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Fanning the Flames of Disaster: The Role Colonialism Plays in the Impact of Wildfire on Indigenous People in Northern Alberta

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Anthropology

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Abstract

This research contributes to the anthropology of disaster, offering an ethnographic account of the impact of wildfire on Indigenous people in northern Alberta. The vulnerability created by remote environmental locations is increased by social, historical, and economic circumstances. Based on ethnographic data including participant observation and interviews collected over 3 months of fieldwork in the summer of 2019, I argue that colonialism, assimilation policies, racism and structural violence increase vulnerability of Indigenous people and communities to the impacts of wildfire. By looking at wildfire situations holistically this study supports arguments for decolonization and other policy changes that would reduce the vulnerability of Indigenous people in remote areas to disasters. There are also lessons learned, that I have detailed about research with Indigenous people that are of value to other prospective researchers.

Keywords

Wildfire, Indigenous people, Alberta, Natural Disaster, Structural Violence, Colonialism, Vulnerability

Summary for Lay Audience

This research is an account of the impact that wildfire has on Indigenous people in northern Alberta. Wildfires are becoming increasingly common in Alberta and pose a risk to many communities situated in the boreal forest. Indigenous communities are at a higher risk due to their remote location in heavily forested areas. In combination with environmental risk, social, historical and economic factors play a role in the increased vulnerability of Indigenous people to wildfire. The data collected for this research was gathered over 3 months in the summer of 2019. I argue that colonialism, policies of assimilation, racism, and structural violence increase the vulnerability of Indigenous people and communities to the impacts of wildfire. I also detail lesson learned that will aid other researchers who wish to conduct research with Indigenous people and communities.

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Chapter 1

1 Introduction

In Alberta's boreal forest there are more and more wildfires each year. The summer of 2019 was the worst wildfire season on record for the province, with 989 fires burning 883,411 hectares (Government of Alberta, 2019). These extreme wildfires are becoming increasingly dangerous and are causing the need to evacuate communities throughout the northern part of the province. Indigenous communities are often at a higher risk of a wildfire because of their remote locations in the boreal forest and therefore they are more commonly evacuated (McGee, Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation, & Christianson, 2019). In addition to environmental risks associated with location, experiences of colonialism, assimilation, racism, and structural violence have contributed to the greater vulnerability and disadvantage of Indigenous people and communities to the impacts of wildfire. Although there is plenty of research from a variety of disciplines that examine the impacts of wildfire, there is a lack of research focused on the impact of wildfire on Indigenous people and communities (Asfaw et al, 2019; Asfaw, Mcgee & Christianson, 2019; McGee, Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation & Christianson, 2019; Christianson, 2015; Scharbach & Waldram, 2016). There is even less focused in the context of Alberta (Christianson, McGee & Whitefish Lake First Nation 459, 2019; Clark, 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2019; Kristensen & Reid, 2016), and minimal research that uses an anthropological lens (Lewis, 1978); my research helps to address this gap. By looking to the past, I trace the history of wildfires in Alberta. I also examine Métis, Cree and settler worldviews that have been reflected in the ways that wildfires have been interpreted and managed. Some of these differences in perspectives of wildfire management have led to the increase of

wildfires and evacuations that we see today. Wildfire evacuations are hard on everyone involved; however, due to a lack of communication, lack of infrastructure, cultural differences, and collective trauma evacuations are experienced differently for some Indigenous people and communities. I conclude by stating the limitations of this research and recommendations for other researchers examining the impact of wildfire situations for Indigenous people and communities. By understanding how wildfires affect Indigenous people, we can better prepare and respond to disaster situations to mitigate the impact of the event on these populations. Disaster response is not a one size fits all and different social, cultural, historical, and economic needs must be taken into account. By looking holistically at the impact of wildfire situations on Indigenous people, I have detailed the ways in which colonialism, assimilation policies, racism and structural violence increase vulnerability of Indigenous people and communities in relation to wildfires.

1.1 Fieldwork Locations

Pictured in Figure 1 is a map of Alberta outlining the different locations of this research. Some interviews were done by phone and are demonstrated by the phone icon on the map; while places I travelled to are signified by the star icon. I have highlighted the two major cities, Calgary and Edmonton. I spent the majority of my research on the Sawridge First Nation reserve in northern Alberta. Sawridge First Nation is located on the edge of the town of Slave Lake and is home to Cree people. From an outsider's perspective, it is hard to tell where the town of Slave Lake ends, and the Sawridge First Nation begins. In fact, from the front window of the house I was staying in, you could see houses in Slave

Lake.



Figure 1. Map of Alberta showing research locations. Source: Adapted from ABC Maps

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the Sawridge First Nation and the town of Slave Lake are in very close proximity demonstrated by a single black star. The First Nation is relatively small compared to the town with 42 members living on reserve and 486 living off reserve (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2020a). There is a substantial number of people living off reserve as a result of the discrepancies between band membership and status Indian registration. A person can hold status but not have band membership and

vice versa, as dictated by Section 10 of the *Indian Act* which gives the band control over band membership (Indian Act, 1985). Sawridge has very strict membership rules which limits the number of people who can become a band member and benefit from a share in the community trusts (Barnsley, 2019; Pimentel, 2019). There are many people who are unable to gain band membership but claim to have deep connections to the Sawridge First Nation.

Sawridge First Nation has two reserves: one that is 906 hectares and another that is 1236 hectares both within 140 km of Edmonton. I stayed on Sawridge 150G which is closest to the town of Slave Lake. Sawridge 150G is the smaller but more populated of the two reserves. The other, larger, reserve Sawridge 150H has a population of 10 people and 4 private dwellings according to 2016 Census (Statistics Canada, 2016a). Sawridge ratified their constitution on August 2009, which was a major demonstration of their right to self-government (Sawridge, 2009). In the constitution it is mandated that the First Nation “defend and protect our lands, waters, resources, air space, rights, and Treaty relationship” (Sawridge, 2009) The constitution also gives legislative jurisdiction over, among other things, the environment and natural resources. This jurisdictional power over the environment and natural resources means that Sawridge has the power to decide how to plan and respond to wildfires on their lands. In addition, the constitution outlines a custom electoral system, which gives more control to the First Nation and is a departure from the electoral system outlined in the *Indian Act* (Sawridge, 2009).

Sawridge First Nation consists mostly of residents’ homes and a few businesses. There is an Administration Office where the council holds meetings. Beside the Office is the Slave Lake Airport. The Airport houses a few of the province’s water bomber planes and

firefighting helicopter equipment and is very busy over the wildfire season. I could hear the rumble of planes and helicopters while on the First Nation. I could often feel the house I was living in shake, as the planes took off and landed. There is a truckstop across the highway from the Administration Office, which has a gas station, a restaurant and a few other small shops like a barber shop and a vape store. Since there are limited services on the First Nation, members of the community acquire most of their goods and services from the town of Slave Lake. Sawridge children also attend school in town, as there is not a school on the reserve. Most of Sawridge First Nation is covered in forest and bush, including areas where oil has been found and has provided great financial opportunities for the First Nation. Other financial opportunities come in the form of business ventures, such as hotels in various places in Alberta. Although I was staying on the reserve, I spent most days in and around Slave Lake, only spending my downtime on the First Nation.

Driving into the town of Slave Lake, the highway is surrounded by forest. Throughout the forested area there are visible signs of wildfire. While much of the area is covered in lush green, there are spots where only the darkened limbs of tree trunks remain indicating that the area had experienced a wildfire. The forest consists of a mix of coniferous and deciduous trees including white birch, jackpine, as well as black and white spruce trees. Little creeks and rivers flow throughout the forested areas. The sky in the summer is usually bright blue with puffy white clouds floating by. The town is relatively small with a population of around 6000 people with around 25 percent of people identifying as Indigenous from various communities and backgrounds (Statistics Canada, 2016b). There are 860 First Nations people, 730 Métis people and 800 status Indians living in Slave Lake (Statistics Canada, 2016b). The town has one main street that holds most of the

stores, restaurants, businesses and the only college. Surrounding the main street are suburbs filled with houses, schools, and churches. On the east side of the town there are a mix of older and newer looking homes, along with some empty plots of land that were never rebuilt after a wildfire in 2011. The rest of the suburbs consist of older looking homes with big yards. There were a few gatherings and parades in the town over the summer which brought people from the smaller outlying communities to town. It seemed like everyone had so many connections in the town as residents walked around greeting each other at the events. The theme of one of the parades was “Slave Lake Strong” a theme that is usually associated with places after a disaster, which speaks to the feelings of resilience experienced by the community, but also acts as a reminder of what residents have gone through. Residents of the town that I met were friendly and welcoming to me.

In addition, I travelled to the hamlet of Wabasca-Desmarais twice during my fieldwork to interview the Bigstone Cree Fire Department and a local public health worker. Wabasca-Desmarais is about an hour's drive north of Slave Lake and is located in the Municipal district (MD) of Opportunity No. 17. The MD has a population of 5400 with 2000 residents of the Bigstone Cree reserves according to the MD of Opportunity No.17 website. The census profile records a population 3120 in the MD, of which 2480 are Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 2016c). There are 2165 First Nations people, 315 Métis, and 2175 status Indians in the MD (Statistics Canada, 2016c). The hamlet of Wabasca-Desmarais has a population of around 3000 people split between Municipal District (MD) of Opportunity No. 17 residents and Bigstone Cree members, according to the MD of Opportunity 17 website. There are five reserve lands belonging to the Bigstone Cree First Nation, with 2157 residents on the four reserves on the edge of Wabasca-Desmarais.

Bigstone Cree Nation is a large First Nation with 8349 registered members and 3221 of them living on Bigstone Cree First Nation reserve land. There are 4774 Bigstone members living off reserve (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2020b). I was told many Bigstone members live off reserve in the MD or in larger cities like Edmonton as there are more job opportunities and usually better living conditions.

The drive to Wabasca-Desmarais looks similar to the drive to Slave Lake from Edmonton. When I drove up to the community, I drove through an area that has recently experienced a large wildfire. Places were smoldering, but there was also a blanket of lush green grass that had grown in the two weeks since the fire had started. There were also scattered patches of forest untouched by flames along the highway. Driving into the hamlet I passed houses in varying condition. Some well-kept and other with broken down cars and other rusted items scattered in the yard. The hamlet has plenty of outdoor recreational activities such as outdoor rinks, skate parks, a pool, in addition to the ample places for water activities such as fishing, kayaking, swimming. There are limited shops within the community with a few stores, restaurants, and hotels. There are government services such as a courthouse, two fire departments, and public health services such as a hospital. Bigstone Cree First Nation is well set up to service most needs of the community members.

In addition to in-person interviews, I held phone and Facetime interviews with residents from locations that I could not physically travel to. I held a Facetime interview with a resident from Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement who is Cree and married into the Settlement. This participant was recruited through a post online on the Alberta Wildfire and Flood Support Group Facebook page. Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement is located in

the north-west area of the province around 466 km from Slave Lake and situated near the town of High Level. The settlement has a population of 540, with 440 people identified as Métis, 40 First Nations and 100 status Indians (Statistic Canada, 2016d). I also held a phone interview with a man from around the Rocky Lane area, who is from the Beaver First Nation, which is also located in the North-Western part of the province. I was put in contact with the man because of his extensive knowledge of wildland fire fighting. A large wildfire impacted both Paddle Prairie and Rocky Lane during my fieldwork.

1.2 Participants

When I started my Master's program, I knew I wanted to research the impact of natural disasters. I also had an interest in researching the impact of natural disasters specifically on Indigenous people. As a result of my interest in the impact of natural disasters on Indigenous people, I received a research grant from the Northern Tornadoes Project (NTP) at Western to fund my field work. NTP examines the effects of severe weather on built structures within the Canadian context. NTP is an interdisciplinary project that works in collaboration with the Meteorological Research Division of Environment and Climate Change Canada. Adding a human dimension to the project, I was invited by lead investigator, Dr. Greg Kopp, to conduct research exploring Indigenous perspectives on disasters resulting from severe weather. There were three terms of agreement for acceptance of this grant; my research had to focus on natural hazards, my research had to be in Canada, and finally, I was to focus on Indigenous perspectives. It soon became apparent that finding a community to work with was not as simple as I naively assumed. I had no prior connections in any Indigenous communities, which made it hard to find a willing community to conduct fieldwork. After months of contacting different First

Nations who had recently faced a natural disaster and speaking with professors who currently had connections with different Indigenous communities. I made contact with a member of the Sawridge First Nation through a family friend. After a conversation on the phone with this member it was decided that I would spend the duration of my fieldwork staying on the First Nation in the resident's house. I made a weeklong introductory trip to Slave Lake in April of 2019. I went to the house where I would stay for the summer and meet with some contacts. I was put in contact with another Sawridge member, Cheryl, by the Sawridge member whose house I was staying in. During our meeting Cheryl and her niece agreed to arrange meetings with other members of the First Nation for my project. We discussed their experiences of the fire in 2011. Unfortunately, when I returned for the summer Cheryl had become ill and was unable to introduce me to other residents.

I returned to Slave Lake for 12 weeks from May to August 2019. In my second week of fieldwork, I was put in touch with the director of the Slave Lake Native Friendship Centre (SLNFC), Barb. The Friendship Centre deliver services to urban Indigenous people and are funded in part by the federal and provincial government (Anfca, 2020). On May 21, 2019, I went into the Friendship Centre to meet with Barb and interview her about her experiences dealing with the impact of wildfires. It just so happened that on May 21, the community of High Level, a town in northern Alberta, was being evacuated to Slave Lake due to threats of a wildfire. When I went in to speak with Barb, she was in high gear, getting ready to open the food bank that is held in the Friendship Centre to evacuees from High level. It was evident that instead of talking, I should be helping, so I offered a hand in whatever was needed of me. The SLNFC is a larger building that holds the Food Bank, a hall that is available to rent, a large kitchen to cater events, a small

secondhand store, and a few office spaces. There is a long hallway that separates the Food Bank from the secondhand store. When I arrived at the SLNFC, at around 4 pm, I walked the long hallway with Barb to the Food Bank. When we walked into the Food Bank the space was fairly empty, however, over the course of the night more and more goods were delivered, and the space was filling up fast. I spent the night setting up rows of food and drinks to hand out to evacuees. During the evening, an ambulance full of donations arrived, as they opened the back door of the ambulance food came tumbling out; it was full to the top. Pictured below in Figure 2, is an example of the goods donated that night. There was a variety of goods, such as fruits, vegetables, non-perishables, and water. I took the picture in Figure 2 the first night of the High Level evacuation. As time went on the Food Bank was soon very full of donations for the evacuees and became much more organized.



Figure 2. Friendship Centre Donations. Source: Alana Kehoe

May 21 was a hectic day in Slave Lake as the town was preparing to welcome evacuees. There were TV news crews placed around the city, with news reporters recording stories of the evacuation. This situation was very familiar for residents of Slave Lake who had lived through the 2011 wildfire evacuations. Although this situation was extremely unfortunate and stressful for many residents of both Slave Lake and High Level, it gave me a chance to experience firsthand some of what happens during an evacuation. The many evacuations and wildfires over the summer of 2019 allowed me to expand my research to incorporate people from different communities in the area of Northern Alberta.

I returned to the SLNFC every day for the next two weeks and volunteered 10-hour days in the Food Bank, helping to hand out food to the evacuees, organize goods, and record information from people accessing services for the Centre's records. I also spent time speaking with evacuees and other volunteers about their experiences. Over these two weeks, I met many people and was able to recruit participants. I continued to volunteer at the SLNFC for the duration of my fieldwork interacting with the many wonderful volunteers and staff and helping in the second-hand store.

I also used online social media groups like the "Slave Lake and Area Community Discussion" page and the "Alberta Wildfire and Flood Support Group" on Facebook to recruit participants and spread the word of my research. A local newspaper reporter saw the post about my research and asked to do a news story about my research in the newspaper, which included my information and encouraged people to participate in my study.

In addition, I called the Wildfire Information Officer for the area, Leah, and requested an interview. During that interview I was provided with the contact of a person who works for FireSmart Canada, an organization which informs people about the dangers of wildfire and ways to decrease their risk. I also contacted a few fire departments in areas affected by wildfire through their Facebook pages and was able to set up a group interview with firefighters from the Bigstone Cree Fire department.

1.3 Research Question

When I set out to conduct this research, I had a few research questions in mind. I wanted to understand how Indigenous people in and around Slave Lake were impacted by the 2011 wildfire and how to improve future wildfire situations for Indigenous people in the area. My original questions were:

1. What are the experiences of Indigenous residents who were affected by the 2011 wildfires around Slave Lake? How do Indigenous individuals in the area understand and conceptualize natural disasters?
2. Do Indigenous participants feel their identity as Indigenous influenced their vulnerability to the disaster?
3. Do Indigenous participants feel their needs were different than non-Indigenous residents? If so, how can disaster response protocols better incorporate Indigenous people's needs and become more culturally appropriate?
4. What were the operative relations between groups (Indigenous residents and emergency management officials) throughout the stages of recovery and response?

However, as I began my research there were many wildfires in the area and I was able to interview people from many different backgrounds and communities. As a result of my interviews and my analysis of the data I came to understand that there was a common thread throughout. This thread often brought me back to the impact of colonialism and structural violence on Indigenous people and communities in relation to wildfires. I

tailored my research question to be more specific of the data that I had gathered and ended up with this question to guide my research:

- How does colonialism and structural violence shape Indigenous people's experience of wildfire in northern Alberta

My research aims to explore the impact of colonialism and structural violence on Indigenous people in northern Alberta. However, due to the scope of my research and interviews I am not able to fully answer my research question, but rather I have added to the discussion of the impact of wildfire on Indigenous people in northern Alberta.

1.4 Ethics

I obtained ethics approval from the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board at the University of Western Ontario (see Appendix A). This process required that I provide a detailed account of my plans to carry out research, including the study description, recruitment process, consent and withdrawal process, risks, benefits, compensation, funding, and any conflict of interest that might come up. My application went through several revisions until approved by the board. This process ensures that my research adheres to the ethical standards laid out by the university; however, this process did not ensure that my research was to the ethical standards of the First Nations that participants are members of. In hindsight, a wise practice would have been to consult the First Nations to better understand their ethical processes, if they have one laid out for research. Upon completion of this research I searched for any local Indigenous ethics protocols that I should have consulted and was unable to find any; however, that is not to say that none

exist. Had I been in contact with local officials at the time of my research, they may have suggested or required I obtain approval for this study from the appropriate authorities.

All participants were informed of my study and agreed to participate through written consent forms, which detailed their position in the study, their rights, and risks to participation. All participants were given the ability to withdraw from the study at any point during the research. To withdraw participants had to contact me with their intent to withdraw and all the information they provided would be destroyed. My ethics approval, letter of information and consent form, and my interview guide have been attached in the appendices (See Appendix A, B, C).

1.5 Methods

I used ethnographic methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews during my fieldwork. Anthony Oliver-Smith (2016) states that "ethnographic methods are extremely effective in capturing the processual dimensions of disaster risk construction, vulnerability, disaster events, and post-disaster processes of recovery" (76). Ethnographic methods allowed me to explore the impacts of wildfires on a deeper and more personal level than quantitative and survey-based work would allow. The immersive nature of ethnographic research allows for the exploration of multidimensional social, political and economic issues rather than just the biophysical impacts of a natural disaster. Ethnographic research also allowed me to examine the temporal aspect of a disaster. Often disasters are considered to be an event, but it is the events leading up to and after the natural hazard that truly constitute a disaster. Ethnography allows for examination of the full scope of a disaster.

The majority of my fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews with various Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals who had been impacted by wildfire. My research participants included both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals to allow for a better understanding of any of the differences between these groups. I conducted 16 interviews with a total of 27 individuals. Out of these individuals, 20 people identified as Indigenous and 7 identified as non-Indigenous. The majority of Indigenous people that participated were of First Nation descent, with only two identifying as Métis. The majority of First Nations people were Cree, from various First Nations such as Sawridge First Nation, Peerless Trout First Nation, and Bigstone Cree First Nation while only one participant identified as Beaver. Out of the Indigenous participants 5 individuals lived in an urban environment, 14 lived on reserve land, and 1 person lived on a Métis settlement. The participants consisted of 16 women and 11 men. Most of the participants were 40 years or older. A large portion of the fire fighters from the Bigstone Cree Fire department were 18-20 years old and were the youngest participants interviewed.

Bigstone Cree Fire Department in Wabasca-Desmarais is a volunteer-based fire department which has received funding from the federal government (Government of Canada, 2012). The members I interviewed were Cree and lived either on the reserves surrounding Wabasca-Desmarais or in the hamlet. The fire station was built after a historic land claim settlement in 2010. The settlement concluded with the creation of a new First Nation, Peerless Trout First Nation, which used to be a part of the Bigstone First Nation. The settlement involved 231 million dollars from the federal government, 140,000 acres of provincial land, and funding for infrastructure provided by the federal government for each five communities involved (Government of Canada, 2012).

Interviews focused on the experience of evacuations, the process of returning home, the experience of being away from home for an extended period, and what could improve wildfire situations. For each interview, I had a few key questions, outlined in the interview guide (see Appendix C), that I asked everyone, followed by a few questions tailored to each individual. I allowed the interviews to follow the flow of a normal conversation. Most interviews took place at the participant's work or in their home. I recorded interviews when appropriate and when consent was provided.

In addition to interviews, I conducted participant observation. I went to community events, such as a parade, a dance, community fair, and Indigenous day celebrations. Many of the smaller communities around Slave Lake attend these events, so I was able to interact with a variety of individuals. I spent a lot of time talking to people about wildfire during my volunteer hours at the SLNFC. Considering the high number of wildfires in the summer of 2019, there was a lot of talk around town about people's experiences with wildfire. I was able to collect a lot of data from casual conversations and interactions with people in the field.

After my fieldwork, I transcribed interviews. I then coded my transcribed interviews using NVivo qualitative analysis software. I used NVivo to organize the transcripts and other documents collected. I tagged parts of these documents so that I could easily find them and group them to be studied together. I carried out a content analysis, comparing how various people answered the same questions and searched for patterns of how the pieces fit together. Finally, I put my data into a program called XMind, that allows for virtual mind maps, which helped me to conceptualize relationships between certain factors and helped me to organize the data into chapters.

1.6 Positionality

No matter who we are, our research is reflective of our own biases and our own positionality (Bourke, 2014). There are numerous ways in which my position as a white, female settler, who is also an Albertan has played a role in the process and outcome of my research. Although these factors often work in combination with each other, it is easier to think about how they impact my research by separating them.

First being a white settler, researching Indigenous issues has taught me many things about the impact of positionality on research. I often question my place as a settler and how this is reflected in my research. As a white settler, I have no right to speak for Indigenous people. I have tried to ensure that my work best reflects the voices of my participants by using direct quotes when possible. I have tried to convey the messages I heard in a respectful manner and I have tried to ensure that my work is reflective of my participants' experience by using direct quotes. Being a settler means that I may not have gained trust from some of my participants the same ways that an insider may have.

Throughout my research, I tried to be aware that as a non-Indigenous person, some people might perceive me as reflective of the many researchers who have done harm to Indigenous people and communities through research (Smith, 2013). At times, I felt unsure about what would be considered appropriate questions to ask Indigenous participants. For example, sometimes I did not ask certain questions about race, ceremony and cultural tradition. Although some participants may not have felt that it would be inappropriate to ask these types of questions, I never wanted to overstep boundaries or make participants uncomfortable. Not asking these sorts of questions may have limited the data that I collected. However, I feel I learned a lot about how my

position as a white settler played a role in every decision I made during the research and writing of this thesis. I have also learned areas for improvement, which I will describe in more detail in Chapter 5.

As a woman, I found that I interviewed more women than men. After a few uncomfortable encounters early in my fieldwork, I no longer felt comfortable interviewing men in a one on one situation, so I opted for group interviews or phone interviews. I may have limited myself in this aspect. I found women to be more receptive of my presence and more willing to participate in the research. Most of the men involved in the research were firefighters, or in positions of authority. As a result, most of the information collected is more reflective of a female voice and that is something that must be into account when interpreting my findings.

Finally, as an Albertan, I found that I was able to connect to people on a personal level about past experiences of wildfire in the province. My personal connections to wildfire is one of the main reasons for conducting this research. This personal connection allowed me to relate to others and build rapport, which is a critical step in building trust between researcher and participants. Additionally, I was able to easily understand events and places in Alberta that my participants reference, perhaps more than someone who did not grow up in the area.

I am an outsider to the communities and people I interacted with, which meant I had to build relationships from the ground up. It takes time to build a relationship of trust. I was limited in my ability to build these relationships because I was only in the field for a short period of time. On the one hand, as an outsider I may have been limited in what people

told me. While on the other hand, some participants may have felt at ease talking about community issues with an outsider because I would not be in the community past my fieldwork and therefore, they may have felt repercussions within the community would be lessened. Thus, being an outsider can be both a disadvantage and an advantage depending on the participant and their comfort with outsiders.

These are just some of the ways in which my positionality played a role in my research. I would like to note that there are other ways my positionality may have impacted my research, ways I may not have recognized.

1.7 Terminology

I refer to specific evacuations and wildfires by the largest towns they are associated with. I have found it easier for readers to associate a fire with a geographical location, and therefore I refer to the fire that impacted Slave Lake and area as the Slave Lake wildfire. Wildfires are given names by Alberta Forestry, the government agency in control of management of Alberta's forested area. For example, the wildfire that went through Slave Lake was called the Flattop Complex. The fire that caused the evacuation of Wabasca during my fieldwork is called the McMillian Complex. I want to emphasize that although I refer to these fires using a single geographical location, these fires often impacted more than one town or location. For example, the Slave Lake wildfire caused the evacuation of Slave Lake and the Saw Ridge First Nation. I do not wish to erase the experiences of anyone that was impacted by wildfire, but rather, I use this terminology with the mindset that the reader will be able to associate each fire with a broader geographical location than the geographic location I use in the title.

It is important to acknowledge the diverse groups of people that are categorized under the term Indigenous. In Canada, Indigenous refers to three groups of people. First Nations people, Métis people, and Inuit people. While speaking about Indigenous people, I aim not to essentialize any group's experience. Indigenous people come from a large and very diverse population and have many unique experiences. In Alberta there are many Indigenous groups, as the province is covered by three different treaty areas. The Northern portion of the province, the area in which my research takes place, is Treaty 8 territory. Treaty 8 is home to 24 First Nations in Alberta, which includes Cree and Dene peoples (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010). There are three Métis Settlements located in the northern area of the province (Government of Alberta, 2020). The Census does not divide Alberta into sections; thus, it does not provide data on the number of Aboriginal people residing in northern Alberta. The total number of Aboriginal people in Alberta, according to the 2016 census is 258,640. Out of this group 135,585 are First Nations and 114,370 are Métis. There are 123,235 status Indians in the province (Statistics Canada, 2016e).

There are a few terms related to Indigenous people that are important to understand. Some of these terms are legally recognized while others are not.

Indigenous “is a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants” and includes First Nations, Métis and Inuit (Government of Canada, 2017). Indigenous is sometimes interchangeable with the term Aboriginal. I use the term Indigenous throughout this thesis when I am not referring to legislation or historical acts that use the term Aboriginal or Indian. According to the *Constitution Acts of 1867 and 1982*, Aboriginal peoples of Canada includes Indian, Inuit, and Métis people of Canada.

The *Indian Act* defines Indian as “a person who pursuant to this Act is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian” (Government of Canada, 2020a). Indian refers exclusively to First Nation people; there are status Indians and non-status Indians. Status Indians are people who are “registered as an Indian under the Indian Act” (Government of Canada, 2020a). Status Indians are eligible for benefits and services (Government of Canada, 2020a), which will be outlined in the next chapter. A non-status Indian is a First Nations person who does not qualify for registration of Indian status under the *Indian Act* (Government of Canada, 2020a). Indian, status or non, refers directly to First Nation people. First Nation people are neither Métis nor Inuit people. First Nation is a general term which encompasses a number of different distinct groups in Canada. For example, Sawridge First Nation, Bigstone Cree First Nation, and the Beaver First Nation are all different and distinct Nations. When possible, it is best to use the name of First Nation a participant is affiliated with rather than use the general term, as First Nation people come from very diverse groups with different traditions and cultures. I have tried to refer to the name of the First Nation a person is associated with throughout the thesis. The Métis “emerged as a distinct Indigenous people and nation in the historic northwest during the late 18th century” (Métis Nation, 2020). The Métis are the “mixed offspring of Indian women and European fur traders” (Métis Nation, 2020). The Métis people have their own distinct culture, traditions, and language. There is a large number of Métis in Alberta, however only two participants identified as Métis. Thus, my research is not representative of the Métis people in the area. The Inuit “are the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic” (Government of Canada, 2019). The Métis and Inuit are not covered by the Indian Act. No Inuit people participated in this research.

There are many differing definitions of northern Alberta. I use the definition outlined by the Northern Alberta Development Council (2017), which states that the region covers around 60% of Alberta's landscape. Ranging from the northern border with the Northwest Territories, eastern border with Saskatchewan, western border with British Columbia, and as far south as the Lesser Slave River region. Although northern Alberta covers much of the province's landscape it is home to a relatively small population of people when compared to the southern part of the province (Northern Alberta Development Council, 2017). I also was not able to cover all the Indigenous groups in northern Alberta; thus, my study does not represent the impact of wildfire on all Indigenous people in northern Alberta, but rather is reflective of the people I interacted with, mainly Cree people.

To protect the identity of some participants, I have used pseudonyms. For some participants, I am unable to use a pseudonym as they have positions in the community that identify them. I have asked all participants their preference when it comes to using their name. In places where a name is not necessary, I have referred to people as "participants" or "interviewees."

1.8 Theoretical Approach

In this research, I draw on three bodies of literature to better understand Indigenous experiences of wildfire: anthropology of disaster, vulnerability and structural violence.

1.8.1 Anthropology of Disaster

The anthropology of disaster literature focuses on how humans conceptualize disaster situations. The term natural disaster is often equated with natural hazards. A natural

hazard is the effects of extreme weather, such as fire, flood, hurricane, tornadoes, earthquakes (Aksha, Juran & Resler, 2017); whereas, natural disasters are the effects that the hazard has on a population. The root causes of disaster are social (Barrios, 2017). Disasters are the interactions of a natural hazard with a population of people who are in a socially or economically vulnerable position (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith, 2002). A natural hazard can occur without a disaster following as long as the people are prepared and have access to the resources and the infrastructure needed to cope with the hazard; this distinction is essential if we are to understand how disasters are socially constructed events that take place due to a natural hazard. To put it simply, natural disasters are not natural. Human reaction to a natural hazard can often be more detrimental than the effects of nature itself.

1.8.2 Vulnerability

In the anthropology of disaster literature, the concept of vulnerability has been used to explain why some populations experience natural hazards more negatively than others. Zakour and Gillespie (2013) state that "disaster vulnerability theory seeks to explain the susceptibility of individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and countries to losses from disaster" (17). More vulnerable populations are said to be less resilient and at a higher risk. Risk is defined as "the combination of the factors that determine the potential for people to be exposed to particular types of natural hazard" (Blaikie et al., 2004, 7). Resilience is defined as the ability to survive disaster situations with minimum damage and impact (Barrios, 2016). Risk is measured before the hazard and resilience is measured after. There is currently a lot of research being done to decrease risk and vulnerability and increase the resilience of Indigenous communities to natural hazards

around the world (Cadag & Galliard, 2012; Clark, 2018; Hilhorst et al., 2015; Howitt, Havnen & Veland, 2012; Lambert, 2014; Lauer, 2012; Ruiz-Mallén & Corbera, 2013). Much of this research demonstrates how the incorporation of traditional knowledge in disaster preparation and response can be beneficial for recovery and decrease vulnerability (Cadag & Galliard, 2012; Lambert, 2014; Lauer, 2012; Ruiz-Mallén & Corbera, 2013). Others detail how important communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders is in both response and recovery during a disaster (Clark, 2018; Howitt, Havnen & Veland, 2012). However, little of this research is focused in a Canadian context and even fewer studies are focused on Indigenous people in Alberta (Christianson, Mcgee & Whitefish Lake First Nation 459, 2019; Clark, 2018). My research helps to address this gap.

Theories of vulnerability emerged out of observed differences in recovery and reconstruction. Countries and communities with a higher economic status were able to recover better than those with a lower economic status. The same natural hazards did not have the same responses in recovery; it was perceived that the 'developed' countries fared better and recovered quicker than the 'developing' countries (Faas, 2016; Zakour & Gillespie, 2013). Thus, vulnerability is the product of "access to economic, political, social, environmental, and geographical assets" (Pelling & Uitto, 2001, 51). Populations that are deemed more vulnerable are the populations with unequal access to the previously mentioned assets. Indigenous populations are categorized as vulnerable populations in Canada due to the unequal access to resources they experience (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2009; Howitt, Haven, & Veland, 2012). As I will show, the

vulnerability they experience is directly related to structural violence, racism, assimilation policies and colonization.

Faas (2016) suggests that the concept of vulnerability has influenced disaster research in three ways. First, the concept has altered the way that social scientists view disasters as natural and unavoidable. Essentially the concept has enabled scientists to analyze the human element involved in disasters. Second, the previously held views that disasters are temporary situations or events have been challenged; social, economic, and political histories affect the severity of the disaster. Finally, vulnerability politicizes disaster because it demonstrates that unequal relations of power place certain disadvantaged groups at a higher risk (Faas, 2016). The fact that Indigenous communities are often in the most vulnerable positions to wildfire is a direct demonstration of unequal power relations and structural violence.

Theories of vulnerability have had an impact on ways that disasters are perceived. However, the conception of vulnerability has held various meanings. Vulnerability has been conceptualized as the increased risk as a relation to proximity to hazard; however, this conceptualization does not account for differences in effects within similar proximities (Faas, 2016). If a person lives close to a volcano, then, in theory, they are said to be more vulnerable to the hazard; however, this way of looking at vulnerability does not consider the social situations that place people in more vulnerable positions. Another way vulnerability has been theorized is by looking at how social structures and histories create vulnerability in specific populations (Faas, 2016); however, this conceptualization does not account for the entanglement of humans and the environment or how the environment plays a role in increasing vulnerability. By looking at the policies

and acts related to Indigenous relations put in place by the Canadian government, detailed in Chapter 2, it is clear how these social structures have created increased vulnerability for Indigenous people in Canada.

Oliver-Smith (1999) uses political ecology to conceptualize the interactions between the environment and social, political and economic aspects of human life. Oliver-Smith (1999) states that "A political ecology perspective on disasters focuses on the dynamic relationships between a human population, its socially generated and politically enforced productive and allocatable patterns, and its physical environment" (189). When both the increased vulnerability caused by social determinants and by proximity to natural hazards are considered, it allows for a more holistic understanding of vulnerability in relation to disaster. Oliver-Smith's (1999) conceptualization of vulnerability has now become the most prominent in disaster anthropology. By looking at how colonialism helped to push Indigenous people into isolated communities in heavily forested areas and the restrictions on the use of traditional fire prevention techniques, such as prescribed burning, it becomes clear how vulnerability is increased for these communities.

1.8.3 Structural violence

Structural violence was first theorized by sociologist Johan Galtung (1969). Structural violence has been widely studied throughout anthropological research concerning a variety of topics, such as health, poverty, recovery, power, racism, and disaster recovery. Structural violence is "the indirect violence built into repressive social orders creating enormous differences between potential and actual human self-realization (Galtung, 1975, 173). Structural violence "erases the history and consciousness of the social origins of poverty, sickness, hunger, and premature death so that they are simply taken for

granted and naturalized so that no one is held accountable” (Scheper-Hughes, 2004, 14). Structural violence is the reproduction of power and the consistent oppressing of the disadvantaged. Structural violence is often the result of racism, political violence, prejudices, inequalities, and oppression (Farmer, 1999). Both Galtung and Farmer have theorized structural violence in relation to health disparities and how disadvantaged populations see higher rates of preventable and treatable diseases. A central component of this theory is that societal structures allow for harmful or negative situations, such as high rates of death related to treatable diseases, that are otherwise avoidable (Hirschfeld, 2017). Curable diseases can be cured, risk can be reduced, yet society functions in such a way that increases harm to the oppressed and facilitates the disadvantages of certain groups.

In relation to natural disaster theories of structural violence have been used to demonstrate why some populations are worse off than others after a natural hazard. For example, Hurricane Katrina was one of the largest disasters of the early 2000s in the United States which demonstrated how specific populations were more affected by the hurricane than others. Although the disaster affected both affluent and poor neighbourhoods, the most impoverished neighbourhoods were the hardest hit and the least able to recover (Simmons & Casper, 2012). Simmons and Casper (2012) argue that Hurricane Katrina rendered visible the social disparities largely felt by African-American populations in New Orleans, as is often the case in disaster situations. African-American populations in New Orleans were and continue to be disproportionately poor and disadvantaged when compared to white counterparts, which was visually represented by the ratios of black people living in temporary shelters or on the streets seeking assistance

post-hurricane, compared to white people (Huddy & Feldman, 2006). After the hurricane, discriminatory practices became abundantly clear through processes of recovery and reconstruction (Voigt & Thornton, 2015). The rich were able to rebuild shortly after, while the poor and disadvantaged remained in a state of crisis. This example represents how a natural hazard does not affect everyone in the same way.

In relation to the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire, which caused the evacuation of over 80,000 people and destroyed over 6000 structures. Indigenous communities near Fort McMurray were not included in the formation of disaster response policies, and there was a lack of communication between the Alberta provincial government and the First Nations governments, especially during the evacuation (Clark, 2018). Clark (2018) states “ The wildfire revealed the depth of this institutional disconnect, which manifested in low level of preparedness, weak coordination and cooperation, major communications breakdowns, and critical capacity deficits across all responsible authorities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in all phases of disaster management” (2). The lack of communication resulted in increased risk and vulnerability for these communities. Fort McKay First Nation, which is situated north of Fort McMurray hosted around 5000 evacuees before being placed under their own evacuation orders. Residents from the nations said they were unprepared and were left out of decision-making processes. As stated above, the low level of preparedness, lack of communication, and disconnect between Indigenous and provincial government could have been avoided, and thus can be seen as a form structural violence that excluded Indigenous peoples from policymaking. The structures of the Alberta government work in favour of the majority of the population and facilitate the exclusion of minority groups like these First Nations (Clark, 2018).

Throughout this thesis, I examine the historical and social contexts that have caused a lack of communication and exacerbated the inequalities experienced during an evacuation period. Structural violence can also work to increase vulnerability to natural disasters, so my theoretical approach considers these concepts in relation to each other.

1.9 Structure of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I outline different colonial policies that have worked to oppress and assimilate Indigenous people throughout the last century. This chapter informs the reader of Indigenous-settler relations throughout Canadian history which impact the experience of wildfire evacuations today. These historical policies and procedures dictate how wildfires are fought and wildfire management is funded in First Nation and Métis communities. This chapter outlines the foundations of structural violence against Indigenous people that have promoted racist settler attitudes and increased vulnerability of Indigenous people in Canada.

In Chapter 3, I review what a wildfire is and describe how they are stronger and travel differently today than from in the past—followed by a brief history of wildfire in Alberta. I then describe how Indigenous people once used fire to cultivate the land by prescribed burning. I compare differing worldviews that have helped to shape the response to wildfire and prescribed burning. I examine how colonial governments have worked to suppress the practice of prescribed burning, which has increased the amount of fine fuel left on the landscape allowing wildfires to spread rapidly. I detail how regulations put in place for wildland firefighters have, in effect, limited the number of Indigenous wildland firefighters. Overall, this chapter examines how policies and regulations placed by both federal and provincial governments have worked to control Indigenous people and

disregard traditional knowledge, which has increased their vulnerability to wildfires in numerous ways.

In Chapter 4, I examine the impact of evacuations on Indigenous people. I use my own experience of evacuation to inform my understanding wildfire evacuations. I examine how structural violence and methods of evacuation may increase vulnerability experienced by Indigenous evacuees. I detail the effects of displacement caused by wildfire evacuations and how a history of collective trauma experienced by Indigenous people and communities impacts experiences of evacuation today. In addition, I examine how a history of paternalistic attitudes toward Indigenous people relate to the experience of being in need during an evacuation.

In this Chapter 5, I summarize my findings and give directions for future research. I also describe the limitations to my research.

Chapter 2

2 Historical Indigenous-Settler Relations as context for Emergency Management

In this chapter, I aim to provide an overview of the legislative and jurisdictional policies and procedures related to the colonization of Indigenous people in Canada, specifically First Nation and Métis peoples. It is important to understand the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the governments of Canada, as outlined by historical procedures. The colonial procedures of land acquirement play a large role in how emergency management is funded and carried out today. By looking at a history of federal policies affecting Indigenous people, we can better understand how structural violence under colonialism works to shape Indigenous people's experiences of emergency management and wildfire evacuations. I detail the federal and provincial funding in relation to emergency management in Indigenous communities in Alberta. I also examine the logistics of fire management between jurisdictions on federal and provincial land. The way that wildfires are managed today on Indigenous lands is a direct result of colonial policies, but to understand this we must first detail some of the colonial procedures and policies which have shaped relations between the governments of Canada and Indigenous people today.

2.1 Indigenous-Settler Relations Today. "Why them?"

After a week of cold calling businesses to try to establish more contacts, I decided to go to the local hotspot for lunch in hopes that some face to face contact might work best. I sat down at the bar in the restaurant and ordered myself some lunch while silently

watching the locals greet each other as they walked through the door. It was undeniable that I was in a small town, as everyone had some sort of connection to each other it seemed. As I waited for lunch, I sat looking up where I could try to go next. I planned to go to the college and see about their forestry program.

As my lunch arrived, so did a man, Adam. Adam approached the bar, joking that I stole his seat. I joked back that this was now my chair and he'll just have to find a new place. He sat down beside me and began to question what I was doing in Slave Lake, as though it was apparent that I wasn't from there. While Adam was chatting with me, our conversation was frequently interrupted as he greeted other people who had just arrived at the restaurant. Adam was quite outgoing and friendly, talking to almost all of the people around him. I thought to myself that this man seems like a good contact to have and a great way to introduce myself to more people. Adam was very interested in what I was doing in Slave Lake. I told him of my intentions and my plans to carry out research. After a brief introduction to my research, Adam informed me that he knew some people involved in firefighting and he could put me in touch with them. I thought I struck gold after a hard week adjusting to my new environment and some contacts no longer being available, I was wondering if I would ever meet anyone.

I spent the rest of the afternoon with the Adam talking about my schooling, while he introduced me to other patrons at the restaurant as they passed by. After a while, Adam began asking "why Indigenous people". I tried to explain the problems and issues that wildfire situations bring to Indigenous people and communities; however, he didn't seem to think my research should be focused on Indigenous issues. Adam introduced me to a white woman who had lost her house in the 2011 Slave Lake wildfire. The introduction

was followed by him questioning why Indigenous people over this woman, who is “hard-working”. It was clear that Adam thought this woman, who was white, was more deserving of my attention. Also, by accentuating the term “hard-working,” he was suggesting that Indigenous people were not as hard-working.

As I was about to leave, a man, who was visibly Indigenous, was walking by the window, and that’s when Adam went off. He asked me why I would choose to research people like him, pointing to the man, when I could research hard-working and deserving individuals. He questioned why the government would fund my research on Indigenous people; although I had never said anything about funding, he assumed that it was the Liberal government that funded me, and that made him angry. I quickly found the exit and left, realizing that there may be some unanticipated problems with racial relations in my research topic. I relate this story as a way to illustrate how the relationship between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people can be rooted within racist ideologies of Indigenous people in Slave Lake and the surrounding areas of Alberta.

Adam’s opinions are certainly not held by everyone in the community, but it is not an opinion exclusive to him. The relationship that Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people have is formed by a long and ongoing history of colonialism and the domination and assimilation that has created the structural violence experienced by Indigenous groups throughout Canada.

2.2 History of Colonization of Indigenous People in Canada

Indigenous people in Canada have faced and continue to face oppression and violence, both physical and structural as a result of colonization (TRC, 2015). According to the

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), a commission created to detail the experiences and impacts of residential schooling on Indigenous people, “For over a century, the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties and, through the process of assimilations cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious and racial entities in Canada” (1). The policies and laws regarding Indigenous people in Canada have worked toward the appropriation of the lands. Assimilation and cultural genocide of Indigenous people have been the goals of settlers since colonization began.

When European colonizers first arrived on the eastern shores of what is now called Canada, they encountered the many Indigenous peoples that lived on the land in organized societies. Upon arrival, Indigenous people helped the settlers by teaching them about local foods and guiding them around the land (Leslie, 2002). The settlers brought with them new materials as well as foreign diseases. These diseases killed many Indigenous people, and it is suspected that over half of the Indigenous people who once inhabited the land died due to the diseases introduced by settlers (Borrows, 1994; Poelzer & Coates, 2015).

The British and French were competing to claim land in North America in the 1700’s. The Europeans and Indigenous peoples often battled, and many lost their lives over claims to land (Borrows, 1994). First Nations acted as allies to both the British and the French. The Iroquois, Huron, Ojibwa, and Mohawk allied with the British, while the Abenaki joined the French (Ray, 2016). These alliances and relationships were ever evolving throughout the years (Ray, 2016). It was clear to both the French and the British

that the First Nations possessed both economic and military power and would not be conquered through force (Borrows, 1994). Both the French and the British wanted to maintain good relations with the First Nation people as they understood this to be beneficial for their own longevity in North America. After the Seven Year War constitutional relations were “further developed through Articles of Capitulation” in 1760 (Borrows, 1994, 14). Article 40 was the first demonstration by both the French and the British to recognize that First Nations were “autonomous and independent” (Borrows, 1994, 14).

Although Article 40 was a recognition of independence and sovereignty of First Nations, the battles for land still continued with the European settlement expanding throughout North America (Borrows, 1994). Thus, after approximately 200 years of contact in 1763, King George III put forth the Royal Proclamation to alleviate conflict over land (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2009; Borrows, 1994; Leslie, 2002; Makokis, 2001; Miller, 2009; Ray, 2016). The Royal Proclamation outlined the recognition of “Indian title to lands, the right to self-governance on those lands, and it specified the procedure by which the British government could negotiate treaties” (Makokis, 2001, 17). This proclamation stated that Indigenous people owned the land that they occupied and that in order to colonize, the Crown must purchase the land which could then be sold to settlers (Leslie, 2002; Miller, 2009). Although this document seemed to be in favour of First Nations by the recognition of Aboriginal rights, it outlined the process through which to extinguish their rights to their traditional territory (Borrows, 1994; Miller, 2009). The Royal Proclamation allowed the Crown to slowly purchase most of the territory of what is now Canada (Leslie, 2002). As John Borrows (1994) states, “the Proclamation

illustrates the British government's attempt to exercise sovereignty over First Nations while simultaneously trying to convince First Nations that they would remain separate from European settlers and have their Jurisdiction preserved" (19). Thus, although the Proclamation seemed to be a resolution to the fighting for both parties, it acted as a way to ensure that the British were able to continue to acquire territory and jurisdiction while leading First Nations to believe they would remain separate (Miller, 2009). The Royal Proclamation was not created with the input of First Nation people (Borrows, 1994; Makokis, 2001), despite serving as a basis for the treaty making process throughout Canada (Poelzer & Coates, 2015).

In addition to treaties, the Haudenosaunee would use wampum belts to "regulate political protocol between First nations and Europeans" (Muller, 2007, 129). Wampum belts serve as mnemonic devices that "recall political agreements and guaranteed the authenticity and sincerity of these diplomatic promises" (Muller, 2007, 129). The two-row wampum belt is made of rows of purple and white shells and beads which are bound by hemp, which preserved oral agreements (Muller, 2007). The belts were presented at conferences and gatherings. Indigenous laws and agreements between nations were recorded on the belts (Borrow, 1994; McGregor, 2002; Muller, 2007). For First Nations, these agreements were seen to represent their freedom and sovereignty as they lived side by side with the settlers (Borrows, 1994).

Shortly after the Royal Proclamation, in 1764 the Treaty of Niagara was established at a peace council held at Niagara with representatives of the Crown and over 2000 First Nation leaders from all over North America (Borrows, 1994; Macklem, 2001). The agreement included a reading of the Royal Proclamation and an exchange of a wampum

belt, which reflected First Nation tradition and was symbolic of peace and friendship between the First Nations and the Crown (Borrows, 1994; Macklem, 2001; Muller, 2007).

The agreements made between First Nations and Europeans were more than what was written on paper (Muller, 2007). For example, when the words of the proclamation are taken with the exchange of the wampum belt, they mean something different than the words alone (Borrows, 1997; Muller, 2007). The wampum belt is a representation of an equal partnership (McGregor, 2002), while the words in the Royal Proclamation claim that First Nations live under the protection of the Crown. As John Borrows (1997) states “the wording of the document made it unclear as to whether First Nations would have the political power required to exercise autonomy through their own sovereignty or under British jurisdiction” (18). Taking into account the exchange of the wampum belt, however, the recognition of First Nation sovereignty becomes clearer.

There is a long history of treaty making within Canada with over 500 treaties signed (Macklem, 2001; Government of Canada, 2018a). Treaties are agreements that “provided for a specialized means of political accommodation between North America’s Aboriginal peoples and European colonists” (Grammond, 1994). The treaties signed before 1850 usually involved a military alliance or a “onetime payment by the Crown for the surrender of relatively small tracts of land” (Macklem, 2001, 134). The treaties signed after 1850 involved annual payments and larger areas of land (Grammond, 1994; Macklem, 2001). In 1871, Canada began signing the numbered treaties, which cover most of the country from the Quebec border to the northwest of Canada. The last of the 11 numbered treaties was signed in 1921 (Grammond, 1994; Morin, 2005). In addition to the

historic treaties between the Crown and Aboriginal peoples there have been modern-day treaties created regarding land-claim agreements in which provincial governments have taken part (Gammond, 1994). The land claim agreement, described in Chapter 1, between Bigstone Cree First Nation, the federal government, and provincial government is an example of a modern-day treaty.

Treaties granted certain rights to “Treaty Indians” or status Indians, defined in Chapter 1, and outlined the transfer of land to the Crown in exchange for reserve land and treaty rights. According to the Government of Canada (2018a) treaty rights often include rights to land, rights to hunting and fishing, money to be paid annually by the federal government and rights to federally funded education. Although these rights are outlined in treaties, they are often not upheld and First Nation people continue to fight for the rights they have been guaranteed by treaties. The treaties allowed for the colonial expansion and the settlement of the prairies (Gammond, 1994; Macklem, 2001; Makokis, 2001; Morin, 2005). The treaties outlined the process in which Indigenous people lost rights to the land and were pushed onto reserve lands. A reserve as defined by the *Indian Act* is “a tract of land, the legal title to which is vested in Her Majesty, that has been set apart by her Majesty for the use and benefit of a band”. Sometimes reserve lands outlined in the treaties would be relocated from resource rich land to less desirable areas (TRC, 2015; Shkinyk, 1985). Taking control of the land through treaties laid the foundation of structural violence against Indigenous people that is still experienced by Indigenous populations today. Treaties and reserve lands are part of the reason that Indigenous communities are often situated in remote areas. These remote areas are often

cut off from major infrastructure and thus increase vulnerability of residents in these communities, especially in disaster situations.

In 1867 the *British North America Act* (BNA) was passed by the Crown (Justice Law Website, 2015; Ottawa, 1883). The BNA established the dominion of Canada, which consisted of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec at the time and allowed for the addition of other provinces. (Makokis, 2001; Morin, 2005; Ottawa, 1883). The BNA outlined the process of government and the division of authority between federal and provincial governments. In Section 91(24) of the BNA Act it is “established that the Parliament of Canada held legislative authority over ‘Indians and lands reserved for Indians’ making Aboriginal affairs the responsibility of the federal government” (Morin, 2005, 29). The BNA was not created in consultation with Aboriginal people (Makokis, 2001). The BNA was later termed the *Constitution Act* of 1867 once the *Constitution Act* of 1982 was passed. I will refer to the BNA Act as the *Constitution Act* of 1867 from now on.

In 1876, shortly after confederation the *Indian Act* was passed (Klem & Smith, 2018; Leslie, 2002). The *Indian Act* was put in place with aims to assimilate First Nation peoples and does not include Métis or Inuit people (Leslie, 2002; TRC, 2015). The *Indian Act* was a consolidation of previous acts that dealt with who was considered an Indian, the administration of Indian lands, and the governance of Indian communities (Klem & Smith, 2018; Leslie, 2002). Richard Bartlett (1980) states that “the Indian Act of Canada is the principle instrument through which federal jurisdiction over Indians ... has been exercised” (11). The *Indian Act* helped to define the relationship between Indians and the

Canadian government as parental in nature, in which Canada would control Indian land, money and property and Indians would be wards of the state (Klem & Smith, 2018).

Indian Agents were assigned to reserves by the federal government to enforce the *Indian Act* until the 1960s. The Indian Agent kept the government updated about the happenings on reserves they were assigned to. The *Indian Act* of 1876 was very comprehensive and touched on all aspects of Indian reserve life (Klem & Smith, 2018). The Act covered reserve lands, Indian moneys, power of chiefs and council, Indian privileges, taxation (or absence of), and procedures for enfranchisement (loss of Indian status) (Leslie, 2002).

Throughout the years there have been many amendments and revisions to the *Indian Act*, most notably in 1951 and 1985 (Klem & Smith, 2018; Leslie, 2002; Makokis, 2001).

During the 1880's the government tightened rules regarding daily life on the reserves and gave more power to the Indian Agent as a way to speed up the process of assimilation (Klem & Smith, 2018; Leslie, 2002). The Act placed bans on ceremonies and mandated that Indigenous children attend residential schools (Leslie, 2002; TRC, 2015). For a while the Act required that any Indigenous person wishing to travel off reserve land must acquire a pass from an Indian Agent, thus restricting travel (TRC, 2015). All of the rules and regulations that came with the *Indian Act* worked to "kill the Indian", in hopes that First Nation peoples would assimilate into the dominant culture and act as the settlers did (Klem & Smith, 2018; Leslie, 2002; Makokis, 2001). The 1951 changes to the *Indian Act* reduced the minister's discretionary powers and gave more power and freedom to the chief and band councils (Leslie, 2002). The ban on ceremonies and cultural practices was also removed (Leslie, 2002). In 1985, there was Bill C-31 which was passed by parliament and reinstated women who had lost their status "under paragraph 12(1)(b) of

the 1951 Indian Act” (Leslie, 2002) and removed the process of enfranchisement (Government of Canada, 2018b). The *Indian Act*, although reformed is still in use today (Leslie, 2002). The *Indian Act* is a direct example of structural violence, in that the policies derived from the Act legalized the unjust atrocities against Indigenous people which directly increases the vulnerability of First Nations people. Some of these unjust atrocities can be considered collective trauma, detailed in Chapter 4, which has directly impacted the way that individuals interact with each other and how they experience their community and the world around them.

The Métis people do not have reserve lands like the ones the federal government has assigned to First Nations through Treaties and the *Indian Act* (O’Byrne, 2013). Alberta is the only province that has recognized Métis settlements. Métis settlement lands were originally set aside after political activism from the Métis Association of Alberta through the *Métis Population Betterment Act* in 1938 (O’Byrne, 2013). The *Métis Population Betterment Act* recognized the Métis as a distinct people in Alberta and set aside lands for the Métis people. In 1989, with the Alberta-Métis Settlements Accord came “a political agreement between Alberta and the Federation of Métis Settlement Associations which described both parties’ intentions to develop a new land-based governance model for the Métis settlements” (Government of Alberta, 1989). The goal of the accord was to support local autonomy for the Métis settlements. In 1990 the Alberta government “Formally recognized the Métis right to self-government by passing the Constitution of Alberta Amendment Act” (O’Byrne, 2013, 344). The *Métis Settlement Land Protection Act* of 2000 confirms Métis ownership of the Métis land settlements. (O’Byrne, 2013). Métis Settlements are not under federal jurisdiction like First Nation reserves are. Métis

settlements have elected council which have legislative powers to create bylaws for their settlement so long as these bylaws do not interfere with provincial law. The settlement council is also able to create bylaws in relation to fire protection, which are not publicly accessible for the community of Paddle Prairie.

The *Constitution Act* of 1982 severed all the remaining ties to the British Crown and gave the government of Canada the ability to change its constitution without the approval from the Crown (Asch, 2014). Section 25 of the *Constitution Act* of 1982 states that “the guarantee in this Charter of certain rights and freedoms shall not be construed so as to abrogate or derogate from any aboriginal, treaty or other rights or freedoms that pertain to the aboriginal peoples of Canada including” rights recognized by the Royal Proclamation or that “exist by way of land claims agreements”(Constitution Act 1982). Section 35 of the *Constitution Act* of 1982 recognized existing Aboriginal rights and treaty rights. However, the Act does not provide a definition of Aboriginal and treaty rights. As there is no definition provided on what Aboriginal rights entail in the *Constitution Act* of 1982, there has been much contention between Aboriginal people and the courts on what these rights actually entail (Asch, 2014; Slattery, 2015). In section 35.1 the Act also asserts that any amendment made to section 91(24) of the *Constitution Act* 1867, or sections 25 and 35 of the *Constitution Act* of 1982 must be made with the consultation of Aboriginal representatives.

Aboriginal rights are sometimes thought of as divided between generic and specific rights (Slattery, 2007). Generic rights are the rights that every Aboriginal person is entitled to, while specific rights are the rights that depend on particular circumstances (Slattery, 2007). Specific rights often depend greatly on cultural practices; thus, some specific

rights may be accepted for some groups and not others depending on their cultural practices and previous agreements made with the government through treaties (Slattery, 2007). Slattery (2007), provides a list of generic rights which is not comprehensive but covers what he deems to be the most important generic rights. The generic rights include the right to “conclude treaties, customary law, honorable treatment by the crown, ancestral territory/Aboriginal title, cultural integrity, and self-government” (Slattery, 2007, 9). There are a few of these generic rights which are important to expand on in relationship to their impact on wildfire. The right to honorable treatment entails that “aboriginal peoples have the right to fiduciary protection of the Crown” (Slattery, 2007, 12). This means that the Crown must act in the best interests of Aboriginal people and protect them from exploitation and harm. The right to self-government allows Aboriginal groups to “establish and maintain their own constitutions” (Slattery, 2007, 20) as demonstrated by the *Constitution of the Sawridge First Nation (2009)*. These generic rights give way to the specific rights, which depend on the aboriginal group and the agreements they may have with the Crown (Slattery, 2007, 23).

Throughout the years the government of Canada has played a major role in many unjust atrocities against Indigenous people, many of which aimed at the assimilation of Indigenous people. Residential schools were run by the federal government and the churches; the first school opened up in the 1840s the last school closed in 1996 (TRC, 2015; Walker, 2009). These schools aimed to “civilize” Indigenous children by restricting the use of their native languages, limiting interactions with family, and instilling Christian values. As stated above, attendance at these schools became mandatory under the *Indian Act* (TRC, 2015). Children were brutally forced from their

homes and families and sent to these schools. Many children were not able to see their families or go home for extended periods, and their parents were provided little to no information about their children. Some students tried to escape and run home, but many were unsuccessful and punished for leaving or died while trying to get home. Many students experienced physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and others died while at residential schools (TRC, 2015; Walker, 2009). Their bodies were never returned to their families, the records of their death hidden, destroyed, or never recorded. The schools were usually in poor condition although federally funded, so the children were forced to do manual labour to keep the institutions self-sufficient rather than focus on their education. The children were seen as less intelligent and less capable than non-Indigenous children and therefore did not receive an education of the same standard. It is estimated that over 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools (TRC; 2015). The abuse experienced at these schools has had a lasting impact on subsequent generations and has created intergenerational trauma, which is reflected in higher rates of suicide, addictive behaviours, poor mental and physical health in many Indigenous populations today (Wilk, Maltby, & Cooke, 2017). Residential schools allowed for the systemic abuse and maltreatment of thousands of Indigenous children which was supported and funded by the federal government.

In addition to the residential schools, children were forcibly removed from their home in the 1960s, during the “Sixties Scoop”. During the 1960s as residential schools were on the decline, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed into foster care (Shabalin, 2017). The children were often placed into non-Indigenous homes and raised by middle class, predominantly white families. As a result, many Indigenous

children did not grow up with their culture and were often unaware of their ancestral ties. In addition, children were not granted “Indian Status,” which meant that they did not receive benefits that they were entitled to. Children were often separated from their biological siblings which worked to sever familial ties (Shabalin, 2017). The 60’s Scoop was yet another way to assimilate Indigenous people into the dominant culture. Today there are more Indigenous children in government care than ever before (Cardinal, 1999). Children placed in government care are often placed into the care of non-Indigenous foster homes which contributes to the assimilation of Indigenous children today. Children in these situations grow up without knowledge of their culture and often without knowledge of their family backgrounds. Structural violence and assimilation created by colonialism has created a dependence on the state, which has directly increased the vulnerability experienced by Indigenous people and communities.

2.3 How does this relate to wildfire protection?

What are the provinces’ jurisdictional powers if the federal government has claimed power over Indians and Indian lands as seen by Section 91(24) of the *Constitution Act* of 1867? Section 88 of the *Indian Act* deals with the provincial jurisdiction applicable to Indians. Section 88 states:

Subject to the terms of any treaty and any other Act of Parliament, all laws of general application from time to time in force in any province are applicable to and in respect of Indians in the province, except to the extent that those laws are inconsistent with this Act or the First Nations Fiscal Management Act, or any order, rule, regulation or law of a band made under those Acts, and except to the extent that those provincial laws make provisions for any matter for which provisions is made by or under those Acts. (Section 88 of the Indian Act)

Thus, the province does have some jurisdiction over Indians so long as it is not inconsistent with the *Indian Act*, the *First Nations Fiscal Management Act* or any band

laws created under those Acts. For a provincial law to apply to Indians, as defined in the *Indian Act*, it must not concern anything already covered in the *Indian Act*. It is important to note that Section 88 of the *Indian Act* does not mention Indian land as Section 91(24) in the *Constitution Act* does, but rather just Indians. This difference in wording creates a difference in the way that laws are applied to Indians on and off reserves, which means that provincial laws are much less applicable when dealing with reserve land (Hughes, 1983). This is important to note, because the province has jurisdiction over the lands that they own but not over the federal lands located in Alberta, such as First Nation reserves.

The provincial government is responsible for wildfire management on its lands (Tymstra, Stocks, Cai & Flannigan, 2019). Since First Nation reserves are not considered provincial land, but rather are under federal jurisdiction, it is the federal government's responsibility to manage wildfires on lands (national parks, First Nation reserves, and Department of National Defense lands) under their jurisdiction (Tymstra et al, 2019). Thus, there are pockets of land in Alberta that are under the federal government's jurisdiction and protection. The federal government can make agreements with the provincial government of Alberta to manage wildfires on federal land.

2.3.1 Funding

If the province incurs any expenses for the protection and recovery of any reserve, the federal department of Indigenous services will reimburse all costs (Public Safety Canada, 2020). Any expenses incurred for the protection and recovery off-reserve are subject to the Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements, which provides funding based on a formula that takes into account expenses incurred and per capita population. Each province has a threshold based on expenses per capita, if expenses incurred are above the

threshold the federal government will provide financial assistance to the province based on the formula (Public Safety Canada, 2020).

The federal government is responsible for funding wildfire management and response on their lands. The system that allocates funding to First Nations is Indigenous Services. The *Department of Indigenous Services Act* of 2019 section 6(2) states that the department of Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) must ensure services with respect to infrastructure and emergency management, among other things, be provided to eligible Indigenous individuals and/or governing bodies. Through the Emergency Management Assistance Program, ISC works with federal and provincial governments and non-government organizations (NGO) to ensure that First Nation communities can access emergency services. I contacted Emergency Management Alberta and they confirmed that they work with ISC to provide emergency management services on First Nations, but that the documentations of these agreements are not publicly accessible.

The Emergency Management Assistance Program provides funding to First Nations, provinces, territories and NGOs to support emergency management on reserves (Government of Canada, 2020b). Through the Emergency Management Assistance Program, ISC budgets 16.5 million dollars in funding for prevention and mitigation activities (Government of Canada, 2020c). The amount of money each First Nation receives is decided by a “regionally-based formula” (Government of Canada, 2020c). This formula takes into account “the number of buildings on the reserve, population, local environment, how close the reserve is to other communities” (Government of Canada, 2020c). In 2018-2019 ISC provided \$34 million to fire protection services (Government of Canada, 2020c). These funds can be used to run fire departments or to

contract agreements with near-by communities. It is up to the discretion of the band council how these funds will be used; funds may be allocated to other priorities. I was unable to find exactly how much funding went to each First Nation. According to the *First Nations Financial Transparency Act*, First Nations must provide consolidated financial statements. Sawridge First Nation has a statement on financial transparency that determines they are unable to be transparent as it goes against their constitution and their right to self-government (Sawridge, 2015). Thus, the allocation their emergency management funding was not publicly accessible. I was able to find consolidated financial statements for the Bigstone Cree First Nation, but these statements are broad and do not state how these specific funds were allocated. Thus, I am unaware how much funding was provided to Sawridge or Bigstone Cree for fire protection and wildfire management.

There are four areas where ISC supports emergency management on First Nations reserves, mitigations preparedness, response and recovery (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2020). ISC can also delegate provincial government, and other NGOs to provide services during an emergency for First Nations. The province and other delegated organizations will provide services on behalf of the ISC and will be reimbursed for eligible costs (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2020c). I was unable to find any information for emergency support provided by ISC to eligible Indigenous individuals not living on-reserve. Perhaps this funding goes to local services, which provide services to Indigenous people in an emergency situation; however, it is not clear whether they provide any direct funding for these specific circumstances.

For example, Slave Lake has over 800 status Indians. Thus, there are many people within Slave Lake that are eligible for funding from ISC. However, it is unclear if ISC provides funding to the community to assist with disaster management for the community. The lack of information provided in the different federal documents leads to the conclusion that there is no specific funding for off-reserve individuals for emergency management. It seems, if anything, these individuals will be covered under their respective community emergency plans.

Métis settlements have been provided funding through arrangements with the provincial government, such as the Long-Term Governance and Funding Arrangement (Government of Alberta, 2013). The Alberta government committed 85 million dollars over a ten-year period to improve and strengthen conditions on the settlements, including infrastructure and essential services. Métis Nation of Alberta has also received funding from the provincial government for Forest Protection Services (Métis Nation of Alberta, 2016). Métis Settlements are eligible to apply for municipal grant programs within the province some of which are dedicated to emergency management. Métis settlements and First Nations can also apply for grants from the provincial government for fire services training programs (Government of Alberta, 2013).

2.3.2 Emergency management plans

It is important to note that from the government's perspective, emergency management starts at an individual level. An individual is responsible to make sure they are prepared in the event of a wildfire (Emergency Management Act, 2020). The next level is the community. The community is responsible to have an emergency management plan in place that covers the possible emergencies that the community might encounter. The

community must use everything in their power to respond to an emergency. The community is responsible to make decisions in relation to emergency management until they are unable to respond. If a First Nation community requires assistance, they must contact ISC and the provincial government (Government of Canada, 2015). The provincial government and services within the community will respond accordingly to the agreements that have been made. These agreements are not publicly accessible documents. Sometimes a wildfire is so large that the province will require assistance from the federal government, in which case the government will provide assistance.

For example, Bigstone Cree is responsible for having their own emergency management plan in place for the reserves. If they are unable to respond or need assistance then the MD of Opportunity will provide them with assistance as they are surrounded by the MD. Agreements have been made between the MD and Bigstone to act cohesively in response to emergencies, like wildfires. The Bigstone Cree fire department also works with the Wabasca-Desmarais fire department to fight structural fires both on and off reserve. The reserves are so close to Wabasca-Desmarais that most, if not all, emergencies will impact the area at the same time. By working together, the communities are able to share resources and information, which will be to the benefit of emergency management. Decisions can be made together to ensure the safety of all residents.

Another instance of communities working together is the Tri-Council that was formed after the 2011 Slave Lake wildfire. The Tri-Council consists of members from the town of Slave Lake, the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River, and Sawridge First Nation. The Tri-Council “provides direction for regional recovery matters and issues of regional interest” (Town of Slave Lake). Although these communities have their own emergency

plans (Sawridge First Nation, 2018), they are in communication with each other about disasters that may impact the region and they work to ensure the safety of the region as a whole. For instance, the Tri-council ensured that water tanks were put in each community during a wildfire alert in the summer of 2019.

2.4 Conclusion

Indigenous people in Canada have been controlled, and structures have been put in place that work to devalue Indigenous cultures and rights by trying to assimilate Indigenous people into dominant Euro-Canadian ways. All of these policies and laws, described above, have helped to shape the experience of Indigenous people today. The process of colonization has shaped disaster response today, which is reflected in the funding that is provided to and managed by Indigenous communities. Assimilation policies, colonialism, and structural violence have helped to shape how Indigenous people experience and perceive wildfire evacuations.

Chapter 3

3 Differing Understandings of the Relationship of Humans and Nature, and How They Have Been Reflected in Wildfire Management Over Time

This chapter details historical and recent approaches to wildfire and describes some different worldviews around the relationship between nature and humans that have shaped responses to wildfire. This chapter also shines a light on the impact that the European settler disregard for traditional knowledge has had on wildfires and wildfire response, which has helped to shape Indigenous people's experiences of wildfire situations. The disregard of traditional knowledge is reflected in wildfire

3.1 Wildfires Today

Wildfires are a natural part of a forest's ecosystem. There are two ways a wildfire can start in Alberta's boreal forest: either by lightning or by anthropogenic causes, including but not limited to leaving a bonfire unattended, throwing a cigarette butt out of a vehicle window, or driving an all-terrain vehicle when the conditions are dry. According to Tedim et al. (2018), "most of the two million wildfire events registered every year worldwide are small in terms of area burnt. However, some become very large incidents that have significant ecological and socio-economic impacts" (2). These very large wildfire incidents that Tedim and colleagues (2018) mention result in the inability to contain or suppress the flames, which can have catastrophic consequences. There are different kinds of wildfire today than the ones in previous decades (Eisenberg et al, 2019; Tedmin et al, 2018; Petryna, 2018). Most fires used to travel along the base of the forest, burning shrubs and debris; however, nowadays, more fires are travelling along the

canopy of the forest at very high heats. These fires create their own wind, which helps them move along the canopy of the forest and destroys mass portions of forest in short timeframes. These extreme fires are also tough to control or extinguish (Petryna, 2018). The wind created by the fire itself in combination with weather carries embers, which, when close to a flammable material, will ignite. As these extreme wildfires move through the forest, they easily ignite other areas because the wind carries the embers far distances. This allows the fire to spread quickly and remain uncontrollable (Petryna, 2018), which was the case for the 2011 Slave Lake Fire. One resident compared the winds the day of the 2011 fire to those of a hurricane.

In recent times, there have been many extraordinary wildfires that have had detrimental impacts on the populations affected by the event. When a wildfire interacts with an area populated by humans often, there is an “array of societal, economic, and political concerns” (Tedim et al., 2018, 2). It seems every year there is an extraordinary, record-breaking wildfire event. For instance, in the last three years, extreme wildfires have occurred in Australia (2019-2020), Brazil (2019), Alberta (2019), and California (2018), only to mention a few. These extreme wildfire events have become the new norm (Gill, Stephens, & Cary, 2013; Petryna, 2018). The increased number of these events has been attributed to climate change (Charnley et al, 2015; Fairbrother & Tyler, 2019; Gill, Stephens, & Cary, 2013). In the last 10 years, Alberta has seen the interaction of a few extreme wildfires with many communities, which have resulted in thousands of people being displaced when they are forced to evacuate for long periods of time.

3.2 History of Wildfire in Alberta

For most of my life, I have lived in Alberta, but it wasn't until 2011 that I realized the danger that northern Albertans faced. I was working in a clothing store when the wildfire hit Slave Lake. Living and working in St. Albert, I was approximately a 2.5-hour drive from the affected area, which meant many evacuees came to my city to buy items that were either left behind or lost in the fire. The store I worked at, like many others, was giving out major discounts to help the victims of the fire. I vividly remember the panicked look on one customer's face as they were buying new jeans, and they were so grateful for the discount. They described how they lost everything and how happy they were to get some new clothing. This was my first real interaction with people who had been affected by a wildfire.

Five years later, in 2016, Fort McMurray and surrounding areas were evacuated due to the Horseshoe wildfire that consumed thousands of structures and caused the evacuation of over 80,000 people. This evacuation affected my cousin and his family, and they came to live with me during the month that they were evacuated. I stayed up most of the night to keep in contact with them as they evacuated. They were exhausted after travelling all night and fleeing the flames that surrounded the only highway in or out of the community. The five-hour drive took all night, as mass amounts of people left the area. Feeling relieved that they had arrived at a safe location but still anxious to hear any information about what damage the fire had caused, we watched for any details on the news. Thankfully, their house remained standing, but the effect of the fire had hit much deeper than the material that it consumed. When I recently spoke to these members of my

family about the events that transpired that day four years ago, it was clear the impact is lasting. These two wildfire events helped shape my understanding of evacuations, but also sparked my interest in research.

Much of Alberta has been affected by wildfire over the last 100 years. The vast presence of wildfire in Alberta became apparent to me during an interview at the Lesser Slave Area Fire Centre (LSAFC). The LSAFC is a facility where many things related to wildfire take place, such as education on firefighting practices, monitoring wildfire, and storing equipment. In the duty room at LSAFC, there is a large map of Alberta that outlines all of the wildfires that have happened in the area. Looking at this map, it became clear to me the extent to which wildfire plays a role in shaping the landscape of northern Alberta. The map below is similar to the one in the LSAFC. The map in Figure 3 depicts all of the wildfires that have happened in Alberta over the last 90 years (1930-2019). The fires are colour coded by decade. The last decade (2010-2019) has been very busy with various wildfires all over Alberta. Many of the larger fires depicted actually took place over the duration of my fieldwork. For instance, two of the largest wildfires recorded in Alberta, the High Level fire and the Wabasca fire, happened in 2019. Four of the five largest fires happened in the past decade (2010- 2019).

Figure 3 demonstrates that fire is commonplace throughout the boreal forest. Around 60% of Alberta is covered by forested area. According to Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (2001), “Alberta forests are prone to fire, and much of what we see in the forest today has been shaped by fire” (4). Fire is a natural part of the boreal forest’s life cycle. Fire allows for the regrowth of new vegetation and brings a new life to the forest. There are even certain types of vegetation, like the jackpine, lodgepole pine, and black

spruce, that rely on fire to germinate (Le Goff & Sirois, 2004). Fire has and will continue to shape Alberta’s forest.

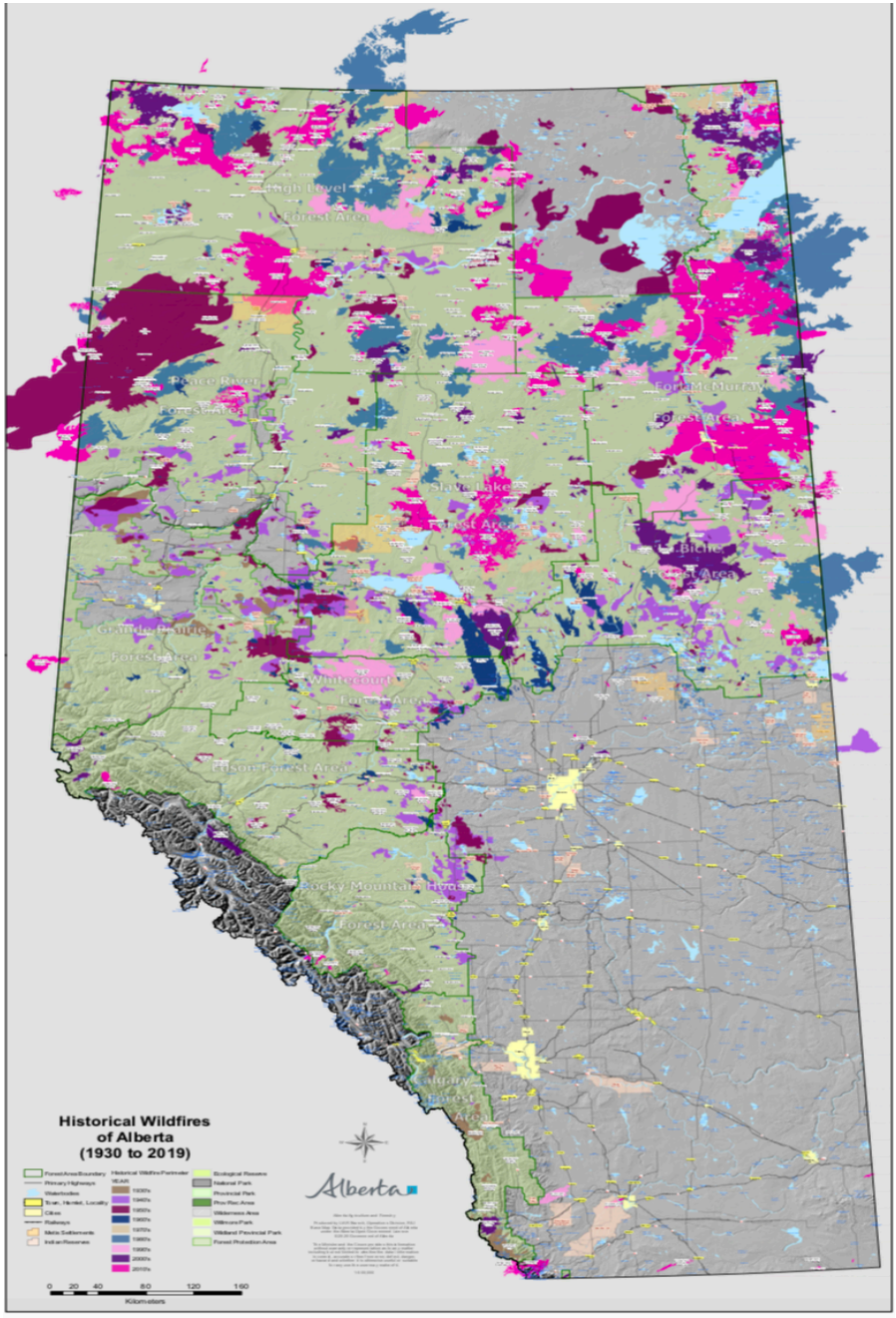


Figure 3. Map of Wildfire from 1930-2019. Source: Government of Alberta, 2020.

Although Alberta's boreal forest is sometimes thought of by settlers as a natural landscape relatively untouched, people have been cultivating and manipulating the forest for centuries. Indigenous people used fire to "clear certain forest areas for the ease of travel and to encourage the plants" to grow and animals to graze on the fresh growth (Murphy et al., 2006, 3). The landscape has been consistently shaped and maintained throughout time by human activities. Prescribed burning practiced by Indigenous people is one of the ways in which humans have influenced the landscape.

3.3 Prescribed Burning

For centuries before colonization, Indigenous people specifically Cree, Dene, and Métis people (Ferguson, 2010), used fire to maintain and modify ecosystems in Alberta.

According to Lewis and Ferguson (1988), the only sections of forest that were burned were areas that were void of game and areas that, if ignited by lightning, would be a serious risk to the surrounding area. Cree, Dene, and Métis people used fire to clear an area and encourage the growth of vegetation that animals, such as moose, deer or muskrats, would consume. Indigenous people used fire to create or clear meadows on which they could easily hunt. Fire was used to encourage the growth of a variety of plants that were gathered for human consumption (Lewis, Christianson & Spinks, 2018). For example, it has been recorded that fires were used to encourage the growth of edible berry patches such as blueberries, huckleberries and soapberries (Gottesfeld, 1994). In addition to creating environments that encouraged animals and plant growth, fires were used to clear unwanted debris that would ignite if wildfire started. Fire was also used to create firebreaks around inhabited areas to ensure safety from possible wildfires. A firebreak is an area that has been cleared of debris between a forested area and an

inhabited area. A firebreak slows the fire as there is nothing left to ignite and allows time for people to evacuate or fight the flames.

Indigenous people who practiced prescribed burning planned when to burn according to the seasons, the amount of moisture that was present on the ground, and the direction of the winds. Fires were only lit when the conditions were right, to ensure that the flames remained controllable. Fire was used as a tool for the cultivation of prosperous forests for centuries; however, the use of prescribed burning practices was eventually restricted by both the provincial and federal government in the early 1900s (Lewis, 1978).

When I set out to do this research, I initially assumed I would hear a lot more about these practices; however, not much was said about prescribed burning other than it had been performed in the past. For example, one Cree resident from Paddle Prairie Métis settlement stated, "in the old days people used to walk the forest and look for potential dangers... they would control burn that area so that it wasn't a problem anymore".

Another Cree woman from Slave Lake also briefly mentioned the use of fire stating, "yeah, it makes sense [burning the land] because that's what people used to do, they would burn the fields." Both women mentioned the practices of using fire to maintain the land; however, they were unable to speak to the knowledge that was used during these burns. In another interview a non-Indigenous resident of Slave Lake, who was very aware of the impact of colonialism on Indigenous practices and who was also interested in climate change, expressed her regrets that these practices have been ignored and suppressed. She states while talking about prescribed burning, "I think we are learning how right the Elders were because we are seeing the danger of all of this fuel left on the landscape and the arrogance of all the forestry people for all those years."

As demonstrated above, knowledge of these practices was mentioned throughout my interviews, yet the understanding of what these practices actually entailed was relatively little. Christina Eisenberg et al. (2018) states that:

Indigenous and non-indigenous managers and scientists lack full insight into how or why Indigenous peoples employed fire management throughout North America... because some Traditional Ecological Knowledge, which is based on oral histories, has been lost due to colonialism, forced relocation, and death of knowledge keepers. (2)

Many of my interviewees mentioned the use of fire to maintain landscapes as an old practice, but when I questioned the use of prescribed burning more, there was little more said. Traditional Ecological Knowledge is referring to the traditional knowledge held by Indigenous people, which shaped their understanding of how to maintain and care for the environment around them. As suggested by Eisenberg et al. (2018), the lack of knowledge is due to the suppression of the practices by colonial powers, as well as the death of knowledge keepers, and the colonial displacement of the people who once practiced prescribed burning.

The aim of the federal government of Canada was to assimilate Indigenous people into the dominant Euro-settler culture (TRC, 2015; Tsuji, 1996). Using both political and physical force Indigenous people were oppressed, and their cultures suppressed. Many Indigenous people died due to disease or starvation while many others were forced to assimilate resulting in the loss of traditional knowledge (TRC, 2015). Due to colonialism much of Indigenous traditional knowledge has been lost (Berkes, 2008). The *Indian Act* and the policies that led to the Indian residential school system worked to limit the generational transfer of knowledge, and therefore many Indigenous children were not

taught the ways of their culture. As a result, knowledge was primarily lost due to the death of knowledge keepers and forced assimilation of Indigenous people.

What was once a tradition is now becoming a distant memory. The settlers and colonial government held very different ideas about forest maintenance compared to the Indigenous people, as demonstrated through policy.

3.4 Conflicting Worldviews

There are many diverse and unique worldviews, some are similar, and some are vastly separate. Worldviews “profoundly shape the ways people see the world and live their lives” (Hiebert, 2008, 14). A worldview is “composed of a person’s attitudes, values, opinions, and concepts” (Hart, 2010, 21). Worldviews affect “how we think, define events, make decisions, and behave, in that we perceive and evaluate situations and derive appropriate actions” (Hart, 2010, 21). Differing worldviews have resulted in the suppression and disregard of traditional knowledge

3.4.1 Indigenous Worldviews

Indigenous people hold a wide variety of worldviews that are unique to each individual group (Cardinal & Hilderbrandt, 2000; Hart, 2010; Morrisette, Mckenzie, Morrisette, 2003). I will not review all the worldviews that are held by various Indigenous groups, but rather focus on some components that are commonly associated with Indigenous worldviews. I will also detail a localized Métis worldview from Paddle Prairie, and focus in greater detail on the Cree worldview, as many of my participants identified as Cree. It is important to note that while I describe worldviews, not all members of a culture share and are guided by the same worldview (Hart, 2010). Thus, a Cree person may not be

shaped by the Cree worldview that is described below. The Cree worldview that I describe is a generalization based on some common elements among the many worldviews held by Cree people.

Not all Indigenous worldviews are the same, however often times Indigenous worldviews share a some commonalities (Cardinal & Hilderbrandt, 2000; Hart, 2010; Morrisette, Mckenzie, Morrisette, 2003). Many Indigenous worldviews are focused on the collective wellbeing of people, animals and the environment (Cardinal & Hilderbrandt, 2000; Morrisette, Mckenzie, Morrisette, 2003). Morrisette, Mckenzie and Morrisette (2003) state that “while aboriginal people do not embrace a single philosophy, there are fundamental differences between the dominant Euro-Canadian and traditional Aboriginal societies, and these have their roots in differing perceptions of one’s relationship with the universe and the creator” (93). The fundamental difference that Morrisette, Mckenzie and Morrisette (2003) mention is reflected in the way that these groups interact with the environment around them. For instance, Terry Teegee (2015) relayed the words of a Saik’uz Elder which state “if you take care of the land it will take care of you” (132), which can be interpreted as a demonstration of what is sometimes called relational worldviews.

Relational worldviews are held by many Indigenous groups (Crofoot Graham, 2002; Cross, 2001). Relational worldviews “perceive health and wellness as a balance of four major factors, which can sometimes be understood as the spirit, the context, the mind, and the body.” (Crofoot Graham, 2002, 61). There are four factors that may vary slightly depending on the Indigenous group (Crofoot Graham, 2002; Cross, 2001; Hart, 2010). Generally, the factors are as described in the quote below:

Spirit includes spiritual practices and teachings, dreams, symbols, stories, gifts, intuition, grace, protecting forces, and negative forces. Context includes family, culture, work, community history, and environmental factors including climate and weather. Mind includes intellect, emotion, memory, judgment, and experience. Body includes chemistry, genetics, nutrition, substance use and abuse, sleep and rest, age and condition. (Crofoot Graham, 2002, 61)

All factors in combination are connected to personal and community well-being (Crofoot Graham, 2002; Cross, 2001). Terry Cross (2001) states “this worldview in which well-being is balanced between mind, body, spirit, and context, teaches that these elements have equal weight; achieving balance among these various functions is in essence the object of our human existence. To be well is to have these things in balance” (1).

Relational worldviews demonstrate how deeply connected elements of life are in some Indigenous cultures. In many instances these relations of wellbeing are depicted and thought of in a circular form, demonstrating the interconnection of everything (Crofoot Graham, 2002; Cross, 2001; Hart, 2010).

Elmer Ghostkeeper (1995), a member of the Paddle Prairie Métis settlement describes the Métis worldview held by many within his community. Métis groups like other Indigenous groups have differing worldviews depending on the group. Ghostkeeper (1995) describes Métis of Paddle Prairie having a localized worldview that is of a “living universe”, composed of three worlds. These three worlds are the spirit world, this world, and the evil world and were created by the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit created other spirits to aid in providing balance to the universe. The gift of life “contains the aspects of the spirit” (Ghostkeeper, 1995, 10), the mind, emotion, and body. The body was created by the Great Spirit from elements of mother nature. Living beings include all aspects of mother earth, such as plants, animals, insects and humans. All living beings are created equal and are interdependent (Ghostkeeper, 1995). To live happy and healthy is to find

balance between “spirit, mind, emotion, and body” (Ghostkeeper, 1995). Balance is achieved through ceremony sacrifice and ritual, all of which consist of the exchange of gifts. Gifts are aspects of the body, emotion, mind and spirit “exchanged in a relationship between a donor and recipient” (Ghostkeeper, 1995, 13). The evil world is inhabited by the evil spirit and its evil helpers and disrupt the balance of this world. Ghostkeeper (1995) states that “the daily challenge for Métis is to maintain a balanced set of good and bad forces of body, mind, emotion, and spirit in making a living with land” (14). The need for balance in the Métis worldview seen here is comparable to the balance since in relational worldviews.

For the purpose of this research, I will focus on the Cree worldview as Cree people make up the majority of participants in this study. As previously stated, not all Cree groups are exactly the same in their worldviews, however, there are some commonalities between Cree people that are evident in their worldviews (Brass, 2000; Makokis, 2001).

Spirituality is central to Cree worldviews and it is believed that the creator has provided all that is needed for the Cree people (Cardinal & Hilderbrant, 2000; Makokis, 2001).

Cree worldviews are “intrinsically and extrinsically shaped by the members of the Cree society and their relationship to self, other, the environment, and the cosmos” (Makokis, 2001, 89). One of the central components to Cree worldviews, similar to the relational worldviews, is the interrelatedness of all parts. Humans are a part of the natural world and everything is connected and has an impact on wellbeing (Cardinal & Hilderbrant, 2000; Makokis, 2001). These relations create an interdependence between humans and nature (Makokis, 2001). It is also this interdependence that helps create principles of responsibility. In Cree worldviews people have a responsibility toward other people,

animals, and the environment to maintain good relations (Cardinal & Hilderbrant, 2000). The principle of responsibility is reflected in the way Cree people interact with the world around them.

It is important to note that much of the Cree worldview is expressed through the Cree language (Makokis, 2001). The Cree language categorizes objects as animate and inanimate objects which reflects their belief “in the existence of various spirits” (Hart, 2007, 51). When something is believed to have a spirit, such as a rock or a pipe, it is believed to be animate and is referred to as such (Makokis, 2001). Thus, the Cree language enriches the peoples understanding of the Cree worldview. Cree worldview is best understood through the language in which these views are formed, as such Cree provides contextual understanding that cannot be gained in English. Therefore, the knowledge and the worldview that is expressed within the language is not always readily available to all Cree people, as many Cree are not able to speak the language due to colonialism, forced assimilation, and restriction placed on the use of their language (Cardinal & Hilderbrant, 2000; Makokis, 2001).

The traditional knowledge understood by the Cree and Métis people is a part of their worldviews (Hart, 2010). The traditional knowledge of prescribed burning thus stems from theses worldviews. As described above, the people who practiced prescribed burning worked with nature to increase their food productivity and decrease the risk of large uncontrollable wildfires a benefit for both the environment and people. The Cree and Métis people, like many other Indigenous people, had strong connections to the land (Cardinal & Hilderbrant, 2000; Makokis, 2001).

3.4.2 European Settler Worldviews

In contrast, the common worldview of the European settlers at the time was that there was a hierarchical order of nature. This order of nature was linear, which is a stark contrast from the circularity of relations found in relational worldviews. At the top of this order was God followed by humans, and below was nature, which consisted of animals and plants. This hierarchy was theorized by philosophers like Aristotle and Carl Linnaeus (Bernasconi & Lott, 2000, 43). Along these lines of thinking other philosophers began to categorize humans based on phenotypic traits into races and placed these categories of race into a hierarchy as well. White people being the ‘Caucasian race’ were believed to be at the top of the hierarchy by thinkers like Johann Blumenbach and G.W.F Hegel. Hegel states when talking about the separation of nature and humans “it is in the Caucasian race that mind first attains to absolute unity with itself. Here for the first time mind enters into complete opposition to life of Nature, apprehends itself in its absolute self-dependence” (Bernasconi & Lott, 2000, 43). He goes on to say “the natives of America are, therefore, clearly not in a position to maintain themselves in face of the Europeans. The latter will begin a new culture over there on the soil they have conquered from the natives” (Bernasconi & Lott, 2000 , 44). Hegel’s statements are representative of the European settler worldview that facilitated colonial conquests and the assimilation of Indigenous people. The settler’s worldview saw humans as separate and superior to nature. The settlers saw the land and its natural resources as commodities which could be bought and sold for profit (Cronon, 1983). This worldview of being superior led to the disregard of Indigenous traditional knowledge (Cronon, 1983). As described in Chapter 2, the settlers saw Indigenous people as inferior and therefore did not value or respect

their worldviews. This disregard and active suppression of Indigenous knowledge contributed to the increased vulnerability of Indigenous people in relation to wildfires. By suppressing traditional knowledge and actively trying to assimilate Indigenous people were no longer allowed to practice their traditional ways of life. These traditional ways of life helped ensure food security and also decreased the risk of wildfires entering the community. The conflicting worldviews increased vulnerability for Indigenous people by decreasing access to land and actively suppressing traditional ways of life and disregarding traditional knowledge.

The settler's worldview separated the idea of the 'wilderness' and 'natural environments' from the anthropogenic landscapes that make up much of the world. With the settlement of Alberta, settlers believed there was a need to keep the forest pristine and natural. Settlers also believed there was a need for people to ensure that the activities that take place on that land do not disturb the 'natural' environment and did not increase the chances of a wildfire (Murphy, 1985). The settlers saw fire as destructive and something that needed to be suppressed. The settlers also saw the forest environment as natural and separate from human activity (Murphy, 1985). William Cronon (1996) describes this as a central paradox in which "wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural" (17). By creating these divisions, the settlers have created a vision of nature in which humans do not play an active role. However, humans have and will continue to shape and cultivate the environments in which they exist. For without the environment, humans would cease to exist (Cronon, 1996). This idea of a wilderness in which the natural exists outside of human contact worked to erase the millennia of work

that Indigenous people have put into cultivating environments where both humans and non-human organisms thrived.

The settlers believed that the Indigenous people were destructive with their use of fire and that this practice should be stopped (Murphy, 1985). The government insisted that the forests should be left in their natural state and that the goal should be to suppress and extinguish any fire that was found (Murphy, 1985). However, they failed to recognize that the so-called natural state of the forest at this point was one that had been cultivated by the Indigenous people for centuries. Once the practice of prescribed burning was outlawed in Alberta during the early 1900s by the federal government (Lewis, 1978; Murphy, 1985), the landscape was no longer maintained as it once was.

From the late 1800s to the early 1900's European settlers believed that Indigenous prescribed burning was to blame for the large wildfires that were being experienced (Murphy, 1985). With the increase of settlement across Alberta, the federal government saw the need to suppress wildfires so that they would not affect settlements. The federal government introduced the forest protection areas in Alberta and created policies regarding the protection of the forest and restrictions on prescribed burning (Lewis, 1978; Murphy, 1985; Kristensen & Reid, 2016).

When Alberta joined the dominion of Canada in 1905 through the *Alberta Act*, Section 21 stated that all Crown lands and natural resources would remain under federal jurisdiction. The federal government transferred jurisdiction of Crown lands and natural resources to the province of Alberta in 1930 through the *Alberta Natural Resources Act* of 1930; Thus, Alberta assumed the responsibility of forest protection (Murphy, 1985). The

Alberta Act Section 10 states that Indian Reserves will remain under the Jurisdiction of the Crown. The *Alberta Act* also secured the right to hunt and fish on unoccupied Crown land for Indians of the province. Alberta has a duty to consult First Nations “when Crown land and natural resource management decisions may adversely impact treaty rights protected under the Constitution Act, 1982” (Government of Alberta, 2020b, 2). Alberta also has a duty to consult Métis settlements when “Crown decisions relating to land and natural resource management” may impact traditional land use and harvesting activities (Government of Alberta, 2020c, 3). Despite the stated duty to consult both First Nations and Métis settlements, it is clearly written in the guidelines that the Crown has the final decision and that consent is not a requirement of the consultation process (Government of Alberta, 2020b; Government of Alberta, 2020c). Thus, Alberta is required to consult with First Nations and Métis about wildfire management on Crown land, because wildfire has an impact on traditional land use for both Métis and First Nation people. I was unaware of this requirement at the time of research, so I never inquired about consultations that may have taken place in relation to wildfire management on Crown land. This remains a question for further research.

The use of prescribed burning was prohibited and many noted that Indigenous people who tried to burn were arrested (Murphy; 1985). Since prescribed burning was used for a number of different practical reasons, many of which involved the ability to hunt and gather, the proscription of the practice is a form of structural violence which increased Indigenous people’s vulnerability. The restrictions meant that Indigenous people could no longer cultivate the land to increase the productivity of vegetation and encourage animals to graze, decreasing their food security. The restrictions also increased the amount of fuel

left on the ground which in turn increased the risk of wildfires. Not only did the restrictions increase vulnerability for Indigenous groups it actually increased the risk of wildfires for all of Alberta.

Within the division of nature and humans, we find another paradox in which the way a wildfire is treated. A wildfire is seen by settlers as a natural part of the environment, but also as something that needs to be suppressed. Therefore, the natural environment that the settlers wished to maintain is no longer one that is shaped by the natural wildfires, but rather an environment that is shaped to reflect the settler's worldview of what the natural environment is supposed to be. Thus, Alberta's boreal forest is an environment impacted by anthropogenic activities, whether maintained by Indigenous people or monitored by non-Indigenous peoples and the separations of the natural and human are artificial in this case.

In addition, this dichotomy of nature and humans allows for the impacts of natural phenomena, like wildfires, to be viewed as natural disasters, the effects of which are seen as inevitable; rather than viewing a natural disaster as a natural phenomenon interacting with human populations that have various social, economic and political histories. The idea of a 'natural disaster' as being a natural and unavoidable part of life allows people to ignore the vulnerability that is created through structural violence, colonialism, and racism for Indigenous populations. Natural disasters are the combination of a biological and physical process with the sociocultural, ideological and economic systems that exist (Lauer, 2012). The severity of a disaster is the direct result of complex human processes, thus affecting populations of people in different ways as a result of various histories.

Viewing wildfires as natural and their consequences unavoidable allows for the continued disadvantage of those most vulnerable to the hazard.

3.5 The Onset of Forest Protection

Following this ideology of the natural wilderness, we see the onset of the forest protection areas in Alberta. The protection areas were set up as a way to ensure the longevity of the boreal forest (Murphy, 1985). Alberta Forestry insisted that forests should be maintained in their 'natural state' without burning; however, this increased the amount of fine fuels, such as dry grass and branches on the ground, which allows wildfires to spread more rapidly. According to the Settler worldview, there is a need for people to manage and ensure that the forest remains in its natural untouched state. Thus, the role of Forest Ranger was created. The forest is divided into protection areas, as depicted in Figure 4, and Forest Rangers are assigned to each protection area (Murphy, 1985). The Forest Rangers are in charge of making sure that the activities taking place in the forest protection area aligned with the worldview of protection followed by Forestry. Civilian activities should aim to leave the forest in a natural state (Murphy, 1985).

With forest protection areas there is a need to control and monitor any activity within the area (Murphy, 1985). There is also the need to control any use of fire within the protection area to ensure and limit the possibility of a wildfire. The goal of the provincial government is to suppress and prevent wildfires from happening (Government of Alberta, 2017; Murphy, 1985). As of 2019, the wildfire season currently begins March 1st and ends October 31st, which has been recently adjusted to begin earlier as more early-season wildfires are being experienced. One must acquire a fire permit to burn anything other than a bonfire in any of the forest protection area during wildfire season. If caught

burning without a permit, one can be fined (Government of Alberta, 2017). Fines can also be issued on Indigenous territory as decided by the federal government. As demonstrated by Figure 4, the majority of Alberta is considered to be a part of the forest protection area. Therefore, anyone burning anything other than a bonfire anywhere in the pink area must receive a permit to burn from Alberta Forestry.



Figure 4. A Map of Alberta’s Forest Protection Area. Source: Alberta Government, 2017

Many Indigenous communities are located within the forest protection area. Thus, these communities are unable to burn without a permit and are held to the regulations and laws

that have been set by colonial governments which limits Indigenous communities' self-determination. This is yet another example of how policies and structures control Indigenous use of fire. As discussed earlier, Indigenous people used fire to aid in hunting and gathering, to clear paths, and to reduce risk from the potential dangers of extreme wildfire events. The current policies in place limit the ability to use fire in traditional ways. Thus, these policies do not allow Indigenous people to follow traditional lifestyles if they choose to. The use of prescribed fire as a wildfire prevention method was effective for many Indigenous communities (Lewis, 1978; Lewis & Ferguson, 1988; Lewis, Christianson & Spinks, 2018). By restricting prescribed burning these communities have seen increased fuel left on the ground which increases the risk of wildfires. The increased risk of wildfires increases the vulnerability of the communities that once practiced prescribed burning as a prevention method. These policies although in place to prevent wildfire actually increase the risk and vulnerability experienced by Indigenous communities in the boreal forest.

If conditions are deemed to be conducive to wildfires, a fire ban may be issued by the Alberta Government. There are a few different degrees in which a fire ban might be issued, depending on the conditions there will either be "no restrictions", "advisory", "restrictions", or an altogether "fire ban", in extreme cases sections of the area may also be closed as a result of public safety concerns. These bans are issued to lower the risk of a wildfire. At the entrance of many small towns in the forest protection area, there is a sign posted that holds information about the risk of wildfire. These signs usually have a gradient that goes from green to red. Green means there are no restrictions, and red means there is a fire ban. There is an arrow on the sign that points to the current

conditions and is changed as the conditions change, as demonstrated by Figure 5. These signs inform residents and visitors of the present conditions and the possible risks of wildfire.



Figure 5. Wildfire Index Sign. Source: TownandCountrytoday

In the 1930s, lookouts and communication towers were built by Alberta Forestry to help preserve and surveil the forest. The lookout towers are large structures that are built up to overlook an area; these towers allow Rangers to detect smoke from far away distances. Nowadays, Rangers can pinpoint where the smoke is coming from and compare the

location to fire permits to ensure that the fire is a permitted one. According to Leah, a wildfire information officer, if smoke is detected then the ranger will:

Look through the permit books, oh it's permitted; looks good. But if it's not in the permit book then we will send fire fighters and helicopters and planes overhead. So, residents abiding by that to get the permit does help us keep our fire fighters free to act on the real fires. (Interview with Leah, wildfire information officer)

This system ensures that any fire burning is permitted and reduces the chances that a wildfire will grow to be out of control. If the fire is not permitted and is an uncontrolled burn, the right resources (firefighters, helicopters, water bombers) will be deployed.

I experienced the onset of two small uncontrolled burns during my fieldwork. These fires were two separate events. The first fire pictured in Figure 6 started on May 21, 2019, on Devonshire beach along the Lesser Slave Lake. I was at the Friendship Centre with some other volunteers, and we saw a huge plume of smoke coming from the trees along the beach. The Slave Lake airport is located right behind the Friendship Centre, and we could see the waterbombers (airplanes used to drop water on fires) and helicopters taking off and flying over the smoke. Luckily the fire was quickly contained and extinguished. On June 17, 2019, I noticed the other fire while driving into Slave Lake from Edmonton. There was another huge plume of smoke on the horizon, and as I got closer, I realized how close the fire was to the town. This fire caused the evacuation of a small community called Widewater for a few hours until the flames were under control. These two wildfires demonstrated to me the ability of Alberta forestry to contain and suppress fires in a timely matter with minimum impact on the surrounding communities.



Figure 6. Plume of smoke from fire on the beach of Lesser Slave Lake Source: Alana Kehoe

Although the system detects and prevents the spread of many wildfires, sometimes due to the conditions in which a fire started, it can grow to be out of control and into an extreme wildfire event, as discussed above. In these situations, more firefighters and equipment will be deployed to battle the blaze. Sometimes the conditions are so adverse that the battle can take months. When conditions are arid, wildfires have been known to exist deep into the underground, making it extremely hard to extinguish the fire completely. Fires can even burn underground over the winter months and return above ground in the spring and summer. For example, the Fort McMurray fire continued to burn underground long after it affected the town. When a wildfire is uncontrollable and is near an inhabited settlement, often, an evacuation is necessary. I will discuss the process of evacuations in Chapter 4.

3.6 Return to The Burn

Recently, there has been a move back to prescribed burning in different areas across the world. Australia is one of the leading areas when incorporating traditional knowledge into practices of forest protection. Australia and Canada have similar colonial histories. Indigenous people in both areas were subjected to control and restrictions of their traditional practices, including prescribed burning. Australia has been working at incorporating traditional knowledge of prescribed burning into policies of forest protection since at least the 1980s (Lewis, 1989). There have been numerous articles written about the benefits of prescribed burning in Australia (Altangerel & Kull, 2013; Burrows & McCaw 2013; Ens et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2012; Lewis, 1989; Petty, DeKonick & Orlove 2015; Preece, 2013). There are a few findings from these studies that should be applied in Alberta. For example, it is recommended that Indigenous people play a major role throughout the whole process of incorporating traditional knowledge into policy, and for Indigenous stakeholders to be treated as equal counterparts in decision making processes (Hill et al., 2012). In addition, Indigenous traditional knowledge needs to be held at the same value as scientific knowledge (Ens et al., 2015; Mauro & Hardison, 2000). There needs to be a common ground in which Indigenous knowledge keepers can share and incorporate traditional knowledge into current environmental policies.

Alberta Forestry has recently acknowledged the benefits of prescribed burning and has begun to practice these techniques (Government of Alberta, 2017). On the Alberta Wildfire website, there is a section that describes the benefits of these practices. Their website (2017) states, “the provincial prescribed fire program is a proactive approach to

wildfire and forest management. By removing fine fuels in open areas, prescribed fires help reduce the size and intensity of future wildfires that potentially threaten communities or human life, infrastructure, natural resources, watersheds and soils, wildlife”. The website also states that this was a traditional practice of many Indigenous groups in Alberta, thus recognizing traditional knowledge. When discussing reducing the risk of wildfires with Leah, she mentioned that prescribed burning is being practiced throughout the forest protection area. Leah states:

Another way to reduce risk is to burn the dead dry grass every spring so we burn about 5-6 hundred hectares of grass around our communities in our 500 million hectares. The firefighters burn and work with fire departments in the community... around here [Slave Lake], High Prairie, Wabasca, Red Earth, and Trout Peerless. And all around the Indigenous communities on the south shore (Interview with Wildfire Information Officer Leah)

Thus, after decades of suppression, the practice of prescribed burning is coming back because Alberta Forestry has seen its benefits just as Indigenous people had. Indigenous people are not leading these initiatives but are sometimes employed to assist. Prescribed burning is becoming increasingly important in the maintenance of the forest and the prevention of larger uncontrollable fires (Government of Alberta, 2017). Had the practice of prescribed burning not been outlawed and prohibited, there might not be so many of the massive and uncontrollable wildfire events happening today (Lewis, Christianson & Spinks, 2018). Because of the suppression of prescribed burning, there is an accumulation of debris in the forest, which facilitates the spread of wildfires and encourages the growth of the flames into uncontrollable forces. Unfortunately, because much of the traditional knowledge of prescribed burning has been lost as a result of colonialism and assimilation policies, the prescribed burns done today are not to the same extent as the burns done in the past were. The loss of knowledge and the suppression of

the practice has been detrimental to the maintenance of the forest and contributes to the large uncontrollable fires in Alberta and elsewhere today (Lewis, Christianson & Spinks, 2018).

Today Alberta Forestry is working with Indigenous leaders to learn how to employ prescribed burning, which is a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, because conditions have changed so much since prescribed burning was widely practiced, some of the knowledge that has been held on to is no longer as applicable to the current conditions, rendering some of the burns to be less efficient than they would have been in the past (Lewis, Christianson & Spinks, 2018). The environment and climate have changed since the 1900s when the practice was first outlawed, thus the process involves some trial and error to adapt the processes to new and unfamiliar climates. Had the practice and the Indigenous people who used it not been silenced and viewed as inferior (Murphy, 1985), then perhaps there would be widespread use of fire in maintaining landscapes. There also would not be the interaction of extreme wildfire events with populations creating such large-scale disasters. Racist views and disregard for Indigenous traditional knowledge from policy makers over the last century has worked to place Indigenous people and communities in more vulnerable positions to the impacts of wildfires. Due to the scale of the wildfires experienced today there is often the need for the evacuation of large numbers of people, which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

3.7 Indigenous Wildland Fire Fighters

In addition to the proscription of prescribed burning, I was informed by an Elder called Alex, from the Beaver First Nation, about the new requirements that were put in place in

the 1990s that, in effect, limited the number of Indigenous people who could work as a wildland firefighter. Alex was a wildland firefighter and told me he fought his first fire in the 1960s when he was 16 years old. Alex states that:

In 85 on to 95 they were trying to change the system. They were trying to get rid of the native people, I met with Forestry in 1995 and they were making up a new policy and what they were doing, they wanted to instill a program. For one you needed physical activity, which was okay for the Native people. You had to pack about 20 pounds and walk around and that was okay a lot of people could do that. The other thing they wanted to do for safety and that was they had to have a grade 12 education. The safety element caught a lot of native people. You go back several years and a lot of Native people that lived way out couldn't even speak English yet (interview with Alex, Elder and retired firefighter)

This quote speaks to the continued control of Indigenous people and their interactions with wildfire. These new regulations, in effect, worked to limit the number of Indigenous people who could work as a wildland firefighter, a job that I am told was reasonably common for people living in northern Alberta. I was unable to find any documentation of when exactly the new requirements came into place, however, I discovered that to become an Alberta Wildland Firefighter today the government requires the education and strength elements as discussed by Alex (Government of Alberta, 2013). Although these regulations are standard practice for many government-run organizations, they limit the number of people who can work in certain positions. I was told that new regulations that are put in place for safety reasons are a common occurrence by another Métis man from central Alberta. While talking, he said to me that the government put age restrictions on how old you must be to be able to drive a tractor. I was told that many Indigenous children drove tractors as they helped their family with farming. These safety regulations that are meant to ensure that people practice these rather dangerous activities safely, also work to change the way that things have been practiced for long periods of time. These

regulations, although placed to keep people safe, inadvertently (or perhaps intentionally) restrict and limit the actions of the people who have been sufficiently practicing the newly regulated activities.

The new regulations regarding education, although put in place as a safety measure, actually restricted many qualified and knowledgeable Indigenous wildland firefighters from fighting fires. Education is a common requirement for many positions in Alberta. This requirement ensures that Indigenous people continue to be colonized and assimilated by requiring them to learn according to colonial ideals of education. Matthew Wildcat et al (2014) states “the pairing of colonial domination and western education has had a devastating effect on Indigenous students, contributing to the contemporary educational deficit that expresses itself in lower academic success rates” (3). Data gathered by the Assembly of First Nations states that only 36 % of First Nation children graduated high school compared to 72% of other Canadian students (AFN, 2012). While in Alberta the rates of graduation for Indigenous students are higher, they are still not comparable to the rates of non-Indigenous students. Among Indigenous people aged 25-65, 30.4% have no diploma or equivalent certificate compared to 11.3% of non-Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2016f). First Nations people living on reserve experience the highest rate of not receiving a diploma or the equivalent at 54.3 percent in Alberta (Statistics Canada, 2016f). Therefore, the opportunities to become wildland fire fighters are limited for many Indigenous people, as a large percentage of people do not meet the educational requirement.

Many of the Indigenous people I spoke with informed me of the vast knowledge of the land that they have from their hunting and gathering activities allowing them to have a

better understanding of the land, a major asset for wildland firefighters. Leanne Simpson (2014) argues that if education is going to be decolonized, Indigenous ways of knowing must be accepted and valued, especially knowledge that arises from relationships with the land. There is a disregard for Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing and higher value is placed on Western education, similarly to the disregard of Indigenous traditional knowledge of forest maintenance discussed above. While speaking about the educational requirement with a Cree woman who used to be a teacher in the western education system, she states “it is really sad because they [Indigenous people in the area] know fire, they know the land and how fire works”. Even though this woman worked within the colonial educational system she does not disregard the value of the traditional knowledge and she understands the value of the land as an educational system. Unfortunately, in government institutions in Alberta and Canada there is value that is placed on certain ways of learning, especially colonial forms of education while other ways of knowing are often disregarded.

Alex told me that because of these education requirements, and the lack of adequate education provided for Indigenous students by the province, there are not as many young Indigenous people who are able to fight fire comparatively to when he grew up. Alex said it was common for groups of people to be picked up from their community and dropped off in the bush to fight the active wildfires. Alex stated that the Indigenous firefighters used to know the areas that they fought fires, but now the firefighters are dropped off in locations where they don't have the same extensive understanding of because they do not live off the land like the Indigenous firefighters had when he was practicing. Now the process of becoming a wildland firefighter is much more complicated. Although the

requirements of education worked to eliminate many Indigenous wildland firefighters, there are some exclusively Indigenous groups who practice wildland firefighting and who are sometimes commissioned by Alberta Forestry to aid in fighting various wildfires.

There are also Indigenous communities that have their own fire departments, like the Bigstone Cree fire department based in Wabasca. I had the pleasure of interviewing some of this group who were mainly young people. This department worked with other fire departments and Alberta wildland firefighters to ensure the safety of their community during a major wildfire that caused an evacuation during my fieldwork. I asked the group about their experiences of being the people left to protect and defend their community. During our conversation, I heard about the sense of togetherness that the experience of the evacuation brought to their department, but also to everyone from different areas as a whole. So, although there have been limitations that restrict the number of Indigenous wildland firefighters as pointed out by Alex, there are ways around this in which Indigenous people take the lead and form their own departments, which are able to work with other groups toward a common cause.

The ability to form a fire department of one's own is a major safety net for any community, but specifically remote Indigenous communities. Without a fire department near a community, residents are not able to acquire insurance (Currie, 2010). Not having insurance is something that puts community members in a more vulnerable position. Not only are remote communities in northern Alberta more prone to experience wildfires, not having firefighters to fight the fire increases the possibility that the fire will enter the community limits. Also, the fact that people are unable to get insurance means that community members cannot rely on the help of insurance to rebuild once a wildfire

destroys parts of the community. The inability to acquire insurance demonstrates the ways that policy can increase vulnerability for certain populations, like remote communities many of which are Indigenous, as a result of structural violence. The areas that are most prone to wildfires are often the areas that are in remote locations, without fire departments and therefore are the areas where residents are unable to acquire insurance, increasing the vulnerability of people to the impact of wildfire.

Unfortunately, this is what happened to the community of Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement in the summer of 2019. I was told by a resident, Amanda, who lost her house, that although the community tried to put together a fire department, they were unsuccessful. Amanda states:

The government wanted us to set up our own fire department, but I don't know what kind of funding was received by the leadership. I saw the effort they put in trying to get the fire department started. I don't know if maybe there wasn't proper guidelines to follow for the community or they were able to get a stable platform for the fire department started but it just disintegrated. (interview with Amanda a Cree woman living in Paddle Prairie)

Although efforts were made by both the community and the provincial government to get a fire department started, unfortunately, as Amanda stated, it did not succeed.

Therefore no one in the community was able to get insurance. I was unable to locate any official documents related to the funding for the attempt at setting up the fire department in the community or what training was provided. By the time the fire hit the community, it was too late, and the fire was too big, and that attempts to protect the community were rendered useless. The fire burned down 16 homes, and these families were left to rebuild without the aid of insurance. Thankfully, many people rallied around the people who lost their homes, and enough money was raised to rebuild all of the houses. However, had the

community had their own fire department residents would have had the ability to acquire insurance and would have been protected. This protection may have also provided peace of mind to the residents during their evacuation.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the history of wildfire in Alberta. I have detailed the conflicting worldviews behind ideas of the relationship between nature and humans that Indigenous and European settlers held over time. I have examined wildfire response over the recent past. I have also described how policies can impact Indigenous people's role in forest protection. The proscription of prescribed burning combined with requirements that limit the role of Indigenous people in wildfire response has led to the increased number of wildfires today and thus the need for numerous evacuations. Overall, exclusion of traditional knowledge from forest protection and the restrictions placed on Indigenous practices of prescribed burning have increased vulnerability experienced by Indigenous people and communities in Alberta in relation to wildfires.

Chapter 4

4 Experiences of Wildfire Evacuation in Northern Alberta

This chapter sheds light on the experience of wildfire evacuations and the impact they have on Indigenous people. Evacuations are a typical response to disaster situations, especially wildfires. Over the years, the need for evacuating large numbers of people has become more commonplace in northern Alberta's boreal forest, in part due to the circumstances outlined in Chapter 3. Although wildfires have been a part of the landscape for centuries, the need to evacuate large numbers of people was not an issue until recent times due to population increases and larger uncontrollable wildfires. The 2011 Slave Lake Wildfire was one of the first events in Alberta that caused such mass destruction and helped shape Alberta's evacuation response to wildfires today. As I set out to research this fire in particular, I heard many stories about this evacuation and this event acted as a basis for many participants' understandings of wildfire in Alberta. The 2011 wildfire in Slave Lake is no longer considered the most destructive wildfire and has since been overcome by the Fort McMurray fire in 2016. Evacuations caused by wildfire have come to be a very real probability for communities situated in Alberta's boreal forest.

While I initially set out to research the 2011 evacuation of Slave Lake, over the course of my fieldwork there were numerous evacuations, and I was able to expand my research to encompass the many more wildfire events that took place over the summer. These wildfires were spread throughout northern Alberta and affected many communities.

In this chapter, I describe the process of evacuation and its impacts on the vulnerability of Indigenous people and communities. Although both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people experience feelings of displacement, there is a history of collective trauma that Indigenous people have been experienced as a result of colonialism, assimilation, structural violence and racism, which affects the displacement experienced during evacuations.

4.1 Evacuations

How exactly is it decided if and when a community will evacuate and who makes these decisions? To find out more about the processes behind evacuations, I interviewed the Wildfire Information Officer for the Lesser Slave Lake forest region, Leah. Leah was extremely knowledgeable about wildfires and the systems that inform municipalities about the risk of wildfires in their region. Leah informed me that there are 10 information officers including herself, one for each of the forest regions in Alberta. According to Leah, the job of an Information Officer is to "respond to media requests and send out wildfire updates to residents, public stakeholders, officials, and fire departments." A large part of disseminating information is done on social media platforms such as Facebook. In fact, Facebook was where I received the majority of information about wildfire activity over the summer. A few of my participants stated that during the 2011 Slave Lake evacuation, Facebook was their primary source of information, as radio and electricity went out in the town.

Another part of Leah's job is to promote fire prevention. Leah's office provides many pamphlets that described information on all things from wildfire season, fire permits, to hazard reduction burns (prescribed burns). These pamphlets are placed in different

government buildings around town, such as the visitor center. Many of these pamphlets are made in collaboration with FireSmart Canada. FireSmart is an organization that teaches people about the dangers of wildfire and ways to reduce risk. FireSmart holds information sessions at public events and goes to schools with interactive learning activities to teach people about wildfire and ways to reduce fuel on the landscape. There are many displays around town which detail the past fires in Slave Lake and have been created by FireSmart. Leah informed me that during wildfire season, she releases updates that notify residents of the risk of wildfire. The frequency of these updates depends on the perceived risks associated with the possibility of a wildfire. For instance, when it is raining and damp, the potential for a wildfire to ignite is low, so the frequency of updates is lower than when it is dry and sunny, and the potential for a fire to start is high. The higher the risk of wildfire the more reports Leah will send out to the public. If the hazard is low, then Leah will send out information once a week as the risk grows, she will put out updates more frequently. Depending on the situation updates may go out once a day or multiple times in one day. The hazard of wildfires is continuously being measured using a variety of scientific techniques based on weather and levels of fuel on the ground. These measurements are used to inform fire bans as discussed in Chapter 3. During wildfire season fire bans are put in place to lower the risk of a wildfire starting. Wildfire Information Officers keep communities informed of the wildfire situation, but it is the authorities within a community that are responsible for decisions on how to act in response to the threat. Therefore, it is each community's responsibility to decide what the appropriate action is in the current situation and whether an evacuation is necessary. Both

Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities are in touch with Alberta Emergency Management to aid in disaster response.

Because of the diversity when it comes to evacuation response protocols, I will focus on the larger systems at play. For instance, while I was in Slave Lake, the town was put under an evacuation alert. The decision to put out the alert was informed by the updates that Leah provided to the municipality. At first, we were put under an 8-hour evacuation alert, which means that each person must be ready to go within 8 hours in case the situation changes and the alert changes to an order. This alert was later downgraded to a 12-hour alert. An evacuation order means that everyone must leave the community immediately as the threat of a wildfire is imminent. There is also the possibility that a voluntary evacuation order will be issued, in which case it is the community member's choice to leave. During a voluntary evacuation, many times, it is the community members with health issues, disabilities, and small children that choose to leave as these populations are deemed the most at risk.

Table 1 lists all the communities that were under evacuation order and the dates that they were evacuated for. Many of these communities are Indigenous communities, marked by an asterisk, demonstrating the heightened importance of my research. The table shows that some of these communities were forced from their homes for extended periods of time. Evacuation times varied between hours to several weeks. Some communities were even evacuated multiple times.

Location	Dates	Duration
Mackenzie county #23	May 20 th -June 7 th	18 Days
High Level, Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement*, Bushe River*	May 20 th – June 3 rd	14 Days
Dene Tha’ First Nation*	May 20 th - June 7 th	18 Days
County of Northern Lights	May 29 th – June 14 th	16 Days (On and Off)
Wabasca, Bigstone Cree Nation*, Chipewyan Lake Village	May 29 th – June 12 th	14 Days
Peerless Trout First Nation*	May 31 st –June 8 th	8 Days
Indian Cabins	Jun 17 th - 21 st	5 Days
Peerless Trout First Nation*	Jun 17 th – 21 st	5 Days
Widewater	Jun 17 th	5 Hours
La Crete	June 17 th - June 24 th	7 Days
Rocky Lane*, Dene Tha’ First Nation Bushe River*, Beaver First Nation’s Child Lake Reserve*, Boyer River Reserve*	Jun 17 th - June 24 th	7 Days

Table 1. Evacuation Orders Issued in May-June 2019 due to Wildfire

4.2 My Own Experience with Evacuation

Participant observation plays a large role in most ethnographic studies. I had not expected to complete any participant observation of my own, as the wildfire I set out to research happened 8 years before I arrived in Slave Lake. However, over the course of the summer as demonstrated by Table 1 there were numerous wildfires and many evacuations, which allowed me to experience first-hand what happens during these events. I certainly did not expect I would be able to expand my research to encompass the wildfires of the 2019 season, let alone be placed under evacuation alert myself. My own experience of evacuation helped inform my overall understanding of the process and its impact on people.

On May 30th, I woke up and got ready to go volunteer at the Friendship Centre. When I walked outside, I was immediately greeted by a sky of haze. There was much more smoke in the air than the previous mornings. There was also ash covering my vehicle and the patio furniture on the back deck, as illustrated by Figure 7.



Figure 7. Ash covering a patio chair. Source: Alana Kehoe

I was a bit concerned and thought, as a precaution, I should fill my car up with gas. After I filled up, I went over to the Friendship Centre to help at the Food Bank for the High Level evacuees. While volunteering, we got the news that the Hamlet of Marten Beach, about 20 minutes away from Slave Lake, was being evacuated due to a wildfire. Once news spread, the atmosphere in the Centre changed. Volunteers and workers were becoming very wary and expressed concerns about the close proximity of the fire. One person stated, “well, if they are under evacuation, surely we are next”. I could sense the feelings of unease that overcame the Centre; people were rightfully reminded of the past evacuations and the damage caused by the fire in 2011. Some people started to compare

the smoke coverage to that of the day of the 2011 evacuation. Barb, the director of the Friendship Center, decided to let staff leave one at a time to gather important documents and to pick up their children if needed. I wandered around the Centre uneasy as the smoke grew thicker and questioned what I should be doing. Since I was living out of a suitcase, I knew I would be able to leave quickly if needed. This made me stop and consider what other people who live in the area might be feeling. The stress of deciding what to take and what to leave behind knowing that you might never see these things again can be overwhelming, I was told. This stress sometimes resulted in people grabbing items they later found to be silly or useless like a pair of snow pants in the middle of spring or taking a picture of jewelry instead of grabbing the jewelry.

I continued to help out at the Centre knowing I would be able to pack up fast. The Centre had just received a large donation of water bottles for the High Level evacuees. I helped unpack pallets of water and carry them to the back room with another volunteer. As I unpacked, I was chatting with other volunteers and staff about what their plans were in case of an evacuation, many of them mentioned that they would head to Edmonton even if it were just an alert. As the morning went on, more and more people left the Centre to prepare themselves for the worst-case scenario. Most of the volunteers had left, and half of the staff were gathering the essentials. I had been in contact with the woman who was letting me stay in her house and was informing her about the situation at Marten beach. I asked if there was anything I should do or anything she wanted me to gather in the case of an evacuation. She asked me to spray down her house with water and informed me that she would be coming to gather up some of her valued belongings. I was shocked that someone would head towards Slave Lake, as I thought that we would soon all be forced

to leave. Looking back, it is clear that she had a better understanding of the risk and she knew that there was ample time before the wildfire would enter the community.

At 10:16 AM, Alberta Emergency Alert sent out the update over the phone as a text message, similar to an Amber Alert where everyone in the vicinity receives the message, that the Town of Slave Lake was being placed under an 8-hour evacuation alert due to the close proximity of the wildfire. This is when I began to worry. At the time, I wasn't really sure what the "8-hour alert" meant, but the smoke grew thicker, and so did my worries. Others seemed to think that the alert warranted gathering their belongings and getting ready to leave. Some people didn't seem to be panicked and went on about their day. I think people's experience of the 2011 wildfire helped inform their understanding of how serious this alert could be. I decided to leave the Friendship Centre to pack up my suitcase and put my belongings in my car. I rushed home and soon became flustered. I was receiving calls from worried family members, insisting that I should leave the town and return to my hometown, of St. Albert, just outside of Edmonton. I juggled the idea of staying in the area to gather some rich data. I had spoken to residents who fled Fort McMurray in 2016 for previous research and heard their stories of evacuation and how they didn't receive enough warning and ended up fleeing while houses were burning. I knew I didn't want to be in that situation, so I decided I would leave. I struggled with the decision and later realized I may have rushed out of town before I was ever really in harm's way, but at the time I was thinking it's better to be safe than sorry.



Figure 8. View on the drive home. Source: Alana Kehoe

As illustrated by Figure 8, the driving conditions were deplorable, and there was low visibility on the highways out of town. All of the gas stations were lined up, and I was thankful that I had already filled up. I drove to my mother's house and stayed for the weekend. The whole weekend I felt like I should be in Slave Lake, and I wondered if I was missing out on valuable data. I thought about the experience of being in a town that was under the evacuation alert and how people would probably be discussing wildfire and its impact. I would have been able to hear people's concerns while out around town and I would have used these conversations to inform my understanding of how people react to evacuation. I wondered if I would have found people to interview during this time; at the time I hadn't interviewed anyone yet, and I worried I was going to miss out

on some insights that came up during this time. Perhaps this evacuation alert would have been the perfect time for some participant observation. I was able to complete some participant observation on my own because I had left due to the evacuation alert, but had I stayed I may have been able to observe others and gotten a better sense of the general feeling in Slave Lake and not just my own feelings.

I felt uneasy and displaced while at my Mom's, still, even being removed from any hazard of wildfire. I experienced a small taste of the worry that others in these situations face. I was able to remove myself from the situation with relative ease. I did not have a home to worry about. Of course, I worried about all of my new-found friends and their possessions, but I would not equate this to the same kind of fear as someone who is from the community and has a serious attachment to the place. I remembered the time my cousin and his family were evacuated from Fort McMurray and the constant worry they had about their house and belongings. Their feelings of anxiety came from the unknown and knowing they could not do anything to stop or change the path of a wildfire. The situation is out of residents' hands and the responsibility is placed on first responders. This creates a sense of unease, because control has been lost. I remember how hard that anxiety was for my cousin and his wife; and for everyone experiencing wildfire evacuations. My feelings of displacement came from being disrupted and my anxiety came from the unknown. I knew I had a job to do in Slave Lake, and I felt like I was unable to complete it. I was happy to be home, but I was anxious to get back. There is something to say about the routine of life that we get used to; it provides a source of comfort. The disruption of routine can be very upsetting and uncomfortable for people who are experiencing displacement (Oliver-Smith, 2016).

I returned after the weekend, once the alert had been reduced to 12 hours instead of 8. I was still uneasy about the possible danger and the proximity of the fire. I found upon returning to Sawridge First Nation that I had this constant feeling of fear in the back of my mind. It wasn't a debilitating fear, but I felt it daily. My fear was that the fire would come closer, and I would be forced to flee or even worse die in the flames. This fear was even incorporated into my dreams, or should I say nightmares. I woke up one night in a sweat after dreaming that the fire had hit the First Nation and firefighters were at the door screaming for me to get out. I had similar dreams throughout my fieldwork. There seems to be this same sense of fear that is incorporated in everyday life for many who experience a wildfire evacuation.

I set up interviews for the week following the alert and discussed my fears and my misunderstandings with others. It soon became apparent that I, never having lived in the boreal forest, had never been taught what the alert system meant. Many residents have been taught or informed by FireSmart programs in the area since the 2011 wildfire, which describes the risks associated with living in the boreal forest and how to prepare. I hadn't thought to study up on how these alert systems worked because although I was embarking on the journey to study evacuations, I never thought I would be involved in one. This experience became a talking point in many of my interviews, as I expressed my concerns to others, and they responded with their own. Participants understood my concerns and my reasons for leaving. I felt better able to understand and empathize with participants having experienced the evacuation alert.

4.3 Evacuation of Indigenous Communities

Wildfire evacuations of Indigenous communities can demonstrate a lack of infrastructure within the community, communication difficulties, and the discomfort caused by culturally insensitive evacuation protocols. All of these factors work to increase vulnerability of these communities, who are already at an increased risk due to their location in the boreal forest.

There has been little research conducted on the impact of wildfire evacuations on Indigenous communities, which is especially considering the increased vulnerability that many Indigenous communities face due to their remote locations in heavily forested areas and lack of infrastructure in place to deal with wildfires (McGee, Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation, Christianson, 2019). The studies that have been conducted have demonstrated that evacuations due to wildfire are extremely hard and do not consider the specific needs of many Indigenous communities. Scharbach and Waldram (2016) explored the 2011 evacuation of Hatchet Lake Denesuline First Nation, a remote fly-in community, in northern Saskatchewan. Residents expressed that the evacuation caused great stress and confusion for many individuals. During the evacuation, families were often forced to separate, and sometimes mothers were forced to separate from their young children. The evacuees were flown to different host communities, many of which were far apart, making reuniting families a difficult task. Scharbach and Waldram (2016) also found that information on where the evacuees were sent was often not clear, meaning that individuals often had no idea where their family members were located. Many members of the community did not speak English, making communication in host locations extremely hard and increasing the isolation that some residents faced during the

evacuation. Furthermore, the experience of being in “the big city” of Saskatoon was a culture shock for many who had never left the reserve before (Scharbach & Waldram; 2016).

In another study, McGee, Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation and Christianson (2019), found that numerous members did not want to leave the Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation in 2011 as evacuation protocols were found not to be culturally appropriate, moving people off traditional territory for extended periods of time. Many residents stated that they would have preferred to stay on the First Nation and fight the fire to protect their belongings. Others stated that the communities they were sent to were unfamiliar and they would have rather been sent to communities closer to their home community. Others felt they lost control when they were forced to leave and would have preferred the choice to leave be up to them. The desire to stay on traditional territory was related to the lasting impacts of colonialism and the *Indian Act* (McGee, Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation, & Christianson, 2016). One resident compared the evacuation to the memories of being forced to leave to attend residential schools.

Clark (2018) conducted a study of the evacuations of various Indigenous communities in Alberta caused by the Fort McMurray fire in 2016. Clark (2018) found that there was a lack of communication between provincial and Indigenous governments that lead to the exclusion of Indigenous groups during conversations by authorities about the evacuation. Not only was there a lack of communication during the evacuation, but it was found that Indigenous governments were excluded from the re-entry and recovery phases. First Nation communities felt a lack of communication and Métis organizations felt completely disregarded and ignored throughout every phase of the evacuation. Overall,

Indigenous communities felt excluded and were disregarded when it came to the evacuations in 2016 even though they housed evacuees during the first weeks of the evacuation. The wildfire also demonstrated a lack of funding and infrastructure in communities that led to struggles to rebuild and hampered the ability to continue to provide social services during the disaster. Clark (2018) found that there needs to be improvement in government to government relations, communication, and decision-making processes throughout all phases of evacuations.

All of the studies mentioned above used community-based research practices, which allowed them to understand better what evacuations were like for the community as a whole. I am not able to speak for communities as whole entities but instead can draw connections from interviews with various Indigenous individuals who are situated both on and off-reserve and were involved in separate but similar evacuations.

During an interview with an Indigenous community health representative, Sophie from Wabasca, I was informed of what the evacuation was like for her and also for the many people she assisted during this summer's evacuation and previous evacuations. One of the major themes that came up during this interview was how hard it was for elders to be moved into the city during the evacuation, similar to the hardships discussed by Scharbach and Waldram (2016). Sophie recalled her interactions with one elder in particular during the evacuation this summer. The evacuation lasted two weeks, and therefore evacuees were entitled to financial compensation. Sophie planned to assist an older gentleman with the paperwork needed to receive the money. She stated that the man had received a lot of the wrong information and was not sure of the proper steps to

receive the money. Sophie told the man that she would be right back to assist him, but upon her return, the man had left. Sophie states:

I wondered about him. And I see him in our community here and I went and talked to him last week on Friday, I seen him and I asked him "Did you ever get the help that you needed?" And he said "No". I said "really nobody helped you or what was going on?" and I said "cause I went back and you were gone". He said "Well I went to my room and I laid down". I said "Oh wow. Do you know any kind of financial help would of helped you for these several days." And he said "you know what makes you think it's all about money?" And I said "well it would help you for the little things." He says "you know some of us, we don't rely on that. We just rely on Mother Earth." And after I left, I was really thinking where was he coming from. But I know his lifestyle. He's a person that is always out in the bush. He's eats over a bonfire. He's a very traditionalist and uh I guess he's happy that's how his life is. He just stays out by his place and he survives by what he hunts. I kind of think it was a big culture shock to him. (Interview with Sophie an Indigenous, community health representative)

Sophie's interactions with the man are not an example of an isolated event. It is hard for individuals like this man to be removed from their home to a city like Edmonton for extended periods of time. The city is vastly different than the reserves in Wabasca, which created obvious discomfort for this individual as well as others. The city is large and bustling, where the reserve is quiet and has a lot of space to hunt or fish. The city is full of many different people, while the reserve consists mainly of Indigenous people, many of whom share the same language and cultural values. There are different customs and interactions experienced in the city than on the First Nation. Sophie told me that many individuals on the reserve had never left and if they had, it was usually for a few days to the city. She states:

Well most families aren't used to that. Usually when our families go to Edmonton or cities it is for a medical reason or something serious. But that's only for two or three days. It's a lot easier to go in and come home but you know when you have a fire it's different. (interview with Sophie a Cree, community health representative)

Not having the ability to return home or to go somewhere that is like home created a culture shock for community members. Even when a trip to the city is needed, many elderly community members will avoid it at all costs. I was told that some individuals would rather die than go to the city for continued medical treatments. Similar to Sophie, Amanda, a Cree resident for Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement, mentioned that many of the residents from her community also hadn't left the community for extended periods of time and were not accustomed to the city. Once removed from their home, many evacuees longed to return home, often questioning authorities on when they could leave.

Another thing that Sophie mentioned was that she experienced a lack of communication about the evacuation itself. Sophie lives on the edge of the reserve and does not have internet access. She also mentioned that she turns her cell phone off on her days off and enjoys her surroundings. On the day of the evacuation, Sophie stayed home sick from work and had her cell phone turned off. She stated that if she had not travelled into town to visit her brother, she might not have received information about the evacuation. I was told by Bigstone Cree Fire Department that they went door to door to inform people of the evacuation order, indicating that they are aware of the problem. However, Sophie pointed to the need for better systems of communication. She suggested that family members would have to look out for each other as they would have more information on who would be home at the time, but that this wasn't a foolproof system, especially for people who didn't have any connections in the community. Sophie mentioned that not everyone in the community uses social media or even a cell phone, so it can be hard to get a hold of people. Amanda also suggested a lack of communication during her evacuation as she stated she never really understood how close the fire was to the settlement. It was her

understanding that the evacuation was due to smoke and not the proximity of the fire itself. Amanda only left the settlement when she heard the highway, the only way out, was going to be shut down.

Lines of communication are often described as a major issue in wildfire evacuations. In fact, McGee (2019) states, “Communication also affects the wellbeing of evacuees, with inadequate communication increasing distress and abundant and timely information helping residents to cope with the stressful situation” (13). Not receiving the information needed to make timely decisions has been demonstrated to increase stress during evacuations. There needs to be a way that communication of important information can be increased for everyone in these communities. The lack of communication infrastructure should be addressed as many communities do not have proper cell-service or access to internet, both main points of communication during evacuations I am told. The lack of these services increases vulnerability of people within the community and creates added stress for residents. It also puts strains on the fire department who spent hours informing people of the potential of the evacuation and then again hours later informing people of the mandatory evacuation order.

A member of the Sawridge First Nation recalled the evacuation of 2011, due to the Slave Lake fire. As previously mentioned, Sawridge reserve borders the edge of Slave Lake. In 2011, Sawridge First Nation was evacuated on May 14, one day before the town of Slave Lake was evacuated. I was told that when evacuated, members of the First Nation just went into town and stayed at friends or hotels. Because of the proximity of the reserve to the town, some of the First Nation’s members questioned why the reserve would be evacuated and not the town.

From my own understanding why we were told to leave is because we didn't have a fire service and because we didn't have our own equipment and stuff like that to fight a fire ourselves the province said probably better for you guys to go because we are not sending any fire trucks or first responders to your First Nation because we need those services to fight this fire. So basically, it kinda felt like, and I didn't feel this personally because I understood, but community members felt that oh they just want us out of their way. They aren't going to fight a fire if it comes to the reserve, they will let us burn. (Interview with Indigenous resident from Sawridge First Nation)

There is a real challenge for Indigenous communities to fund programs such as fire departments. The lack of these services puts Indigenous communities in more vulnerable positions and also creates a reliance on larger surrounding communities. The larger communities will likely protect themselves, unless agreements between governments are created, leaving Indigenous communities without resources or protection. Indigenous communities should have access to funding to create the needed infrastructure for their protection, like fire and police departments. In addition, I was informed that people felt evacuating the First Nation first was a demonstration of the racial tensions that Indigenous people face. Some people from the First Nation interpreted this as a complete disregard for their existence as a community and another way in which systems and policies harm Indigenous groups through structural violence.

4.4 Direct and Indirect Experiences of Racism During an Evacuation

Aside from structural violence and problems with evacuations being culturally insensitive, there are also direct and indirect experiences of racism that occur during evacuations. Interactions between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people during the time of a wildfire evacuation are sometimes fueled by negative stereotypes and racist attitudes. During the evacuation of High Level and area, many evacuees came to Slave

Lake, while others went to Grande Prairie or other locations. Upon arrival, the evacuees were supposed to check-in at the Legacy Centre in Slave Lake. The Legacy Centre is a multipurpose center where events such as banquets, weddings, plays, are held.

Interestingly the Legacy Centre was built after the 2011 fires and is owned by the Wildfire Legacy Corporation and operated by the town. In the Centre, there is a large and beautiful, interactive FireSmart display that details the 2011 wildfire evacuation and recovery efforts. Figure 9 is a picture of the display that anyone who enters the Legacy Centre will see. The display acts as a reminder for the events that transpired during the 2011 Slave Lake Wildfire to all that see it. The evacuee registration tables were set up in front of the display, alongside other information booths.

The Legacy Centre became the main point of location for most things related to the High Level evacuation. It was the first place that evacuees went when they arrived in Slave Lake after having to leave their homes. When I first heard about the evacuation of High Level and how evacuees would be coming to Slave Lake, I went to the Legacy Centre to talk to officials and see if I was able to help in any way. One lady immediately said, "nope, we've got this". As I turned away, a bylaw officer said, "I'll take your information, and we will call you if anything comes up." He followed with, "we might need someone to clean up after the animals". I gave the officer my information but never received a call. I had also signed up online as a volunteer but never received any more information or requests to help.



Figure 9. FireSmart Display at the Legacy Centre Source: Redpointcreative

I had already planned to go to the Friendship Centre and meet with its director, Barb, about my research. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, when I got to the Friendship Centre, they were setting up the Food Bank. I ended up spending the duration of the High Level evacuation volunteering at the Food Bank. During this time, there were many representatives from different organizations that came through the Friendship Centre offering their services, most of which were Indigenous Health workers.

While serving soup and bannock one Friday, I was teamed up with one of the Indigenous health workers, Margo. We talked about how people felt that the Legacy Centre was exclusionary and rather cold when approached or offered help. It seemed like the municipality did not want any help and wanted to remain in control at all times. I mentioned to Margo that I was told at the Legacy Centre I wasn't needed for anything, and she responded by asking me if I was white. She was a bit relieved to hear that I was

not Indigenous, as many of the workers felt that because of their position as "Indigenous health worker," they were being categorized and sent to the Native Friendship Centre as a way to centralize (or perhaps marginalize) the Indigenous people. At one point, we had over 6 different organizations at the Centre, all to do with Indigenous services, such as health workers or representatives from different bands that were being affected by the evacuations. I never checked out what services they had at the Legacy Centre after the first day because I was too busy volunteering at the Friendship Centre; however, I was told that there were a few public health workers at the Legacy Centre. Some of the people I talked to felt that the Legacy Centre was discriminating against Indigenous people. Whether intentional or not, the fact that people perceived these actions as discriminatory speaks to the situation and the relationship between figures of authority and Indigenous people.

Considering the Legacy Centre was the first place that evacuees had to go, one would think that it would be easy access to have all the services provided upfront. For the first few days of the evacuation, we were being told at the Friendship Centre that there was no information being provided to evacuees that the Food Bank was open and available to them. This could be due to the chaos of trying to get the influx of people provided with shelter (hotel rooms), yet this could also be a result of the strained relationship that the Friendship Centre and the municipality have, according to some residents. Either way, by sending Indigenous health workers to the Friendship Centre, there was a divide created in who accessed the resources at the Friendship Centre, which created the perception that there was racial profiling at the initial point of contact during the evacuation. A Cree woman I interviewed stated: "I hate to say it, but I felt it was a bit prejudice because the

only people that were sent here [the Friendship Centre] were Indigenous people and foreign workers" when talking about the separation of people at the initial point of contact. This quote exemplifies how some of the Indigenous people that I spoke to perceived the separation of racialized groups during the evacuation.

In addition to the influx of Indigenous workers at the Friendship Centre, the people who were accessing the Food Bank were disproportionately Indigenous or Filipino foreign workers. There were only 2-3 families that I identified as white accessing the food bank, one of which only came because they needed gluten-free food for their daughter who had celiac disease. Alberta has a high number of foreign workers from the Philippines who work at a variety of stores, commonly Tim Hortons or McDonald's, which is why we saw large numbers of foreign workers. According to the 2016 census, of the 2741 residents of High Level, 24% or 670 registered as being 'Aboriginal' in High Level (Statistics Canada, 2016g). Foreign workers are counted in the census, but in a category that includes other populations, so I was unable to find any data of the overall percentage of foreign workers that make up the population of High Level. However, judging from the immigration category, it seems to be a relatively small percentage. Only 24% of the population of High Level is Indigenous, but more than 80% of the evacuees accessing the food bank were Indigenous. I see two possible reasons for this discrepancy. Either Indigenous people were being racially profiled and were being sent to the Food Bank by town officials as this population is deemed in need, or it because Indigenous people had a lower socioeconomic status than non-Indigenous people in High Level and were indeed in need services provided by the Food Bank.

Evacuees were being provided three meals a day out of a food truck at the Multipurpose Recreation Centre (MRC). I was told that there was only one choice of meal for each mealtime. Many individuals could not eat what was being provided due to health and dietary concerns. At the food bank, we had many requests for diabetic-friendly foods, as Indigenous people have the highest rates of diabetes in Canada (Leung, 2016, Meatherall et al., 2005). The food truck provided enough food to cover three meals but did not provide any extra food for snacking, which is where the Food Bank saw the most requests for snack foods for children. The Food Bank also provided canned goods, bread, sandwich meats, cereals, condensed milk, fruit and vegetables when available as well as hygiene products such as soap, shampoo, toothpaste, diapers, and wipes. The town's people were very generous, and we received large donations of various items every day.

The demeanor of some of the Indigenous people who came to the Food Bank was one of shame and embarrassment. One Indigenous woman, who was caring for a family of five, came in for some diapers and some snacks, she was very embarrassed and quietly mentioned to me that she is not normally like this and that she would not normally take handouts. It was very obvious that she felt some sort of shame by accessing the resources that we were providing. This could be due to how she perceives the common stereotype in Alberta that Indigenous people are always taking handouts (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Cardinal, 1999). The shame associated with receiving handout could also be a result of a long history of paternalistic attitude toward Indigenous peoples by colonial powers as discussed in Chapter 2.

In another instance, I was told a story from a Cree woman who was evacuated from Slave Lake in the 2011 evacuation. I was discussing her experience of the evacuation, and she

told me that at the time she had a white husband and that while registering as an evacuee, she was treated differently than her husband. She told me that her husband was treated very empathetically and with respect while she was pushed aside and did not receive the same respect as him. She also mentioned that she had not really noticed the difference in treatment but that her husband was outraged because it was very apparent to him. She explained how she had so often been treated disrespectfully because of being Indigenous that she sometimes doesn't realize that it is even happening; she has become accustomed to the racism and oppression she experiences (Allan & Smylie, 2015). This is just one example of the overt racism and racial profiling that can take place during evacuations. This story also demonstrates that the separation and differential treatment of Indigenous people did not only take place during the High Level evacuation in the summer of 2019, but also was felt during other evacuations. Evacuations can increase the potential for Indigenous people to experience both overt and covert forms of racism.

For instance, as discussed earlier, some Indigenous people had never left the reserve. Once forced to leave and interact with larger populations of the dominant culture, some Indigenous people are subjected to racism and racial profiling from the people that are supposed to help them as well as others in the community who are dealing with the influx of evacuees (Scharbach & Waldram, 2016). In addition, these situations place people in situations where they need help and may experience a loss of independence. This loss of independence is something that can reflect the colonial experience of Indigenous people, where Indigenous people are forced to rely on settlers.

Feelings of being controlled are a result of the long history of control that has been placed upon Indigenous people in Canada through colonial policies (Allan & Smylie, 2015), as

outlined in Chapter 2. I spoke to a Cree resident, Amanda, from Paddle Prairie, a Métis settlement in northern Alberta located near High Level. The settlement lost 16 houses, and a vast amount of traditional territory was damaged due to wildfire (Parsons, 2019). Amanda spoke with me about the impact of government control. Amanda stated, "policies have affected the way that our people could grasp and take care of themselves for years we weren't able to use our skills and knowledge because of the policies that the government has in place." She goes on to say that "Paddle Prairie is supposed to be self-governed but that they can't because of the policies and procedure of the government in place". While talking about the government's control, Amanda speaks of how these policies work toward continued assimilation and how this is still a problem that Indigenous people face today.

Amanda values her Indigenous heritage and wants to ensure that she instills these values in her children. Amanda demonstrates how the policies of the government have been used to control Indigenous people and work to assimilate them into the dominant culture. The reliance that is created through the lack of infrastructure means that often times, Indigenous communities must give up control during an evacuation. The lack of control experienced during these events may feel more upsetting to Indigenous communities because of the history of assimilation and control that they have experienced. In times of disaster, it is the community's responsibility to have a plan in place. If the community is unprepared, then they will need to ask the province or federal government for assistance. In these situations, the province takes over control of the response and recovery from the disaster. This loss of control is detrimental to the self-determination of Indigenous

communities and can feel like the continuation of colonial control and assimilation policies outline in Chapter 2 according to participants.

Many communities do not have the proper infrastructure needed to deal with the threat of a wildfire and therefore will have to give up control if a wildfire hits the community. This demonstrates deeper issues dealing with inadequate funding for Indigenous communities which limits community's ability to provide and care for themselves in the event of a disaster and therefore creates a reliance on assistance provided by provincial or federal governments.

4.5 Displacement

A major theme throughout my work is the feeling of displacement that evacuations create for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. I will first focus on the impact of displacement in a general sense, then I will detail the impact on Indigenous people and communities in greater detail in the next section. Hall (2017), describes displacement as “being and feeling out of place, away from certainty in place” (5). Displacement, although largely thought of as a physical thing, is much more than just being out of place and removed from one's environment. Displacement can be thought of as an all-encompassing feeling for some. Although one may no longer be physically displaced, the feeling of displacement may not go away. Hall (2017) states that “displacement through disaster occurs in multiple dimensions; there are those who have to leave and re-establish in different locations and those who are able to stay in a vastly changed environment and need to rebuild not only buildings and infrastructure but also place-based identities while grieving the loss of places and memories” (6). Feelings of displacement often continue once an individual or a group has returned home after an evacuation, especially when

there are visible changes to the landscape, whether that be structures or surrounding landscapes. For instance, many wildfires directly alter the landscape in numerous ways.

Diaz and Dayal (2008) state that “the most catastrophic impact of natural disaster is an individual feeling of ‘loss of place’ (1174). This feeling of loss of place is seen in many evacuees’ stories, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. As we go about our daily lives, we create a sense of place and an attachment to place that is grounded in the association that we have with a place (Altman & Low, 1992). These associations come in many interrelated and complex forms such as from our possessions, our identities, relations to the environment, understanding of community and culture created in place, emotions, knowledge and beliefs can all be ingrained in place (Altman & Low, 1992). We create routines and structures that help form the basis of our understanding of ourselves that are deeply related to our attachment to place. When our lives are interrupted by an evacuation, we are torn from our routines, and people can start to question their understanding of themselves and the world around them (Oliver-Smith, 2016). It is the discomfort that comes from displacement that creates these internal crises that some face when in disaster situations, like a wildfire evacuation. It is important to note that not everyone I talked to had experienced such harsh and upsetting reactions to their evacuation experiences; although, everyone did experience some degree of displacement.

I argue that the degree to which an individual is affected by displacement during a wildfire evacuation depends on several different things. For instance, the process of the evacuation itself affects how displacement is experienced. If the evacuation was unexpected and abrupt like the 2011 Slave Lake evacuation, there will likely be a higher degree of displacement felt by evacuees, than in situations where evacuations are

expected. The more information about the risk of wildfires that has been updated and provided to residents the lesser confusion residents felt according to interviews. The information and expectation of a possible evacuation gives residents time to prepare. Also, the experience of leaving an area that is surrounded by flames can alter the associations one has with that place. For example, driving out of Fort McMurray while the flames surrounded the highway is an image that is burned into the brains of many residents, and they may be reminded of the horrifying experience as they continue their daily lives once returning home. Attachment to place can vary, but a person who has a strong attachment to place may feel that they no longer have a home to return to (Altman & Low, 1992). The impact the fire has visually on the landscape also plays a role in feelings of displacement, especially for Indigenous people who often have a deep connection to the land which will be described in more detail in the next section.

Returning home to a place that is now scarred by the flames and no longer resembles home disrupts one's understanding and associations of that place. The value that people have placed on the items destroyed can impact how the person feels when returning. If a person lost their home and all of their valued possessions, then they may find it harder to return home than the person who did not place as much value on the things lost. Also, one's attachment to the affected area impacts feelings of displacement. Sometimes returning home is too hard, and people choose to move to a new location, so they do not have constant visual reminders of what has transpired.

In one of my interviews with a resident of the Sawridge First Nation, she expressed what it was like when residents returned to Slave Lake after the fire. This quote expresses how the damage altered her understanding of what was once a place called home.

When we were able to come into town, god it looked like a war zone. I'll never forget that image for the rest of my life. Coming into highway 88 and of course that's where the burn was, it looked like what you'd see on tv you know like a war-torn country, it was just devastating I couldn't believe it, no one could believe it (interview with Indigenous participant from Sawridge First Nation)

Although residents were able to return “home”, the damage that had been caused by the fire altered the image of home, emphasizing feelings of displacement. Although this person is a Sawridge resident, they consider the town to be a part of their perception of community, thus they were deeply impacted by the devastation the fire caused within the town. The image of the devastation that was experienced on the way back into town really drove home the feelings of loss of place that are associated with displacement, especially for residents who lost their homes. In another interview I was informed of how some residents tried to rebuild and recreate the place that they knew as home; however, even though people returned home and rebuilt what they had, the feeling of displacement did not recede.

Interviewee- yeah what I noticed with people is that there was a lot people that thought “when I get my nice new home and I move back in it will all be better” and it wasn't and that's when you started to see people get divorced and that's when you saw that ripple effect because you moved into that nice new house but it still wasn't your home.

Alana- it's like oh I got all this but still something is missing.

*Interviewee- yeah I have friends who tried to build exactly the same home because they had only been in there five years and they wanted to rebuild it exactly the same, but all that stuck out for them was everything that was different so it was their home but it **wasn't**. (bolded for emphasis) (Interview with non-Indigenous resident from Slave Lake)*

This conversation illustrates the displacement some people face when returning home; therefore, home becomes not only a geographical location but a feeling and a sense of

place (Altman & Low, 1992). Sense of place and attachment to place provide “security, exploration, predictability, control, and individual, group and cultural identity” (Altman & Low, 1992, 12). Although the couple had rebuilt an almost identical house as the one they had before the fire, it wasn’t their home, and it certainly did not relieve their sense of displacement. The feeling of familiarity that is usually associated with home had been changed. Russel Belk (1992) states that our possessions help provide a “sense of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going” and act as an extension of our self (37). Thus, walking into a house that isn’t reflective of the memories they once shared was unbearable for the couple. Although they recreated something similar, the house didn’t have the same dents and marks as their house that had been well lived-in; the house was no longer an extension of themselves and was not reflective of who they are. Much of our sense of place helps form our understanding of where we fit in the world and how life works, but disasters can uproot and disrupt these understandings (Altman & Low, 1992; Oliver-Smith, 2016). The experience of the wildfire altered people’s routines and reshaped their perceptions of how they fit within society. Anthony Oliver-Smith (2016) states “the destruction of loss through uprooting of livelihood and community require those impacted to engage in a process of reinvention. As social creatures, people’s reinvention of self will be intimately linked to the reinvention of social bonds and community” (122). This reinvention of social bonds and community consists of a reworking of people’s understanding of how they fit within their society. In this sense “the entire community or social world is thus endangered by such individual losses” (Oliver-Smith, 2016, 123) that are experienced as a result of the wildfire.

Another interviewee from Sawridge First Nation spoke to me about the importance of looking after yourself and ensuring that you are, as she put it, ‘well’. By this, she meant that you should work out any issues you might have mentally and physically because, in a disaster situation, they are amplified. She went on to inform me of the ripple effects, as outlined in the quote below that the fire had once people returned home:

The effects that evacuations have even on people with medical conditions my son has type 1 diabetes and his sugar was in the 30s. Understanding what trauma does to the physical body, the seniors you know I don't think anyone can be prepared for this but how this affected my family in the long run is that we take care of our shit. We don't need our shit building. It is important to look after your mental illness whatever you are carrying gets amplified. Some people have thoughts of suicide. Some people went into deep depression, marriages that were poor before ended in divorce. Children having issues at home, their behaviour showed up at school... Rate of divorce goes up and problem behaviour goes up and all these things come up after [returning home]. Seniors getting weaker and sicker. So, for me if I was going to recommend to anyone how to prepare for a disaster. Start with this. Make sure you are ok here [points to herself]. So, when something happens you understand what goes on in your head. Take care of business. So, my biggest recommendation is look after yourself. (Interview with Indigenous resident of Sawridge First Nation)

This quote reflects the lasting effects that the evacuation has had on people as a result of the collective trauma the community has experienced. Erikson (1994) explains collective trauma as devastating to social life and the bonds of a community. Although fire is often seen as an event, its effects are much more than just the result of the singular disaster. For many, the fire caused a huge shift in the way people went on about their lives. As suggested, some people were unable to continue to deal with their pre-existing issues.

The stress caused by the evacuation and aftermath of the fire, according to the interviewee, allowed pre-existing problems to fester up to the surface and, in some cases, resulted in a total alteration of one's life. These alterations took the form of break-ups, moving, and mental health issues. Oliver-Smith (2016) discusses how resettlement of the

displaced can act as a secondary disaster in which people are forced to reinvent their understanding of who they are and how they fit. Resettlement can demonstrate the pre-existing problems a person might have and push them to the edge of what they can handle causing a shift in their understanding of who they are. The experience of collective trauma can cause people to act in a way or react in ways that they had not previously as they rework their understandings of who they are and what they want (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2009; Erikson, 1995; Oliver-Smith, 2016). Thus, not only one's environment may change but a person can change drastically as a result of their experiences of evacuation and displacement.

4.6 Collective Trauma of Indigenous People

Although displacement is something experienced by everyone I spoke with, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, it is Indigenous people that have faced a history of displacement. Since colonization, Indigenous people have been restricted and removed from their traditional territory (King, 2012; Richmond & Ross, 2008). Historically, Indigenous peoples have been restricted in their movements and pushed onto reserve land.

Kai Erikson (1994) and Anastasia Shkilnyk (1985), write about the impact that disaster and forced displacement have had on the Ojibwa community of Grassy Narrows in northern Ontario. The community of Grassy Narrows lived a relatively traditional and isolated life until 1963 when the Department of Indian Affairs began moving the community members to a new reserve 5km away. The new community was easier to access and closer to the town of Kenora (Erikson, 1994; Shkilnyk, 1985). The people of Grassy Narrows were happy practicing their traditional ways of hunting and fishing. The

community was turned upside down by a series of events that changed the community dynamics in insufferable ways. To understand how a once self-sustained community turned into a community where cases of neglect, murder, abuse, violence and suicide are at unimaginable rates, we must look at the various factors of collective trauma experienced by the community (Erikson, 1994; Shkilnyk, 1985).

Collective trauma is described by Erikson (1994), as a “blow to the basic tissues of social life that damaged the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (233). Collective trauma changes not only the community, but also the individual as they work to reshape their understanding of who they are and where they fit in the community. For Grassy Narrows this collective trauma takes form in many events. For a long time, the only interaction the community members had with settlers was when the Indian Agent would come to the reserve once a year. However, as assimilation policies increased, some of the Grassy Narrows children were forced to attend residential schools. These children were forced to speak English and learn the way of the Settlers. This created a generation of people who felt a disconnect from their traditional ways and culture (Erikson, 1994; Shkilnyk, 1985). The effects of residential schooling are often described as intergenerational, where the impact on survivors transmits through generations and can be thought of as collective trauma (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009).

In 1963, the Department of Indian Affairs began to move residents to the new reserve which was set up without the consultation of people from Grassy Narrows. The houses on new reserve were built close in proximity and on ground that was not good for growing gardens. The movement of the reserve completely changed the way of life for the people

of Grassy Narrows (Erikson, 1994; Shkilnyk, 1985). In 1970, it was discovered that a nearby pulp mill had been dumping toxic waste which contained mercury into the river. The people of Grassy Narrows relied on the river not only for food and water, but for the economic opportunities that guiding and commercial fishing brought. The water and the fish in the river were deemed unsafe. The people who had been eating the fish and drinking the water were at high risk of mercury poisoning. The economic opportunities the river provided were no longer; commercial fishing was banned on the river and the fishing lodges shut down. All of these events described above are examples of collective trauma as they drastically transformed residents of Grassy Narrows and the community as a whole (Erikson, 1994; Shkilnyk, 1985).

This series of events resulted in a community that no longer resembles the healthy and happy community residents described of the old Grassy Narrows reserve. Bombay, Matheson & Anisman (2009) state, “community level changes in the aftermath of mass trauma have included erosion of basic trust, silence, deterioration in social norms, morals and values, and poor leadership” (23); all of which have been demonstrated in Grassy Narrows. Shkilnyk (1985) describes the community as “a drab lifeless place in which the vital spark of life had gone out” (4). The collective trauma experienced by Grassy Narrows is an extreme example of collective trauma in which the trauma has changed the community to its core. I did not encounter such glaring devastating effects caused by collective trauma in my interviews, but did hear instances where past collective trauma, such as residential schools played a role in the interpretation of the collective trauma that was experienced during an evacuation.

As I mentioned earlier, during an interview with an Indigenous woman from Sawridge First Nation, we discussed how a history of colonialism impacts one's experience of an evacuation. As we spoke about the First Nation being evacuated the day before the town of Slave Lake, the interviewee stated, "you know the survivors of residential schools, they felt like nothing had changed". This quote speaks to the erosion of trust that can be experienced after a mass trauma (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2009); In this sense, two mass trauma events, residential schooling and the evacuation. The survivors felt like the broader community still didn't care about them. They felt that even though years had passed since residential schools, their lives were no more important now than they were back then. The impact of trauma can be cumulative (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2009). The impact of residential schools increased distrust and was reflected by the anger felt after the evacuation for some residents. Some residents felt they didn't matter and that the policies around the evacuation reflected their lesser value. This quote speaks to the impact that colonialism and assimilation policies as collective trauma continue to have on Indigenous people today. Collective trauma can stem from the structural violence that Indigenous people face in Canada. Structural violence continues to place Indigenous communities at risk, which was felt by some community members during the 2011 evacuation. Policies were in place that divided Sawridge from the community of Slave Lake, which was reflected by the separate emergency management plans. Some people from the First Nation felt like they didn't have a place in society. As described in Chapter One, although Sawridge First Nation is separate from Slave Lake, Sawridge residents spend a lot of time in Slave Lake working, going to school and for leisure activities. It wasn't until the disaster that some people really felt that they did not have a

place in the community that they had been interacting with for years. I was told that the fire came extremely close to homes on the First Nation but that the town of Slave Lake was unable to send any fire trucks to fight the flames and that this action made some feel like the First Nation and its people did not matter to the town. When the evacuation ended and people returned, I was told that some people from the First Nation felt a lot of anger.

During the same interview mentioned above, the interviewee also stated, “then came something that I wasn’t prepared for, and that was the anger. The feelings of not mattering as much. The feelings of ‘oh let the Indians burn’”. This quote is representative of the anger and distrust that collective trauma can bring. Here we see how the structural violence in combination with previous collective trauma can impact the process of evacuation. Although the town may not have been malicious in their intent by not sending resources to the First Nation, it is representative of the structural violence that Indigenous people continue to face today. The policies that were in place at the time did not mandate the protection of the First Nation in the case of a wildfire; however, these policies are created according to the emergency management systems in place in Canada and Alberta that dictate a community is responsible for themselves first (described in Chapter 2) . The First Nation did not have the resources needed to fight the fire. Had the fire hit the reserve, it would have been catastrophic for the First Nation. The fact that Indigenous people have been displaced onto reserves and restricted in their movements means that they are stuck in these vulnerable positions in which policies do not protect them to the best of their abilities but rather increase their vulnerability.

The town of Slave Lake, like most municipalities do as dictated by emergency management plans, had policies to protect itself before sending their resources to the nearby First Nation. These policies been revised with the addition of the Tri-Council in recent times. This policy is an example of the structural violence that Indigenous people face as a result of the disconnect between levels of government. Having First Nations under federal jurisdiction means that more work must be done to ensure that First Nations are able to take care of themselves or have resources available to call upon in the event of a wildfire. There must be constant conversations between all levels of government to encourage cohesive emergency management as emergencies often impact larger regions than just one community. These conversations should be public, so residents are aware of the emergency management procedures. This public awareness is important so that community members are not shocked or surprised by the policies in place. The shock that was accompanied by the response of the town in relation to the 2011 wildfire led to distrust and anger from some members of the community, which might have been avoided had emergency management been made clear prior to the disaster.

In addition, the collective trauma of displacement due to wildfire evacuation may be increased for Indigenous people due to a history of displacement (Denov & Campbell, 2002; Egan & Place, 2013). Indigenous people have been displaced as a result of colonialism, the reserve system and racism they face from the dominant society (Denov & Campbell, 2002; Egan & Place, 2013). Wilson, Rosenberg, and Abonyi (2011) state “in addition to physical displacement, the aboriginal population in Canada was displaced socially and culturally through colonial policies that sought to undermine and erase their cultural values, customs and beliefs” (356). This social displacement can result in the

feeling of having nowhere else to go as they feel they are not accepted by the dominant society. For example, when asked if she noticed if people decided not to return after the disaster, one participant states, “No. No one wants us as their neighbour. Let’s be honest. I’m not saying everyone, but do you really want to live next door to an Indian. It’s out there”. Here we see how she feels that there was really nowhere else for her people to go because of the racism and discrimination Indigenous people experience from the dominant society. The displacement that Indigenous people have faced historically is continued in today’s society.

In addition to the impact of social displacement, being physically displaced from the land could result in a higher impact of the collective trauma of the evacuation because of Indigenous people’s metaphysical connection to the land. Richmond and Ross (2008) state, “The land is a fundamental component of Indigenous culture, and central to the health and wellness of Aboriginal societies” (404). For many Indigenous people the land is seen as a teacher (Raffan, 1993), in that it the land holds knowledge and acts as the first teacher and primary caregiver (Styres, 2011). The relationship between Indigenous identity and the land has been described as interconnected and interdependent (Cross, 2001; Crofoot, 2002; Makokis, 2001; Styres, 2011). Stan Wilson (2001) states “Indigenous people’s sense of self is planted and rooted in the land” (91). The land is a fundamental component of many Indigenous cultures, being physically removed from one’s land due to a wildfire evacuation may result in an evacuation disproportionately affecting Indigenous people. Thus, feelings of displacement may be more robust for some Indigenous people as they have been a historically displaced people with strong ties to their traditional territories. As a result of the past collective and intergenerational trauma

experienced by Indigenous people and communities the impact of wildfire evacuations may be experienced in a more extreme form for Indigenous people.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have detailed current Indigenous experiences of wildfire in light of historical and conflicting relationships with European settlers and levels of government. I have examined the impact of displacement as a result of wildfire evacuations and explored the effect of collective trauma in relation to Indigenous people's experiences of wildfire evacuations. The policies and procedures outlined in Chapter 2 have had a lasting impact on Indigenous people. These impacts are reflected in the relationships that Indigenous people have with European settlers and colonial governments, which play a large role in the way that evacuations are experienced.

Chapter 5

5 Conclusion

Indigenous people have had a long history with wildfire in northern Alberta. The outlawing of prescribed burning practices increased the number of wildfires occurring today, creating a need for the evacuations of large numbers of people. Since Indigenous communities are often the most vulnerable to wildfire, higher numbers of Indigenous communities need to be evacuated. Evacuations can expose and exacerbate issues that are felt by Indigenous communities, such as a lack of infrastructure, culturally inappropriate evacuation protocols, and a lack of funding. Wildfire evacuations are hard on everyone going through them, and the sense of displacement that is felt can be lasting for many individuals. Histories of displacement, collective trauma, and attachment to land can result in evacuations disproportionately impacting Indigenous people. Evacuations also open up areas where direct and indirect forms of racism and can be experienced, as discussed in Chapter 4.

This thesis demonstrates how natural disasters are the result of the interaction of economic, social, cultural, political, and historical processes in the context of a natural hazard. A long history of continued colonization, assimilation attempts, racism and structural violence have all played a major role in the impact of wildfire on Indigenous people today. It is essential that when researching natural disasters, we look at the different temporal aspects of the event. By looking to the past, we can better understand the differential impacts of a disaster that we see today.

5.1 Limitations

As with any research there are limitations to this study. Many of the limitations to this study stem from the fact that this project is not a community-based project. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is the new norm for working with Indigenous people and communities. CBPR “is generally understood as a process by which decision-making power and ownership are shared between the researcher and the community involved, bi-directional research capacity and co-learning are promoted, and new knowledge is co-created and disseminated in a manner that is mutually beneficial for those involved” (Castleden, Morgan, & Lamb, 2012, 160).

After completion of this research, I took the First Nation principles of Owner, Control, Access, Possession (OCAP) certification. OCAP was founded in “1998 during a meeting of the National Steering Committee of the First Nations Inuit Regional Longitudinal Health Survey” (FNIGC). The National Steering Committee later became the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC). OCAP is a registered trademark of the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC). “The FNIGC is a non-profit operating with a special mandate from the assembly of First Nations’ chiefs in Assembly. FNIGC envisions that every First Nation will achieve data sovereignty in alignment with its distinct world view” (FNIGC). The principals of OCAP ensure that research done with First Nations is compliant with the ideals of the First Nations involved. A lot of research has been done that has worked to harm First Nation communities and people. OCAP helps to ensure that the research and data collected aligns with the wants and needs of each First Nation involved in research. My research did not follow the principles of

OCAP, since OCAP recommends that the study be CBPR and the First Nations' involved have ownership, control, access and possession of the data collected (FNIGC).

After taking the OCAP fundamentals course I came to understand some of the limitations and challenges I encountered because my study was not CBPR nor was it OCAP compliant. Despite this, there are many insights that are of value towards bettering wildfire situations for Indigenous people. However, I have learned many lessons from my thesis project and as I move forward as a researcher, I will incorporate these lessons into any further projects I am a part of. I personally would not conduct research again without the involvement of Indigenous people and communities throughout the whole research process and would not recommend others to do so. I will follow OCAP principles for any work involving First Nation communities in the future to ensure my work aligns with the needs of the community involved and to reduce any harm that I as a settler may unknowingly perpetuate.

I entered my Master's program with an idea of what I would like to research. I knew I wanted to research disasters, but I had no particular plan on where or what type of event I would examine. I was also aware of some of the issues that Indigenous people face because of wildfires or other disasters. As I mentioned in Chapter One, I was offered a research grant from the Northern Tornadoes Project. As a part of this grant, I was to align my research with three factors outlined by the funders. These factors were that my project was to be focused on severe weather, it had to be based in Canada, and finally it had to include Indigenous perspectives. I accepted these conditions and began searching for somewhere appropriate to conduct this research. I knew finding a willing community that had recently been impacted by a disaster would be hard, but I did not realize just how

hard that it would be. I contacted many First Nations that had recently been impacted by various natural hazards but was unsuccessful. Many First Nations did not reply to my attempts, while others were not interested. I was able to gain interested from a northern isolated community in Alberta but was unable to cover the cost of research up north in the remote fly in community. After many failed attempts, time was running out and I was getting worried I would not be able to complete the research required to hold the grant and complete the thesis. My mother contacted some of her friends and one of them was able to put me in contact with the Sawridge First Nation member who graciously allowed me to stay in her house.

Initially, I had planned to research the 2011 Slave Lake wildfire, but never thought that I would be expand to other wildfires in the area. I was put in touch with another Sawridge member who was willing to help, but unfortunately was no longer able to once I had arrived for the fieldwork. This limited the number of contacts that I was able to find. Not having CBPR meant that I did not have a group of contacts readily willing to participate in my research, and as such I spent a lot of my time building relationships with people who I later interviewed. Not having contacts meant that much of my time was spent finding people and following leads rather than time collecting data through interviews with people. I was limited in the contacts that were available to me, and therefore limited in the data that I was able to collect. Not having a group of contacts also meant I spent a lot of time on my own, which left me feeling isolated in the field.

In addition, I reached out to people from many different communities, which allowed me to get some diverse perspectives, but this also means that I have only a brief understanding of the impact of wildfire on some of the communities involved. The voices

I heard cannot be generalized to represent the entire Indigenous population of northern Alberta. I spoke mainly to Cree people, which represent only a portion of the many Indigenous groups in the area. It is important to note that this research is not representative of the Indigenous groups in the area, however I use the term Indigenous as there are people from different Indigenous groups involved in this project who are not Cree. If this project were CBPR, I believe I would have had an easier time finding willing participants as connections would have already been in place. I also would have had access to larger numbers of people from the communities involved and therefore would have gained a broader understanding of the impact of wildfire on each community.

Not being CBPR also meant that I came up with the research questions based on my understanding of the situation and not based on the needs of the Indigenous participants. By creating the research questions myself, I was not able to ensure that my project would benefit the communities and people I worked with. By involving the communities in the creation of the project I may have found other questions that are deemed of heightened importance for these communities and been able to help provide much needed answers. Having Indigenous communities involved in the creation of the research project ensures that the research benefits the communities involved. Additionally, I never reviewed my findings with participants, because the timeframe of my Master's program was restrictive. I simply did not have enough time to analyze and review my findings with all of my participants within the year. Not reviewing my findings with participant means that participants did not get a say in the final outcome of this project.

There are some other limitations that are important to note. Before fieldwork I did not fully understand the legislative and jurisdictional processes relating to and involving

Aboriginal people, which was reflected in the questions I asked or did not ask participants. I did not interview anyone in authority about funding, which means I do not know how funds provided by the federal government for emergency management and response were spent by the various organizations that were allocated these funds. In addition, I did not think to ask about the logistics behind fire services arrangements. As a result, I am unaware how agreements between First Nation communities and Fire services are made and what exactly these agreements might entail as these documents are not publicly available.

My position as a white female researcher, also impacted the data gathered for this study. I have a higher number of female participants, which has an influence on the data collected. I also am a settler, which means that some participants might not have felt comfortable having discussions about race relations with me. As a settler I did not always feel comfortable asking questions related to race or culture. Sometimes I was unclear how some questions I wanted to ask would be perceived by Indigenous participants, so I did not ask them as to not offend or make participants uncomfortable, thus, limiting the data I could collect.

5.2 Where do we go from here?

This study supports arguments for decolonization and policy changes that would decrease vulnerability experienced by Indigenous people in remote areas in relation to natural disasters. Decolonization needs to take place within our education systems and Indigenous traditional knowledge and ways of knowing must be seen as valid and equally important to colonial education systems. This would be a good first step towards

increasing the role of Indigenous people in positions such as disaster management and wildland firefighters. Another way towards decolonization is to reduce restrictions that inhibit traditional practices such as prescribed burning. To decolonize, Indigenous people should have access and control over their land, which means that they should have the right to practice prescribed burning as they see fit. Decolonization would decrease the vulnerability experienced by Indigenous people, especially in relation to wildfires.

Overall, there needs to be more research directed at the impact of natural disasters on Indigenous people in Canada that is done in consultation with Indigenous communities. There are going to be more wildfire situations in Canada that impact Indigenous communities. As discussed by Anthony Oliver-Smith (1996), “the holistic, developmental, and comparative perspectives of anthropological research placing specifics against larger societal wholes and concerned with issues of social change and evolution are particularly congruent with the totalizing nature of disasters” (304). As pictured in Table 1, Indigenous communities are often the most affected by wildfire due to their remote locations and lack of infrastructure; thus, research should be focused on this population. Anthropological research should also look at disasters as a result of an intersection of social, political, economic, and environmental processes that create unequal levels of vulnerabilities. I would suggest that any researcher looking to do this kind of research should have solid connections in place with a community beforehand or have time to build a solid relationship, which will allow for community-based participatory research to take place. Continued research should be aimed at the improvement of these situations for Indigenous people and communities, based on the communities needs as dictated by the community. Using anthropological approaches

allows for the holistic understanding that is needed to improve wildfire situations for Indigenous people.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval



Date: 14 May 2019

To: Dr. Karen Pennesi

Project ID: 113768

Study Title: The Impacts of Natural Disasters on Indigenous People

Short Title: The Impacts of Natural Disasters on Indigenous People

Application Type: NMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegated

Full Board Reporting Date: June 7 2019

Date Approval Issued: 14/May/2019

REB Approval Expiry Date: 14/May/2020

Dear Dr. Karen Pennesi

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Interview guide. Ethics Section 2.5. Alana Kehoe	Interview Guide	18/Mar/2019	1
Letter of Informed consent. Ethics section 4.3 . Alana Kehoe. Clean copy	Written Consent/Assent	10/May/2019	3
Participant Photo Release. Ethics section 4.3. Alana Kehoe-2	Written Consent/Assent	18/Mar/2019	1
Phone recruitment script. Ethics Section 3.1.5.f Alana Kehoe	Recruitment Materials	10/May/2019	1
Verbal recruitment script. Ethics Section 3.1.9f. Alana Kehoe	Oral Script	18/Mar/2019	1

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).

Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent



Letter of Information and Consent – Interview Participants

“THE IMPACTS OF NATURAL DISASTERS ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLE”

Researcher (MA student):

Alana Kehoe
 Department of Anthropology
 Western University (London, Canada)
 Email: [REDACTED]
 Telephone: [REDACTED]

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Karen Pennesi
 Department of Anthropology
 Western University (London, Canada)
 Email: [REDACTED]
 Telephone: [REDACTED]

About the Research

My name is Alana Kehoe, and I am carrying out this study to obtain my Masters in Anthropology from Western University. My research is about Indigenous perspectives on the 2011 wildfires in Slave Lake.

I will be in Slave Lake from May 2019 to August 2019. While I am here, I will document stories about your experiences of the disaster and how it has had an impact on you.

The goal of this research is to develop a better understanding of the effects of natural disasters on Indigenous people.

Participation

I invite you to participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you may be asked to:

- sit down for an interview (either individually or with others) with me
- allow me to observe and partake in of some of your daily activities
- have your picture taken.

There is no set number of interview sessions, and no set duration for each session. Most interviews take 1 to 2 hours but you are welcome to tell me as many things as you like, and therefore interviews may run longer or shorter. However, if interviews go on for a long time and there are more things to discuss, we can schedule another session to continue the interview then.

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.



Audio-Recording

If you allow me to, I will record our interview(s) so that I can listen to and transcribe it into a written script later, so that I can quote your words as accurately as possible. Nobody except the researchers will have access to the recordings. Recordings will not be released. If you do not want to be recorded during the interview, please indicate this in the consent form below. You can still participate even if you do not want to be recorded.

If you consent to the recording but change your mind during the interview, you may tell me to stop recording at any time.

Photography

If you allow me to, I might take photos of you in the landscape for my study. If this is the case, I will ask you to sign a separate photographic release form and indicate whether you consent to material you appear in being used to illustrate effects of the wildfire for presentations and publications. You can still participate even if you do not want to be photographed

Names will not be linked to photographic material. Your identity will be protected to the best of my abilities.

Risks

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

Rights

You may refuse to participate or to answer questions at any time. If you agree to participate but decide later that you no longer want to, you may withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. You have the right to have any or all previously provided information removed upon your request. Withdrawn information will not be used in the study, and no new information will be collected without your permission.

You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to this study.

Confidentiality

Information that you provide is treated as confidential and not accessible to third parties. Records will be stored on an encrypted hard drive in locked cabinet at the University of Western Ontario for a minimum of seven years. Any identifiable information and the document linking your name to your pseudonym will be stored in a separate secure location at the University of Western Ontario and will be destroyed after seven years. Recordings and transcripts without your name may be kept indefinitely for future use in analysis. If you wish we can give you a copy of your interview recording or transcript, provided that no other participants are identifiable.

Unless you wish to appear in published or publicly presented material under your full name, I will use a partial or full pseudonym. I will ask you to choose one of these three options below in the consent form. I will not directly link names to any other identifiable



information. Please do note that the inclusion of your name may allow someone to link the data and identify you.

You will be asked to also indicate your consent regarding the use of direct and indirect quotes from your interview(s). Please do note that use of direct quotes may allow someone to link the data and identify you.

While I do my best to protect your information there is no guarantee that I will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project which may be required to report by law I have a duty to report.

Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

Questions

Please do not hesitate to ask questions or raise concerns about any aspect of this research, or if you wish to receive a copy of either your interview transcript or of the published study results. If there are any additional issues you wish to address, you are welcome to do so, so that we can work out a solution.

You may direct any questions and concerns to me, Alana Kehoe, or my supervisor Dr. Karen Pennesi, who functions as the Principal Investigator of this study. You will find the contact information at the top of this letter.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics at Western University via phone [REDACTED]

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.



Form of Consent – Interview Participants

“THE IMPACTS OF NATURAL DISASTERS ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLE”

Researcher (MA student):

Alana Kehoe
 Department of Anthropology
 Western University (London, Canada)
 Email: [REDACTED]
 Telephone: [REDACTED]

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Karen Pennesi
 Department of Anthropology
 Western University (London, Canada)
 Email: [REDACTED]
 Telephone: [REDACTED]

Consent

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Contact for Future Studies

I agree to be contacted for further research studies.

YES NO

Have the data collected in this study used in Future Studies

YES NO

Audio Recording

I agree to be audio-recorded in this research.

YES NO

Photography

I agree to be photographed in this research.

YES NO

If **YES**, please also fill out and sign a separate photographic release form.

Direct Quotes



I consent to the use of personal, identifiable quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research

YES NO

Indirect Quotes

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research

YES NO

Names and Pseudonyms

I agree to have my full name used in the dissemination of this research.

YES NO

If **NO**, please indicate in which form you would like to appear in the research:

- FULL PSEUDONYM (no component of the name will be identifiable)**
 PARTIAL PSEUDONYM (some components of the name will be identifiable)

Participant's Signature

I agree to participate in the study under the above-clarified conditions.

 Print Name of Participant

 Signature

 Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

Researcher's Signature

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all outstanding questions.

 Print Name of Person
 Obtaining Consent

 Signature

 Date (DD-MM- YYYY)

Appendix C: Interview guide

Key questions for semi-structured interviews

1. What kinds of natural disasters occur in this area and which ones pose the biggest concern for residents?
2. What do people do to prepare for, prevent, or mitigate these natural disasters or hazards?
3. What is the role of government (local, provincial, federal) in relation to natural disasters?
4. Tell me about your experiences related to the 2011 wildfires. What was your biggest concern? How well was this situation handled by residents, by the government, by leaders, by other responders?
5. How could disaster response be improved?
6. Do you feel disaster response protocols were culturally appropriate? Explain?
7. How could we bridge the gap between Provincial and Indigenous government to create culturally safe and appropriate response protocols?
8. Is there anything unique impact of the fire on Indigenous people that should be taken into consideration when developing protocols?

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Alana Kehoe

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: MacEwan University
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
2013-2017 B.A.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2018-2020 M.A.

Honours and Awards: The Northern Tornados Project Research Grant
2018-2019

Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
2019-2020

Related Work Experience Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2018- 2020

Research Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2020-2021