



NORTHWEST TERRITORY MÉTIS NATION

WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK: SILENCE ON THE TRUTH OF THE MÉTIS EXPERIENCE

Shortly after the establishment of Wood Buffalo National Park, in 1923, Métis hunters and trappers, and their families, all of whom had been engaged in their traditional practices for generations, were unwillingly removed from the new Park.

This exclusion resulted in significant hardship to these Métis families, from a loss of their cabins, their livelihood, their trap-lines and their traditional way of life. Because of this removal, Métis have irretrievably lost their lifestyle, livelihood and connection to the land in the Park – which was within the homeland of the Métis. The consequences of this removal have not been fully appreciated nor acknowledged to this day.

The Northwest Territory Métis Nation is actively petitioning Canada to redress this colonial act, and we want to ensure that our story is not lost to history.

Park's Version of History

Parks presents the history of the Park, through their website and other materials, that overlooks this historic injustice. For example, Parks "Cultural History of Wood Buffalo National Park" website is completely silent on the treatment accorded to the Métis.

Additionally, Park's Indigenous Affairs Branch website *Working Together: Our Stories, Best Practices and Lessons Learned in Indigenous Engagement* misstates through omission the Métis mistreatment following the formation of the Park:

In 1922, Wood Buffalo National Park of Canada became northern Canada's first national park, established to protect Wood Bison from extinction. Unlike southern parks, it was acknowledged that Indigenous peoples' traditional activities would not negatively affect Wood Bison and that prohibiting these activities would have a negative impact on the traditional customs and way of life of Indigenous peoples. Consequently, hunting and trapping continued under a permit system and a Hunters and Trappers Association was formed to set permit limits on an annual basis. It was the first time that Parks Canada involved Indigenous peoples in a decision regarding the management of a park. It was also the beginning of a legacy of cooperative management that is now prevalent throughout the northern Parks Canada system.

BOX 720 • FORT SMITH, NT CANADA • X0E 0P0
PHONE: (867) 872-2770 • FAX: (867) 872-2772

The Reality of the Métis Experience

As Parks Canada is fully aware, Métis hunters and trappers were engaged in their traditional practices in the Park for generations, well before the establishment of government in the area. Contrary to the above website extract, although Métis were permitted to continue traditional hunting and trapping activities for a very short while (although under restrictions and supervision) following the official establishment of the Park on December 18, 1922, Métis were soon after unwillingly excluded from the Park in 1923.

This exclusion resulted in significant hardship to the Métis hunters and trappers and their families. This was recognized at the time: even a senior government official (Director of the Department of the Interior O.S. Finnie) warned in summer of 1923 that this exclusion “...*would be a hardship on the half-breed....*”

Bishop Breynat (of the Mackenzie diocese) also pleaded, in September 1923, with District Agent J. McDougall to allow the Métis to continue to hunt and trap in the new Park:

“.....they have to meet so many difficulties to secure their living that to forbid to them access to the Reserve [Wood Buffalo Park] for hunting purposes would seem to be imposing upon them too much hardship.”

Acknowledging this hardship, on November 8, 1923 District Agent McDougal brought the recommendation to the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection to allow “half-breeds” to hunt and trap in the park, however this approach was rejected and Métis were expelled and excluded.

In contrast to the treatment of the Métis, Treaty Indians took over the trap-lines and hunting areas in the park of the expelled Métis. Additionally, Treaty Indians were further accommodated through the establishment of a large hunting and trapping preserve in September 1923 along the Slave River adjacent to the park, again to the exclusion of Métis. Even though many Métis had relocated to, and lived in or near the preserve, they now could no longer trap or harvest in the preserve.

Pleas to government officials continued over the next decade, but they went continued unheeded as the expelled Métis continued to suffer hardships. For example, in September 1932, six Métis trappers from Fort Smith petitioned the Department of the Interior to rescind their expulsion from the Park. This had no effect and their petition was rejected.

As correctly predicted by Director Finnie, Bishop Breynat and others, the Métis irretrievably lost their lifestyle and livelihood as a result from this exclusion and expulsion, with consequences that have not fully been appreciated nor properly recognized even today. Subsequent generations lost their connection to the land where their grandparents hunt and trapped, and only now are able to slowly regain that which was lost.

Time for Reconciliation

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada Minister Bennett, speaking on behalf of Canada, recently stated that Canada was now a “full supporter, “without qualification” of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. This UN Declaration speaks to the issue of the Métis expulsion from the park in several articles:

Article 20 (2). Indigenous peoples deprived of their means of subsistence and development are entitled to just and fair redress.

Article 28 (1). Indigenous peoples have the right to redress, by means that can include restitution or, when this is not possible, just, fair and equitable compensation, for the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned or otherwise occupied or used, and which have been confiscated, taken, occupied, used or damaged without their free, prior and informed consent.

Article 28 (2). Unless otherwise freely agreed upon by the peoples concerned, compensation shall take the form of lands, territories and resources equal in quality, size and legal status or of monetary compensation or other appropriate redress.

Given the above-cited difference in treatment of the Métis as compared with Treaty Indians, Reconciliation must be addressed directly with the NWTMN. As a step towards Reconciliation, and in full accordance with the UN Declaration, the NWTMN have proposed that Canada establish an appropriate trust fund that recognizes these irretrievable losses – as Canada has done in other such situations in an attempt to address past wrongs. The establishment of such a trust fund would be a particularly fitting reconciliation action given the upcoming Canada 150 anniversary.

We also call upon Parks Canada to expediently correct the misstatements and omissions on their websites and other Parks materials by including the true history of the hardships suffered, past and present, by indigenous Métis of the Northwest Territory Métis Nation as a result of the establishment of the Park.