁹

The extensive trail of documents left by wardens and their superiors in patrol reports, warden diaries and the summaries of these forwarded monthly from the chief warden to park administrators, sheds light on the daily activities, attitudes, and motivations of Indigenous Peoples living in the Park. Park

wardens often worked alongside the RCMP and provincial game guardians and had a range of responsibilities such as managing permitting for trappers and hunters, monitoring wildlife, managing fires, patrolling assigned areas, monitoring the movements and activities of permittees and Indigenous residents, facilitating the supply of rations and medical assistance for local families, and killing for the bison slaughter relief program.⁵⁰ Wardens enforced the permit system and game laws with varying levels of severity, issuing warnings and fines, confiscating harvesting equipment, arresting people they deemed trespassers, and suspending or permanently revoking permits and expelling people from the Park. Reports across the decades recorded warden patrols with detail. In one day in 1948, for example, warden F.A. McCall reported travelling 225 miles and checking five areas where people had cabins, including the Birch River settlement. McCall made thorough searches of any cabins where people were home or that were unlocked. On another day, he reported flying in a patrol plane over trappers working at Ruis Lake, Birch River, Baril Lake, and Quatre Fourches, “to let them know that we were interested in what they were doing.”⁵¹ McCall’s reports insinuated that patrols often occurred simply so that Indigenous harvesters knew they were being watched.

Oral histories express Dene people’s frustration with wardens’ behaviours that reflected the administration’s working assumption that Indigenous harvesters were hiding something. Alice Rigney’s oral testimony in this chapter explains that trust was rarely a defining characteristic of this relationship: “Yeah, there was no trust,” she said. “Parks Canada was able to go into anybody’s home and check and see if you had buffalo meat.” She explained that her mother-in-law used to say she and her family felt taunted by the people in uniforms. Oral histories and archival documents alike suggest that relations between local Dene people and the WBNP wardens have often been strained, with trust lacking on both sides. ACFN member Scott Flett’s oral history shared below summarizes Dene experiences with wardens who, along with police, exercised significant power in the restriction and surveillance of Dene lives: “they had lots of power, like they can do whatever they want, eh? People were kind of scared of them back in the day.” These are experiences that Indigenous oral histories elsewhere in Canada point to as well. For example, Roberta Nakoochee writes that Southern Tutchone Elders she interviewed described aggressive intimidation tactics that wardens in Kluane Game Sanctuary used in their interactions with Tutchone locals, including

examples of low-flying helicopters or wardens approaching families with their firearms visible.⁵² In these ways, wardens became part of a system that criminalized treaty-enshrined rights to harvest unimpeded throughout their territories.

As Dene oral histories indicate, restrictions on local ways of life and on Indigenous relations to the land were violations of Treaty 8 and had significant and harmful impacts. Elder Magloire Vermillion, who was born at Birch River and whose oral testimony is shared below, explained in 1974: “Even since the treaty was signed, we were slowly being restricted with game regulations, preventing us from trapping, hunting, and fishing. There was no such thing as Park wardens [before Treaty]. . . . along with these buffaloes [from Wainwright] came the Park wardens.”⁵³ As this Elder’s oral history suggests, restrictive game regulations and the increasingly powerful warden system became a key instrument in the expansion of state control over Indigenous People’s lands and lives—and in attempted colonial erasures, after the Treaty.

Oral histories refer frequently to instances of wardens abusing their power, but official archives are sparse in details about abuse. As ACFN member Garry Flett said, “they’re undocumented for sure. I mean, it would be self-incriminating if they put some of this stuff in there.” There are occasional exceptions with indirect references that align with the memories and histories of Dene people communicated through the oral testimony. A 1947 letter points to Indian Agent Jack Stewart’s view of the discriminatory attitudes of some wardens:

Mr Stewart indicates that he has spoken to Park Wardens and Game Guardians . . . and he divides the opinions into three categories [*sic*], those who believe the Indians are too lazy to fish for a living; those who believe the Indian as a ward of the Government and not a human being; those who take a broad view of the matter.⁵⁴

Stewart’s description of varying warden attitudes points to some of the motivations for their interactions with Indigenous Peoples. Another 1953 government letter stated that some wardens “acted and conducted themselves in a ruthless and arrogant manner.”⁵⁵ Although the RCMP and Parks officials usually refuted such claims, it is conceivable that warden behaviour and abuses of power, especially toward Indigenous harvesters, were under-reported or



Fig. 5.1 *Camp for police dogs and Wood Buffalo park wardens' dogs, 1952.* Provincial Archives of Alberta, A17163.

even omitted from official records. Yet there is no shortage of examples in the oral histories of these types of actions and behaviours, as demonstrated in the testimonies shared here. Elders stressed that people live in fear under this system. This is a clear opportunity to honour oral histories by challenging erasures in the written archive that privilege mythologies that marginalize and do violence to Indigenous experiences and knowledges.⁵⁶ As historian Winona Wheeler tells us, the best way to understand community histories and experiences often are “found within the community itself.”⁵⁷

Some ACFN members noted that not all Park wardens were “bad guys,” and some were only “doing their job.” They suggested that some wardens were more understanding and lenient than others, and sometimes Dene residents were on friendly terms with wardens and assisted them with their labour. Some ACFN members also have noted that a newer generation of wardens with different views on Indigenous rights and ways of life has been slowly replacing the “old guard” in recent decades.⁵⁸ Archive documents suggest that some wardens acted as intermediaries between Indigenous residents and the Park’s administration, communicating Indigenous People’s frustrations

with harvesting laws and decrying the hardships they faced. For example, Dempsey wrote to McDougal in February 1931 that he was deeply discouraged by the hunger and hardship he had witnessed during a recent patrol, arguing that the conditions were a direct result of the Treaty obligations not being adequately fulfilled. He wrote, “the Treaty with the Indians is simply another SCRAP OF PAPER.”⁵⁹ Sometimes wardens facilitated Dene practices of helping people in need. In 1935, for example, Warden Robert Allen reported that Isidore Simpson (a Chipewyan Band Member and Councillor whose family lived at Peace Point and was transferred to the Cree band in 1944), had reported a bison had fallen off a cliff. When Allen went to investigate, he found the bull still alive but unable to move, so he killed it. He determined that the meat could be salvaged. Apart from one hind quarter that he felt would not be fit for human consumption because of shattered bones, Allen gave all the meat to Isidore Simpson, who in turn divided it among the needy in his community, especially the Elders and widows. Such reports suggest that relationships between Dene people and wardens were varied and complex. Although some wardens frequently complained about the conditions Indigenous Peoples faced, their reports did not usually suggest that they saw themselves—or the system that they enforced—as part of the problem.

Ultimately, through the permitting and warden programs, Parks administration had established a system in which abuses of power against Indigenous Peoples and erasures of Indigenous lifeways were tolerated, normalized, and even encouraged. O.S. Finnie wrote in 1925 that a warden’s lack of popularity or trust among the local people should be considered a strength, suggesting that not having a positive relationship with local residents and harvesters would ensure a warden could do their job without prejudice.⁶⁰ Specific instances of warden abuse, even when not fully documented, were written into imposed colonial laws that empowered officials to intimidate residents and harvesters and criminalized Dene people’s rights to move, live, and harvest freely throughout their homelands.

In the oral history section that follows, community members describe the power that wardens wielded in and around the Park throughout the twentieth century. They recount personal stories of interactions with wardens in more recent decades. Much of the oral testimony shared in this chapter relates personal examples of members’ experiences with the restrictive and punitive system within and around WBNP. Speakers emphasized that the system was critical to advancing colonial control over Dene lands and waters and aimed

to erase Dene people and ways of life from their homelands. These oral histories situate the Park and the surrounding wildlife management regime as instrumental in the histories of colonial elimination in northern Alberta.

ORAL HISTORY

Louis Boucher (1974)

Yes, it [the system controlling land use] has changed a lot. At first there were none, but now they have enforced many regulations. Whenever some white man comes here, a new regulation is in effect. It is a big change since I came here at first up to now.

Alec Bruno (2015)

ON WOLF CULLING

I never hunt, I never trap wolf. I killed two, all the years that I trapped. I caught one in a lynx snare, and I caught up to him [after he ran]. He hung; he wrapped the wire around the tree. I wanted to cut that wire but they wouldn't let me come close, so I had to shoot him. Twice I had to shoot a wolf like that to kill, cause, you know, I couldn't . . . because my dad always told me that wolves are very, very smart animals, very wise, they are just like humans. They have the strength to kill a moose or anything to eat, just like humans, he says. We go hunting and we don't give up until we kill caribou to take meat home. Men and wolves are almost equal. They don't live together but what they do out on the land is pretty well the same thing.

Well the old timers used to tell us the animals, wolves, caribous, moose, same thing. They're all just like humans because they all share. Wolves have to kill caribou to eat and many times you heard these stories. Any time a wolf kills an animal, a moose or caribou or bison, they usually get after the old and the sick. They know. The reason for that is, for them, killing the sick and the old is to maintain a good stock. Leave the young ones alone. It's their way of maintaining a good health, stock, herd together, you know, by killing the old and the sick. I watched, I seen a documentary on wolves that Parks Canada did a couple years ago, and they were with this pack of wolves for about a week. They watched everything they do. They kill, they were trying to, they killed one bison. He was an old one. They waited, they got him out of the herd to kill him and then they went hunting again and these guys [film crew] were in a chopper, and they said all of a sudden they were following this herd of buffalos and all of a sudden they stopped. There was only about four wolves, four or five wolves. They stopped, they turned around and took off, they started running. Now these guys didn't understand why they done that.

Bison were just ahead hey? So, they followed these buffalo, these wolves. They never stopped, they just ran and ran and ran and ran. They ran about 30 km, 37 km is the way they put it. They went into the bush and they came about a dead buffalo. He just died. Just fresh. That bison just died, maybe sick or something, I don't know. How did the wolves know this 37 km away? You'll see that sometimes when you watch shows about animals, wolves, how they hunt. I think it's done here in this area, I think around Lake Claire somewhere. How did they know this bison was dying 37 km away? They ran 37 km to just find this bison just freshly died. So, with all these things that happen, you have to think about it, it makes you think, why do animals do these things? Their ways pretty much tell you that wolves think like a man. That's what my dad you used to say. My dad was the one who used to say, don't ever trap wolves if you can, because wolves and man pretty well think alike. They strike—you strike as a hunter or a trapper to get what you want, and wolves are the same thing.

ON TRAPLINES AND HARVESTING RESTRICTIONS

There was no traplines before the Alberta government got involved. People went wherever they wanted to go. There was an open land out there. You'd take your family and go wherever you want and that's how you'd trap. And then after government got involved, then they start issuing traplines. Back in Richardson country, your trapline, the only rights you'd have to that thing is to trap and hunt, nothing else. There's a fine for trapping [outside the trapline or trapping season]. It started in November, and it ends February, so you only got about four months to do that, and then you come back to the Delta and trap muskrats for another two months, so you're trapping six months out of a year. That's what Western science, law, did to the people when they started giving them traplines. These traplines, you'd give it to Rene [Bruno] or whoever, you got to go out there every year. Harvest that land and if you miss one or two years, they'll take it away from you and give it to someone else . . . Like I said, the way I believe, is when the trapline [system] was issued, government knew that one day down the road this trapping thing would be [lucrative]. There is still a lot of fur out there, but there was no price so people quit going; but they still claim their trapline, but they don't go out. What Alberta government is doing now is bringing in sports fishing, bear baiting, stuff like that on the same trapline [where trappers no longer go] that we'd get into trouble [for doing], and they're getting away with it, making money from it and these guys [the trappers] are make nothing out of it.

Jimmy Deranger (25 March 2021)

Some Dene people were killing the buffalos like when they left the Park, right? And then some of them were charged for that. They spent time in jail I think for that. Because they killed the buffalos that were not even in the Park. “The buffalos,” they were saying, “it was ours anyways to begin with.” But still they charged them, right? With the regulations that they used in Wood Buffalo Park.

Yeah. And they said that the rules had to be followed. There were these rules; [if] they were going to change those rules, why didn’t they come and tell us that they were going to do it? Why didn’t they sit down with us and say, “we’re going to do this: what do you think? What do you think?” That didn’t happen. They just made the rules.

I remember once this thing that happened to me. Magloire Vermilion and Basil Vermilion [Dene Elders who are members of MCFN because of the membership transfer] were in the Parks. You know, even though they were Dene, they were recognized [by the government] as Cree. And I was coming back from Edmonton in January, and they were going back to Fort Chip. And they had cut wood for their homes in Fort Chip. And I was passing by when they were cutting wood. And they said, “why don’t you come and get this wood for us and bring it into Fort Chip.” I said, “okay, as soon as I drive and take my stuff off the truck, I’ll come back.” It’s only about a forty-minute drive, maybe less than that. So I did, took my stuff back and then I came back and got it, their wood, and then I loaded all their wood into my truck and I drove out. And then drove in the bush across the river and there was a snye [a side channel]—this snye usually freezes right to the ground. Because it’s not very much water, there’s only about three feet of water.

And when I was there, I guess somehow they [wardens] heard that the Natives were cutting wood over there, bringing it to Fort Chip. They said they assumed it was for sale. I saw them and I went barreling past them, I wasn’t going very fast, but it seems like you’re going fast when the snow is flying, right? And when you have a load and then it sort of blows up more snow and I went past them, and they passed me. And then I drove it all the way to Basil’s house, unloaded, and as I was going back to my house, I stopped there and they stopped behind my truck, and they’re looking inside my truck and they saw woodchips. They asked me, “where’d you get that from?” I said this, “Basil told me to bring his wood in, so I brought it in.”

“Oh, we have to charge you, we have to take your truck,” they said. And then they went over to Basil’s house and took the wood. And then, that pissed me off. And I went back and then they charged me. Said they were going to hold my truck. But I went to Calgary and then I went to see a lawyer that was working for the Indian Association, TARR—Bob Young—and I told him. He says, “I’ll make a phone call for you,” he said. So, he made a phone call and he said, “you can go get your truck now,” he said, “they are in Fort Chip.” And then they [wardens] turn around, they said they was trying to say it was my wood, [even though] it wasn’t even my wood. They were looking for evidence. But they charged me ten dollars, they fined me ten dollars. So now, that was just in the ’70s, so that means that whatever happened with the First Nations People, in their activities on the land at Wood Buffalo, they were probably charged for something that was ridiculous, like the one that they tried to charge me with.

Garry Flett (6 December 2020)

GF: I mean, it was common back then for a lot of the—I shouldn’t say just Aboriginal People—people in general that harvested a bird in the Park or that were caught doing that sort of thing, or even picking a flower, got you into some crap with the Park. I don’t know all the personal details into it, but I know growing up, it was common to hear about the court dockets of people that were fined for doing those things. So, it was not uncommon.

The only other interaction that I had with a warden that was negative was the one time when my oldest child was born, and my wife was in the vehicle with me. We were coming back from Fort Chip to Fort Smith, and we got stopped by a park warden, and it was cold—it was really cold. And my son was, I would say three weeks to a month old then. He was born in December, so it was in January sometime. But I’ll never forget the cop’s name, the warden’s name either.

He stopped me and he said, “everybody out of the car.”

And I said, “No. Sorry. I’ll get out for you. What are you looking for?”

And he said, “I heard that you have buffalo meat in the vehicle?” I said, “I have none.” He said, “Everybody out of the car.” And I said, “No I’ll get out, but I have a baby in there and a wife and they’re not getting up.”

And things escalated from there. He said, he accused me of being deaf. That I didn’t hear him properly. And I accused him of being deaf because he didn’t hear me. And he went to put his hand on me to move me out of the

road. And I pushed him back. And there was another warden there. He came and got in between and de-escalated the situation.

But my expectation after that was that I would be stopped by the RCMP as I got into the community and questioned over this incident, because I did push him out of the road. When he meant to move me, I shoved him. Just the wrong thing to do, but it was just the heat of the moment. But you know, nothing ever transpired out of that. Nothing. The cops didn't come and see me. Never heard any more from it.

And I thought it just was nothing, it just went to bed, other than a fella came to me a week later and said, "I heard this happened," and he described a situation. And I said, "Yeah, it did." And all he said was "congratulations, the little bastard needed that," he said. "Oh okay." And that was it, and I never heard a thing again about it. I expected that I would be trying to explain myself in the court of law too.

ST: You never had to? And they never searched your vehicle in the end?

GF: No, no. I had nothing to hide anyway. But no, they didn't search it. Because I told him, they had the truck that was plugging off the highway. It was only a narrow little winter road sort of thing to the Park, and they had the highway closed off with their truck. By then my temper was flared, and I said, "get your truck off the road or I'll push it off the road." Anyway, they moved the truck and I was gone. . . . Yeah. Well, the good old days. They were, I don't know if they were empowered or just thought that they were empowered with the same powers that the RCMP had. But they did—they were bullies out there. I can't think of another word, another term for them other than they threw their weight around quite well.

[These types of incidents] are undocumented for sure. I mean, it would be self-incriminating if they put some of this stuff in there, right? At the end of the day, they're just as human as you and I are, and there's some of them that took advantage of the positions that they were put into and used that to bully their way through the system. And for me, we were ACFN. I didn't belong there.

Scott Flett (17 March 2021)

Back in the day, the priests and the game warden, and RCMP, boy, they had lots of power. Like they can do whatever they want, eh? People were kind of scared of them back in the day . . . I remember my Grandpa said he used to hide and stuff. He had to hide. If the park warden was coming along and they

[the people] want to eat. If you want to—even the beavers, [there] were only so many beavers you could get per harvest, and ducks are out of season, you're not supposed to hunt ducks out of season. Oh my God, there's just, it's really bad.

I think there's some people who went to jail or something. I mean, they got a fine and stuff for breaking the rules or breaking the regulations. I heard a story. I think there's some people that were hiding ducks and stuff and then you know, there was a story about these guys, had some ducks or something, and the Park warden came with his dog, and they hid the ducks, but the dog went, sniffed out the ducks or something. I don't know if they got a warning or a fine.

ON BISON SLAUGHTERS

They had a great big laboratory [in the Park], I think they called it. One at Sweetgrass and one at Hay Camp where they had these big corrals and stuff, they used to bring in the buffalo, and they used to check them out for brucellosis and TB and stuff. And then even one time back, what year was that? That was September because school was—it was maybe '73 or something . . . they'd go pick up a truck, and they drove to Sweetgrass, and they brought a whole bunch of buffalo meat into town and they gave people buffalo meat.

Yeah, and they give not just rations like I said. I think it's only a one-time deal, but they're trying to sell buffalo meat down, down south, eh? They're trying to sell the beef to stores and stuff. And they had this big operation on Sweetgrass and, like I said, corrals all over, and then I think even one time they used to use these old Bell helicopters and just herd them by helicopter, and then they had to stop that because there were some buffalo breaking their legs or something. It was kind of cruelty, so they had to quit that process.

Fred (Jumbo) Fraser (12 March 2021)

FF: I think I heard them [local Elders] say anytime they'd kill moose they used to keep the moose bone. Because you never know when them rangers would come around, eh. So, they kept that. And then the rangers I heard were really bad. They'd go and check where the dogs are tied up and everything and look for bones. That's what I heard, anyway.

ST: So they would keep the moose bones so that the ranger didn't know about the buffalo. Is that what you mean?

FF: Yeah. If there was moose bones, but there was no buffalo bones, I guess there's a difference. They were bad rangers. . . . In my mind, too, I think they were pretty—how do you say it? Like, they always wanted to catch somebody. Yeah, I don't think they were good.

ST: What kinds of things did they do to the people who lived there?

FF: Oh, they're coming, nosing around, I guess. You know, look for something wrong. Always looking for dirt, I guess.

ST: What happens if they catch you?

FF: I don't know, you go to court, go to jail probably.

Leslie Laviolette (22 March 2021)

So [the relationship with Park wardens] was just like watching the movies, like cowboys and Indians. We used to hide. We'd see the cowboy ride by in a big jet boat, and us, we'd come out in the canoe, and we'd paddle away from them. You know, it was playing, well sort of playing with the law, I guess. Because they always seemed to get some guy and so we'd just go that extra mile not to get caught. But yet I don't know why we had to run like that and be scared of that. We never had to before.

And this is what my parents and my grandpa [Jonas Laviolette] and all these guys argued about that we're here now, second generation, third generation. I see all these changes that—what my grandfather and the other chiefs like Uncle Fred [Marcel] and all them seen before that, but [the Park officials] never listened. And then when the Park came, well the Park was the sheriff, he had the badge, and he did what he wanted. Cause when you [the wardens] have a badge, well you got to listen to them. They're not gonna listen to me. I don't have no badge, I'm just a trapper and that's it, cause I'm just a number.

Pat Marcel (2013)

ON WOLF CULLING

What we're talking about now, when the federal government came down, and said the only way we can conserve the caribou and the bison is to corral them and put them in a fenced area. But the people were very upset about that. Their [the government's] next move was to cull all the wolves that were preying on the caribou, because then there would be less predation by the wolf pack. But the Elders said that by culling the wolves, the caribou are now susceptible for diseases, because there is no keeping the herd strong by culling the wolves.

A caribou can outrun a wolf, unless they are old and sick or young. The herd is kept to a certain state so that the caribou will never eat themselves out of a home. The herd stays in the set numbers.

This is what we understood, and the white men could not understand. They culled wolves, in the past, mostly in Saskatchewan, in N22.⁶¹ And the trappers would be reporting that they would be cutting open caribou, and they would be affected by it [by the poison used to cull wolves]. The wolves and even the ravens [who] would eat of that poisoned caribou carcass, would be dead [from Strychnine poison].

An old trapper told me that he killed a moose and put the poison into a caribou carcass, and he got twenty-seven wolves. This was happening in the Parks. A lot of terrible things were done, without thought of what will happen if we [the government] did this. No consultation with First Nations Elders. The government would just announce that, “this year we are going to cull wolves,” and poison would be used. The government didn’t think how this would be bad for the trappers and the wolves. Poison doesn’t discriminate. And it kills whatever it touches.

Keltie Paul (25 November 2020)

I’m going to tell you a story. I had to change my shirt because I got strawberry jam all over it. So, I went into my bedroom, and I could hear this low-grade humming sound. And I took off my shirt and I put on another shirt. And then I turned around and, my cabin was right on the river, the curtains were open, and these damn men were in a helicopter right outside my window watching me change. And pointing at me and laughing. They were that close. So, they lowered their helicopter and then I went outside because I was really mad, and I started shaking my fist at them, so they moved off to the next cabin. And here they are with their little binoculars, and everything and they’re looking into people’s houses. Peeping Tom. And that was just an intimidation tactic. And they would, you know, they just insisted on doing things that would harass people. Would make people feel less than. Would make people feel that they were not being listened to. Because they would say, “well you don’t belong here,” and yet they knew they belonged there. They knew their Ancestors were from there. But these guys had different ideas to what things were [i.e. who belonged and who did not], and they’d use it to intimidate, to harass, to bully.

Ernie “Joe” Ratfat (19 March 2021)

Well, I remember [wardens] always enforced . . . if you're caught shooting a buffalo, that they had a fine to pay for or else I think there's a jail term too. Yeah, and they would come into your home, and they would check your meat, you know? If that fat, you know, the buffalo fat? Like it's kind of like a yellowish color. So, if they see that, you're charged.

Alice Rigney (16 March 2021)

ON WARDENS AND REGULATIONS

There was no trust. Parks Canada was able to go into anybody's home and check and see if you had buffalo meat. And if you had buffalo meat, they could sentence you to jail. I mean that kind of rudeness and impolite[ness] and power over the people. And I mean, my family did not, we don't live in the Park. We never did.

And I hear a lot of stories about how they used to have to hide buffalo meat, because Parks Canada could just go to your tent and search through your coolers and your sheds to see if you have any caribou meat. I heard of an Elder who shot a duck out of season and he went to jail for a week or so—you know, stories like that. Where the intimidation was so strong that I mean, people live there in their homelands you know, even though House River [Birch River/House Lake settlement] is just a memory now, I mean, they lived listening for a motor. My brother had a friend living at Quatre Fourches—the Mikisew Cree have a little micro-village there now—and it's not very far from town, it's in the Park. And my brother Joe went out to visit one of his friends. And when he pulled up to his cabin, [his friend] wasn't there, so Joe thought, well, there's a fire going. And then his friend comes out from behind the house carrying a pot, and in that pot was buffalo meat. And he had heard a boat and he took that pot of meat and went to hide it. That kind of intimidation . . . And, I mean, this is the guy who hunted and trapped all his life and here he is hiding a pot of buffalo meat. That is the lowest way of hurting people, you know?

When Parks was created, it became a whole new level of government with their rules and whatnot. No one was allowed—you could not hunt at certain times. You could not do this, you could not hunt. Can't shoot ducks in the summer, you know, crazy things like that.

ON WOLF CULLING

I mean, there's no glamour in Wood Buffalo National Park. And the introduction of the buffalo in 192[6] just caused disease, and then [Parks Canada] they started exterminating the wolves without listening to people. I mean, what was wrong with the way it was? Why couldn't they just leave it alone? Let Mother Nature look after Mother Nature.

And just, there's that concept that white people think different than the land users, you know? We protect the land, as all of us, we were taught to protect the land and save it so that our children and grandchildren can use it as they have. It's destroyed now. You know, we can't do it [can't protect it like we used to]. So, we're trying to fight back. And as long as the government allows all this pollution and Parks, I mean, they have lifted a lot of the limitations and allowed Dene people to hunt in the Park, but most of us don't go there. We go to our traditional hunting spots.

It's the interference and the way of thinking that the Parks warden thinks that they could—they're trying to change Mother Nature by introducing a new breed [of bison] to this breed here. Mother Nature has a way of looking after what she has. The local people here know that when they go hunting, they only take what they need. They do not leave any behind. And there's always that sharing. So that's how it always was, and then [Parks] bring in all this [Wainwright] herd. And they got diseases and whatnot. And then they introduced [Wainwright plains bison], and then to get rid of the wolves, they start poisoning them. Well, you poison the wolves, it's just a vicious cycle. In the middle of that vicious cycle, is a big question mark. Like, why? Why did they even bother? I mean, because they're scientists? And because maybe they have these fancy letters behind their names that they think they know more than the local people. I mean, this is something that's being done all over the world.

ON THE BISON SLAUGHTER PROGRAM

I remember going to Hay Camp in the Park, my sister actually lived with a park warden there, and how they used to corral [bison] and they used to slaughter so many and that was for, you know, they would ship them south. The hides would be sent south for tann[ing]. But the buffalo there were not slaughtered for the people, for the community here. It was sent out and later on they did have one or two years where they did slaughter buffalo and distributed the meat in town.

Mary “Cookie” Simpson (11 March 2021)

ON HARVESTING REGULATIONS

MS: And then they had their stupid rules. They had all kinds of different regulations. They brought the buffalo in, and you couldn't shoot them, even if you were hungry, or even if it was there, which is not right. Because I know my family did not just go and kill just for the sake of killing lots of animals. They only took what they can eat, and they used every part of the animal.

ST: What would happen if you broke the rules?

MS: Well, they would throw you in jail. They would take you . . . and you had to feed your family. Somebody had to stay and feed their family. They couldn't afford to go to jail. So of course, they just forced our people into following their stupid regulations.

ON WARDEN INTIMIDATION

It's always a threat. Every time you see somebody with—what do you call their outfit—on? You think, “oh shit, they're gonna come and give us shit or they're going to come and arrest us.” You know, there was not even a good relationship with them. Like today you can have a good relationship with a cop or somebody, but long time ago you couldn't. It was always the threat of something bad is going to happen. Sudden doom is going to come to you if you see somebody with one of those green outfits on.

And then, yeah, they didn't care for the people. There was nothing like caring and whatever. Like the Aboriginal People still cared and shared and whatever, but not with them. There was nothing with them, they just came to rule. They came and they had the regulations that they had to follow and that's what they did. There was no give or take anything. You've never ever heard of anybody just saying, “you know I guess I'll let you go this time or whatever,” you never heard nothing like that.

ON BANNING INDIGENOUS CEREMONIES UNDER THE 1951 INDIAN ACT

ST: So, you have to be pretty careful, I guess, hey?

MS: Yes. That's right. And then you couldn't even practice your culture or your drumming or whatever. Because the park wardens would come and they'd hear your drum or whatever, then they'd go back and tell the RCMP. And they would come over and say, “oh, you were heard. Your drums were being heard.” And then so, you had to hide all that.

Cause my dad and my grandpa's house there, where my dad and them all lived, they have a cellar in there. And in that cellar, there's a secret

compartment where they had to keep their drums. If somebody would check that house out, they'll know there's a secret compartment, because it's still there. Because we checked it out a couple of years ago, well when my brother Charlie [Simpson] was still alive. We went in and checked it out. And sure enough, there was a drum frame in there. The hide was eaten away on the sides. But even that, like—they [the authorities] were bad. You couldn't practice anything.

ST: So you couldn't even drum?

MS: No, that was banned for about 75 years, at least three generations. You couldn't practice your culture. You couldn't have your Sweats or anything.

ST: Right. Yeah. Because the *Indian Act*, eh?

MS: Yeah. And of course, those park wardens, they were out there more than the RCMP, right? So, they would hear that [drumming] and they would see that, so of course, they'd go back and tell on us. And that's why nobody likes them.

Edouard Trippe de Roche

A portion of this interview is available as a digital audio recording online.⁶²



Yeah, I know for a fact there was, back in the '50s, '60s, everybody in Fort Chip was burning wood. Maybe two or three percent of people burned fuel—you know like Indian Affairs, the Park, the RCMP, police, the Hudson's Bay Company. So, people were saying, the residential school ought to burn wood for heat and cooking. They were allowed to get wood in the Wood Buffalo Park, and they'd buy, I don't know how many cords of wood, I don't know how many cords there is, thousands—the state harvest in the year. But we weren't allowed to harvest any firewood from the Park to bring into Fort Chip.

But yet again, in the '60s probably late '50s, early '60s, they had sawmills in the Park and they were permitted to log on the Cree side of the Park, and to my understanding, their permit is still valid today and yet we Natives cannot put a sawmill in the Park. And I know of four sites that there were sawmills, four or five sites in the Park.

As for harvesting fur, I think my dad had a permit but I'm not sure if I can still use it today if I had to. I don't know if it's passed on from one generation to the next. But he used to trap in the Park. I don't know if it was with other

people or by himself, but by his own area and I know that there were some people were allowed to harvest a buffalo here and there. And I know of two people that were charged for harvesting buffalo. But I guess it's all right if you ate it in the Park. But they brought it to Fort Chip, so they got charged for that. Back in the '60s, my cousin Gilbert got fined \$100 which would be something like, what, \$10,000 today, probably. And one of them, the other guys, got his meat taken away. So, they [wardens] took all his meat. He had moose meat in there. A friend of mine and I helped them get some meat back. We told him to meet us—it was at the RCMP station. And we hauled all this buffalo meat out, so when he went to court there was just this moose meat, so they had to throw it out of court. But, you know, there was things like that, and at the residential school, we ate buffalo meat.

Magloire Vermillion

On one occasion I was with my family, and we were low on supplies. It was then I decided to hunt for ducks, so I had killed six ducks and, at the same time, by coincidence, the Park wardens came. Not really knowing what their action would be, thinking that they would not react to my killing of the ducks, I proceeded to go home with my ducks in my boat. They were following me, but I thought they were just going to go by, but apparently, they followed me home. When I got home, they took my ducks and gun. Along with these, a fine was imposed for me to pay in the amount of \$14.00. They had also taken my boat. My gun was barely given back to me.

Another incident was when I killed a beaver in early spring. I put my beaver in my sled and proceeded home with my beaver. It was getting very late, so I came upon this camp where some Crees were staying. They had no meat of any kind. I was going to camp there anyway. I had this beaver in my sled, so I went out to get it. We skinned the beaver and boiled the meat. After that I camped there. The Cree had told the game warden that I had killed the beaver out of season.

Shortly after that I came to Fort Chip. It was then the Park warden had told me to turn in my permit. I was not to trap, hunt, and fish in the Park for one whole year.

I was very frustrated and disappointed. My permit was taken from me, my only source of livelihood. All my trapping, hunting, and fishing supplies were in my cabin at Peace Point [inside the Park, where he could not go without a valid permit]. There was nothing that I could do about the incident.

It was in early summer. I had thought the whole situation over.

I then made up my mind that I would personally see the district superintendent myself. So I moved to go to Fort Smith, since the district office was there. I went by boat to Fitzgerald. From there, I left my boat. I proceeded to Fort Smith which is about 22 miles by foot. I went directly to the district office. I went into the office. There was this district superintendent who used to be a Hudson's Bay clerk. I knew the man personally when he used to be the clerk. Now he is the district superintendent. I told him about the incident. I could not understand how I could have killed a beaver out of season when it was early spring. I told him that Philip Burkque [the warden] and his assistants had told me to turn in my permit. So I turned my permit over to him. I also told him that this permit that I handed in was the only source for me to provide for my family since we lived off the land. Philip Burkque was in the same office that time, but in a different room. He [the district superintendent] then called him [Burkque] into his office. Philip then sat down in a chair with no impression of any sort of incident. It appears that he had no knowledge of why I was there.

I told him [the district superintendent] that it was the warden that is sitting in the chair along with his assistants who told me that I [un]lawfully had killed a beaver out of season and told me to turn in my permit. The district superintendent then questioned him to cross-examine the situation—but apparently what happened was the intention of showing their authority [Park's authority], rather than for the principle [of conservation]. They both started to blame each other for the so-called illegal principle, not knowing who should take the blame. But this confusion was a coverup. I was then given back my permit.

The district superintendent couldn't see the point during this confusion. So he told his wardens that he could not see how this Treaty Indian had killed a beaver out of season when it was early spring when the beaver season expires late spring. So he told him to turn the permit which was in his hands, back to me.

I then proceeded back to Fort Chipewyan. I stayed for a short period, and during this short period, Philip Burkque came up to me and told me while he was laughing, that I could have my permit back. I went to his office with him to get my permit. He then told me that he was told from the district office that was to turn over my permit to me.

[Burkque explained], “In the future if you’re trapping, hunting, and fishing, we are not to interfere with your Treaty.”

If I had not decided to act on the so-called violation, I probably would not have gotten my permit back.

Leslie Wiltzen (21 January 2021)

ON HARVESTING REGULATIONS

In the first portion of this excerpt, Leslie discusses how some of the state-imposed harvesting regulations (in this case seasons for migratory bird hunting) were incongruous with Dene subsistence practices and Traditional Knowledge, and often did not make sense in the context of the north.

You know, when you start talking about stuff like that [harvesting regulations], you talk about, in springtime, the people of Fort Chipewyan—it’s the people of the North. In springtime you have a mass migration of waterfowl that come from southern areas to northern areas to nest. But you have both male and female species that come in abundance, great abundance. Like I said, when I spoke to you earlier, it was like a cloud. A cloud of geese lifted up. You could hear the thunder from the wings flapping together. Huge, huge amounts of birds. [Yet] you know, the regulations indicate that you couldn’t have a bird in the springtime when they’re at their most; you have to wait for fall. And, you know, birds in the spring—that’s when they’re the most, that’s when they’re [in] the best shape as they’ve been down in certain areas, feeding on corn, feeding on farmers’ fields where food was plentiful. So when they go up north, they lay their eggs, the females lay their eggs, the young are born, they’re all skinny. When they go back south in the fall time, they’re in their worst shape, right? Because they’ve depleted all that resources that they built up down south for that long migration flight, and then to have their young and then migrate back.

So when you’re hunting for food in the springtime, and the wardens come along and start taking your birds away and say you can’t kill birds, or you have to start hiding your birds for fear of being charged. And in 1899 when you [Indigenous leaders] negotiated your treaty [Treaty 8], it indicated that you would be able to carry on your traditional way of living, to make a livelihood to feed your family, as you did regardless [as though you had never taken treaty]. And then all of a sudden again, here’s another roadblock: we’ve

just formed the Park but also you can't kill these birds now. So again, you know those are hardships.

Now we kill a duck, people long ago, those bones after you're all done [with the duck], those bones you don't want to have around your house. So you take them and you go somewhere in the bush and you throw them away. You throw them away because you have fear that if the wardens come around, they're gonna ask you "where did you get that bird?" They're gonna try to prove that you're guilty [of] taking that bird when you're not supposed to, even though your stomach says you need that bird. See, that's how it was. And when you look at those regulations, long ago, they were imposed. They were developed, again without consultation, without any input of how they would affect the day-to-day living of the Chipewyan people.

So again, there's a good [amount] of regulations that were put in place, they don't work. They work in southern jurisdictions, but they don't work in the northern parks. Because in the south populations, like say now you go around Elk Island [near Edmonton, Alberta], you're [in] an urban park surrounded by urban people. You're not a park that is surrounded by Aboriginal People that have traditionally harvested food for as long as time immemorial, right? So, Elk Island National Park . . . you know, it's been modernized and commercialized to a point where that's what it is. People don't make a living there [from the land] anymore. People can't make a living anymore. So that's why I say it works. Those laws work good, those laws. When you look at the laws of Wood Buffalo National Park, the regulations of Wood Buffalo National Park, and you look at the regulations of Elk Island, they're similar in design and their approach when they were written. They're written for white people, right? Written for Canadians. But never took the treaties the Aboriginal People signed into consideration. That when we signed treaty, it said that "as long as the rivers flow, and the sun shines" we'll be able to fish, hunt, and trap. But when those regulations came into effect, our rights were stomped on. Again, no consultation, no input by the Aboriginal People.

ON RELATIONS WITH WARDENS

I started working with Parks Canada on the fire crew back in the late '80s or early '90s, and I myself have gone through the federal park warden training program. I've gone through the RCMP Depot Division [training program] and I became a full-fledged park warden in Wood Buffalo National Park. So I know the regulations and I know all the red tape, right? So, you know, it's

frustrating. It's frustrating to see how little progress from even in 1990 to today. If we hadn't had certain court cases that dictated how the federal government would react to Aboriginal People, I feel, I still think we'd be in a situation where the federal government would still be trying to dictate to us what we were to do, and how to do it, and how we were to react.

Because, you know what, there's a lot of people in this Park I find that have been here long, long enough. I call them old school park wardens. They're starting to fade out, which is nice to see. It'll be a good day when they're all gone. Because you need new people to come and take on a new perspective. When you come to Wood Buffalo National Park, as an employee from another part of the country . . . we haven't always had people that have been cooperatively willing to give the Aboriginal People the benefit of the doubt in this park. And it's always been a struggle. And when you come to Wood Buffalo National Park starting your career, and you have that mindset, then all of a sudden you have a few court cases that dictate otherwise of how you are to think and how you are to react with Aboriginal People. It's hard to change on a split of a dime and change your thinking. In your mind you've always got that old school thinking, "this is what we used to do." And I still find today a lot of the people that are old school will push the envelope to the point where "what can we get away with?" With knowing the boundaries that have been set by precedent, courts that have set precedents. But they'll still push, still push, still push.

Anonymous ACFN Elder (11 March 2021)

Elder: The park rangers, this is a little way back, you know, they were pretty strict. But now, no, because they only got about one ranger here, or two.

[They were pretty] strict, yeah. They were, they were. Long time ago, we couldn't even go to the Park. We got to get a permit. You know, and that's how they were doing that. You can't go. You can't go to the Park. . . .

PF: So what did people think of them?

Elder: Well, the warden, you were scared of him. Well not me, I wasn't scared. . . . But they don't let you hunt or trap or do anything. They won't let you camp out there or nothing.

Anonymous ACFN Elder (16 March 2021)

Elder: Okay, I was gonna ask you a question. How come the Roman Catholics could shoot a buffalo? They took pictures in there, and us Indians from Fort Chip can't shoot a buffalo. It makes sense to you?

ST: I think they had that relief program so they could shoot a buffalo and then they distribute the meat in the mission or in the hospital?

Elder: Ok. Yeah, I'm just asking. To me, it didn't seem right as a Dene . . . You know, how come a white man can shoot a buffalo and the Dene can never really shoot one?

ST: And sometimes they even sold the meat down south too.

Elder: Yes? Oh I didn't know, like I read that, looked at that book, and I was thinking about that. And how come they have the right to shoot a buffalo and we can't? And they have big pictures of them shooting buffalo.

Anonymous ACFN Member (21 March 2021)

I did hear stories that they [harvesters] will lose [have confiscated if they broke the rules] all their trapping stuff, you know? And, what do you call even—like, if they were stopped in their vehicle out in the Park with that, they'd lose their vehicle, their guns, everything. And they'd go to court, and they could go to jail. But I never heard of anyone. Because I was young that time, so I was, I didn't really know.

I did hear stories that they will lose all their trapping stuff, you know. They had to get a license to hunt beaver from the Park in 1912. And that's where some people didn't have license, so they ended up starving. Because they weren't able to hunt in the Park.