

Report details harms to Alberta First Nation for creation of Wood Buffalo National Park

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The Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation was forcibly removed from their land in 1922 in order to create Wood Buffalo National Park.

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Members of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation were forcibly expelled from their traditional lands in Northern Alberta to clear the way for the creation of Wood Buffalo National Park, the largest national park in Canada, a new report says.

The 182-page report, completed on behalf of the First Nation by Willow Springs Strategic Solutions (WSSS), a social science, environmental, and management consulting company, is part of an effort by Athabasca Chipewyan's leadership to produce a cultural history of the community's lands. It documents the park's creation in 1922 and its subsequent expansion throughout the 20th century.

The Athabasca Chipewyan community is seeking an official apology, formal reparations and a framework for a future relationship between it and Parks Canada. The First Nation's leaders expect the report to bolster their case in discussions with the federal government.

[Read the full report from Willow Springs Strategic Solutions here](#)

Athabasca Chipewyan Chief Allan Adam told The Globe and Mail that the creation of the Wood Buffalo National Park is deeply connected to his own family trauma. He said his grandmother, Helen, was forcibly removed from her home on land that was eventually subsumed by the park, and it was burned to the ground. The Canadian government allowed this to happen and there has never been a formal apology to the community, he said.

“How would any other Canadian feel if we were to do that to them?” he said, adding that the emotional impact of the removal was “devastating” and community members did not like to talk about it until recently.

The report, written by WSSS researchers Sabina Trimble and Peter Fortna, says the physical removal of Athabasca Chipewyan members from their lands was part of a larger set of drastic changes Dené people in Northern Alberta faced in the early 20th century. The report says these changes included “the residential school system, devastating epidemics, the influx of settlers and industry, and the increasing power of the colonial state over Northern Alberta.”





A map of park boundaries in Denésuliné territories with the original 1922 and expanded 1926 boundaries.

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Mr. Fortna, a principal at WSSS, said in an interview that he hoped bringing the community’s story forward would draw wider attention to the fact that the government separated members of the First Nation from their land through the creation of the park.

Ms. Trimble said that even though the community knows what happened and oral history has been passed down through generations, the wider public doesn’t know what took place. She noted that the First Nation’s members never consented to Wood Buffalo National Park’s creation, and that they were led to believe park lands would be returned to them.

The report is the result of around two years of research and community engagement that took place in two phases. The first focused on archival research, engagement with existing research conducted by the First Nation and an in-depth review of wider secondary literature. The

second phase focused on community engagement through interviews with elders, knowledge holders and community members.

Wood Buffalo National Park is one of the largest national parks in the world. Parks Canada says on its website that the park was established in 1922 “to protect the last remaining herds of bison in northern Canada” and that today it “protects an outstanding and representative example of Canada’s Northern Boreal Plains.” In 1983, UNESCO named Wood Buffalo a world heritage site. In December of next year, the park will be 100 years old.

A spokesperson for Jonathan Wilkinson, the federal minister responsible for Parks Canada, said Ottawa recognizes the many hardships experienced by Indigenous peoples because of the establishment and operation of Wood Buffalo National Park.

“The government is working with the Indigenous peoples and communities of the region in the spirit of respect, self-determination, and the recognition of rights, to advance reconciliation together,” said the minister’s press secretary, Moira Kelly.

Ms. Kelly also said Mr. Wilkinson has met with Indigenous groups to discuss hardships and difficulties endured by Indigenous people following the creation of the park.

“It is in this spirit that Parks Canada will move forward in building a new management framework for Wood Buffalo National Park,” she said.

Mr. Adam, a residential school survivor who told The Globe last year that RCMP members beat him up and manhandled his wife outside a casino in Fort McMurray, Alta. because he had an expired licence plate tag, remains skeptical about the prospect of reconciliation. He said has yet to see proof of it.

“Canada has to own up to their responsibility for what it has done,” he said.

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