

“LIKE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS ALL OVER AGAIN”:  
EXPERIENCES OF EMERGENCY EVACUATION FROM THE ASSIN’SKOWITINIWAK  
(ROCKY CREE) COMMUNITY OF PELICAN NARROWS

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By

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## **Abstract**

In Canada, northern Indigenous communities are evacuated on an annual basis due to fire and flood, but little is known about their experiences. This ethnographic community-based research relied on 56 interviews and grounded theory to uncover the experiences of residents evacuated from the Assin'skowitziniwak (Rocky Cree) community of Pelican Narrows in northern Saskatchewan due to wildfire in the summer of 2017. It was found that provincial standardization and reliance on top-down, centralized approaches stunted the community's agency and did not address their specific needs. This led to separated families, unmet physical and cultural needs, negative emotional experiences of the evacuation, and frustration due to the lack of acknowledgement of their skills and knowledge relating to fire management. Like Scharbach (2014) this thesis found that there was incongruence between the needs of the Pelican residents and current provincial emergency management policies and suggests changes to improve the experiences of evacuations from northern Indigenous communities.

This thesis addresses issues relating to risk, vulnerability, resilience (specifically cultural resilience), and using Elders as resources. I suggest that risk and vulnerability should not be defined categorically, but rather situationally, to ensure those who need assistance get it, and those who do not are not separated from their families and communities. Keeping families and communities together in familiar settings with access to traditional food and activities and allowing them to be more involved in their own disaster mitigation efforts would help to tap into cultural resilience and would represent culturally safe policy.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Each year in Canada, northern Indigenous communities are forced to evacuate due to wildfires, but there is very little research on emergency evacuations from these communities (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 60). This thesis chronicles the experiences of Pelican Narrows residents during an evacuation due to wildfire in the summer of 2017 and addresses issues relating to risk, vulnerability, resilience, and the implementation of government policy framed for a non-Indigenous, southern, and national context. When applied to risk assessment and the needs of northern Indigenous peoples, these policies do not necessarily accommodate the unique historical, geographic, social, and cultural context that is needed.

During these evacuations, Indigenous elderly people, those with chronic illnesses, young children, and pregnant women are assumed to represent de facto ‘at risk’ or ‘vulnerable’ groups, which leads to them being removed first and separated from family members (Scharbach and Waldram 2016). This separation can cause distress and various social problems when the traditional social structure centred on Elders to provide guidance and direction is absent (Scharbach and Waldram 2016). There is a distinction between Elders and the elderly. Elders are generally seniors but can be in their 40s or 50s, because becoming an Elder is a life stage that is marked not by age, but by experience, wisdom, social status, and an ability to assist one’s self and others. Elderly people are older individuals who have not gained the title of ‘Elder.’ Elders are sources of knowledge, resilience, and comfort for their communities, and vice versa, during times of heightened community stress. While it might seem innocuous to assume older Indigenous people are an ‘at-risk’ population, this assumption is potentially harmful to individuals and communities during evacuations. This is not to say that *no* elderly Indigenous people are at risk or vulnerable, but rather that vulnerability should be understood situationally, rather than categorically, to improve evacuation experiences for all community members (Fjord and Manderson 2009, 67; Scharbach and Waldram 2016).

Resilience in the face of adverse events is more common than is often acknowledged, and requires further investigation (Bonanno 2004; Hatala, Desjardins, and Bombay 2016). Research conducted in Israel found that ‘young at heart’ elderly individuals were of great importance in building community resilience in times of crisis (Cohen et al. 2016). There may be a lesson here for Canada. Risk and vulnerability can lead to resilience and tapping into the knowledge,

experience, and existing resilience of Elders and other older community members might prove useful for future evacuations.

Two issues suggest a need for a greater understanding of the experiences of older adults during disasters: climate change and a growing aged population (Tuohy and Stephens 2012). With extreme weather conditions and an Indigenous Canadian elderly population which has grown by 150% from 2006 to 2016 and could more than double again by 2036 (Social Development Canada 2018), large numbers of older Indigenous people will be affected, and that number will likely increase over time (Tuohy and Stephens 2012, 26). There were 364 wildfires in Saskatchewan in 2016 (Government of Saskatchewan 2016), and the average number of fires in Saskatchewan between 1990 and 2015 was 598 per year, affecting an average of 530,201 hectares of land (PAGC 2018, 1). With such high numbers of fires, community evacuations will continue to be necessary.

This thesis is interested in the dialectic between the ways Indigenous traditions and Elders make people resilient in the face of disasters and evacuations, and the extent to which evacuation procedures compromise the community's capacity to be resilient. I address several sub-questions. First, what were the experiences of residents evacuated because of the 2017 fires? Second, what were their cultural, social, and health needs, and to what extent were those needs met during the evacuation and return? Third, how were the concepts of 'at risk,' 'vulnerability,' and 'resilience' applied to aged Indigenous people and understood by the community? Fourth, how could the effects of separating these people from other community members have been mitigated or avoided? Finally, how could the experience of the evacuation have been improved?

With so little information on the experiences of Indigenous evacuees and the general impacts of "large-scale, centrally organized and mandated community evacuations" (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 60), the importance of this research is its ability to inform public policy regarding advanced planning for wildfire and flood evacuations as well as adding to the scholarship of evacuation and disaster-response. The solutions identified by community members, particularly as they relate to the separating of families, are central to this project.

## **1.2 Research Location and a Timeline of the Evacuation**

My fieldwork took place in the Assin'skowitziniwak (Rocky Cree) community of Pelican Narrows in Northeastern Saskatchewan, which experienced recent evacuations due to fire in the



summers of 2008 and 2017 (Gillis 2008; The Canadian Press 2017). The community, referred to by residents as simply ‘Pelican,’ is a reserve located between the Churchill and Sturgeon-Weir River systems (Goulet 2013, 9). It is governed by the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation (PBCN), which has eight communities under its jurisdiction: Amisk Lake, Deschambault Lake, Kinoosao, Pelican Narrows, Prince Albert, Sandy Bay, Southend, and Sturgeon Landing (PBCN 2009a).

In 1889 the Nation signed onto Treaty Six at Lac La Ronge, and later became known as Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation (PBCN 2009b). In 1930 the Nation signed the Natural Resource Transfer Agreement “wherein lands and resources were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Province of Saskatchewan (and out of the hands of the federal government)” (PBCN 2009b, n.p.). Finally, in 1992, the Nation signed the Saskatchewan Treaty Land Entitlement Framework Agreement, “paving the way for settlement of outstanding claims,” which were paid in full by 2003 (PBCN 2009b, n.p.).

PBCN is the second largest First Nation in Saskatchewan (PBCN 2019c), and Pelican is their largest community (PBCN 2019d). The community’s exact population is difficult to ascertain. CBC News (2017d) claimed the community had 3,500 residents in 2017, which was undoubtedly an old number. Interviewees estimated the population to be around or above 5,000 in 2017, and the PBCN website (2019d) put the community at about 4,000 people in 2013. According to PBCN (2019d), the population has experienced over 50% growth since 1995. In 2005, over 60% of residents were under 21 (Siggins 2006, 47), and with large families being typical, the percentage of young people will likely continue to grow.

In late August of 2017, residents were evacuated because of three encroaching wildfires. The evacuation lasted over 24 days for the elderly, those with chronic illnesses, and women with small children. On August 29, about 450 residents categorized as vulnerable (CBC News 2017d) were evacuated to Saskatoon and Prince Albert (The National Post 2017), many taking buses, leaving without their families, and ending up wherever the bus stopped.

On August 30, the entire community was put under a mandatory evacuation order, and evacuees went to the Henk Ruys Soccer Centre in Saskatoon, stayed with family in Prince Albert, or were put up in hotels in Prince Albert, Saskatoon, or Regina. At the time of the evacuation, some residents were angry because they felt the fires should have been dealt with more aggressively before they got out of control (CBC Saskatchewan 2017). Evacuees were worried about their homes and wanted to return as quickly as possible. The evacuation happened

hurriedly, which left some residents unprepared. For instance, a woman, leaving with her baby, did not have time to get a car seat, clothing, or other essentials (CBC Saskatchewan 2017), and one older resident left in such a rush she forgot her dentures and was without them for the duration.

The same day, the Vice Chief of PBCN posted on Facebook that anyone who chose to stay in the community would be “on their own” (The National Post 2017). By the end of the first day of the full evacuation, the Soccer Centre in Saskatoon was nearing capacity, even though most people who were elderly or ill were staying in hotels (Lesko 2017). The Red Cross shelter manager in charge of the Soccer Centre stated that elderly people and those with health issues being housed in hotels was “a decision made by our health professionals in consultation with the folks generally. The rest generally stay here or go stay with family and friends” (Lesko 2017, n.p.). It was not clear with whom they consulted or at what point in the evacuation the Red Cross spoke with them.

Two different reports came from CBC News on August 31. The first (CBC News 2017f) stated there were 1,000 people left in the community, even though smoke remained thick, and that those who stayed behind were safe but could evacuate if they wanted (CBC News 2017f). Although the main road was closed, community members were being escorted out by convoy; however, they could not return if they left (CBC News 2017f). Duane McKay, Commissioner of Fire Safety stated that anyone attempting to return to the community “Will be stopped at the roadblock” (CBC News 2017f, n.p.).

A second news report (CBC News 2017c) released the same day by the same news source stated a curfew would be imposed from 9pm-7am and security had been hired for those who stayed behind. It was explained that the curfew was to give those who had left “peace of mind” that their houses would be safe (CBC News 2017c). The curfew meant that anyone 16 years of age or younger found outside at night “causing trouble” was to be “arrested, detained and forced to leave on the next bus convoy” (CBC News 2017c, n.p.). While residents were told they were safe, they were also told to stay indoors and that children could be detained, arrested, and removed from the community.

Within the first two days of September, most evacuees had registered for emergency services, about 350 people remained in the community (CBC News 2017b), and 432 were staying in hotels because they were thought to be vulnerable. One Elder stated, “It’s full,” and

“[We] want to go home” (Quenneville 2017). The Chief of PBCN lifted the evacuation order on September 13 (CBC News 2017d), and the next day most people began heading home. Buses, as well as gas reimbursements, were available. The elderly, those with medical conditions, pregnant women, and small children were not allowed to return with their families because they were still seen to be at risk (CBC News 2017e).

The next week, children went back to school (CBC News 2017e), and everyone was able to return home to by September 21 (CBC News 2017a). Air filters and cots were set up in the local school’s gym to assist those who were reacting poorly to the residual smoke (CBC News 2017a).

### **1.3 The People of Pelican Narrows**

There is a dearth of information about the Assin’skowitiniwak who are also known as the Rocky Cree, Rock Cree, Woods Cree, or Western Woods Cree. Much of the literature relating to the community are master’s or PhD theses that only touch upon Assin’skowitiniwak culture (Beatty 2006; Goutlet 2013; Laderoute 1994; Reid 1984; Sitchon 2013; Youngs 1991), or older works of ethnography (Brightman 1993, 2007; Brown and Brightman 1990; Smith 1974, 1975, 1981, 1987). Michell (2005, 2009) also offers two articles which address Rocky Cree culture. Additionally, a journalistic treatment of the community was authored by Maggie Siggins (2006) entitled “Bitter Embrace,” which was written for the public and is not ethnographic. None of these writings explore the issue of wildfire as it relates to the Assin’skowitiniwak. Much of the description of the community comes from my experience of living there and speaking to community members for eight weeks during the summer of 2018.

The Cree name for Pelican Narrows is *Opawikoscikcan*, which translates to “The Narrows of Fear,” and their traditional land spans over 20,000 square miles (Goulet 2013, 9). Many residents have lived there for their whole lives, and some rarely leave. It is a relatively small community that rests between the narrows that join Pelican and Mirond Lake, on the Canadian Shield. It is surrounded by waterways, trees, and beautiful rocky territory. When approaching the community, burned areas are visible for kilometres on either side of the only road into town, caused by the fires in the summer of 2017. Some burned patches touch the road.

Many types of wildlife live in and around the community, including birds (everything from hawks and owls to chickadees), large mammals (bears, deer), a plethora of biting and

stinging insects, and other small creatures. Michell (2005, 35) described the area as being “dominated by boreal forest with rocky terrain sculpted by glaciers and intermittent deposits of sand (known as eskers), clay, gravel and muskeg” with “thousands of rivers, lakes and sandy beaches all with their unique character.” He explained, “It is this land that provides the contextual foundation for the Woodlands Cree way of life. It has and continues to shape our worldview, language, philosophy, epistemology, language, values, beliefs and practices” (Michell 2005, 35).

Although hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering have been replaced by part-time or full-time work for many younger people (Brightman 1993, 17), residents still take part in these activities, and they remain culturally important (PBCN 2019c). Numerous community members continue to hunt in the winter and fish in the summer and older residents almost always prefer the food caught in the bush to food bought from stores. Many men spend much of their summer on the water catching fish for themselves and their families, sometimes borrowing a boat from a friend to do so. Fishing derbies, where the person who catches the largest fish wins a cash prize, occur throughout the summer and draw a crowd even on extremely hot days.

The only grocery store burned down years ago and has not been replaced, so residents must travel over an hour to Flin Flon, which offers very little fresh produce and variety, or four hours to Prince Albert, with more shopping options. Pelican does not have a clothing store, hairdresser, bookstore, hardware store, funeral home, hotel, or bank (Siggins 2006, 10). With the rural bus routes in Saskatchewan having been shut down, one must own a car or be offered a ride to do almost anything, because many important amenities are not locally available.

The community does have a nursing station, an RCMP office, two gas stations (both with a convenience store and an ATM), one restaurant, a fire base called ‘North Bay’ just out of town, two schools, two churches, a post office, and a few small businesses run from people’s homes. Since 1995, the health services in Pelican have been run as a non-profit, incorporated organization called “PBCN Health Services” (PBCN 2019a). They administer and control health-related services and programs, and have a board of directors, elected for two-year terms, which always includes at least one Elder and directors from each community under PBCN (PBCN 2019a). PBCN Health Services provides medical care through the nursing station, including dental and home care, to all of their residents. They aim to serve their communities as well or

better than the province while incorporating local cultural values and addressing people's needs as being "social, emotional, physical, and spiritual in nature" (PBCN 2019b).

The population has been growing quickly, but there is a distinct shortage of jobs (Siggins 2006, 235). The Nation is the largest employer, employing people in schools, the Health Centre, nation offices, and nation-led programs (PBCN 2019d). Seasonal work is also sometimes available with Forest Fire Management which is run by the Province (PBCN 2019d), but as many people told me, these jobs often go to white people. Most teachers and social workers are from the community (Siggins 2006, 282), but police tend to be white, come from away, and spend only a short time there, which can lead to abuses of power.

Before the Band system, the family group was the primary source of authority and social control (Beatty 2006, 16). The political values of the Assin'skowitziniwak have been referred to as "communal, cosmocentric, cooperative, kinship-based, and egalitarian" (Beatty 2006, 16). Men tended to be the head of the family and earned prestige through age, and skills such as caring for and supporting their families, being diplomatic, developing expertise in hunting and trapping, "and for some, special shamanistic abilities" (Beatty 2006, 17). Although these values are not as obvious today, they have continued to be important in community politics and are still apparent "in the election of leaders from large families and the influence of respected Elders and skilled individuals in decision-making" (Beatty 2006, 17).

Little has been written about traditional and modern kinship among the Rocky Cree. There are conflicting claims about whether the Rocky Cree were patrilocal, matrilineal, or had no prescribed rule of residence at all (Corrigan 1962). According to Smith (1974, 758) bilateral kinship and cross-cousin marriages were common, often connecting bands. Bilateral kinship means that relationships on both sides of a person's family (mother and father) are equally valued, and cross-cousin marriage denotes marrying one's mother's brother's child or father's sister's child, often increasing family ties (Nuttall 2012, 453). Smith explained that "a bilateral cross-cousin marriage system creates a social structure in which everyone falls into one of two categories, 'consanguineal,' or non-marriageable kin, and cognates and potential affines" (Smith 1974, 758). When two people are married, relationships are established with the entire kinship group of each spouse, with "reciprocal obligation and privilege" attached (Smith 1974, 758). To the Rocky Cree, family does not simply refer to the nuclear family, but refers to extended and

chosen family as well; “it is not uncommon for aunts, uncles, and cousins to play the role of mentors, role models, teachers and substitute parents” (Michell 2005, 38).

According to PBCN, “The cultural values of respect, sharing and spirituality developed as a way of life with families working together on the land as means of survival in a harsh environment” (PBCN 2019c, n.p.). In the past, large, co-operative kinship groups helped ensure assistance would be available in times of need (Beatty 2006, 101), and continue to be of great importance today (Laderoute 1994, 14). These familial relationships are ones of reciprocity, where a person is expected to assist their kin, and in return, they will receive help when they require it (Reid 1984, 320). This interchange is still present, and residents are generally happy to share their time, food, care, or any items they have that another might need.

PBCN represents groups of people who were once scattered because of their semi-nomadic lifestyle but have been brought together by the Canadian government’s policies into a permanent settlement (Beatty 2006, 16). Before sedentarization, the most common settlement pattern of settlement consisted of groups of dwellings containing “kin-based residential units, often reflecting old Bands, and usually with important economic, political, and religious functions” (WalDRAM 1987, 119). Often, several families lived together in one dwelling during hunting and trapping season, which meant there were many adults to watch and teach the children; “Indeed, the essence of the Cree education system was that children were not so much taught but learned by observing what was going on around them” (Siggins 2006, 139).

Changes to these settlement patterns began to take place when children were forced to attend residential schools by the Canadian government from mid-August until June (Siggins 2006, 46). Guy Hill Residential School was opened in Sturgeon Landing in 1926, followed by a local school built around 1950 (Brightman 1993, 15). In 1945, a family allowance was introduced, followed by the old age pension and a version of welfare (Brightman 1993, 16). People began to settle in Pelican Narrows in the 1960s because children were required to go to school, and families would lose their family allowances if their children did not attend (Smith 1975, 177). Shortly after this educational requirement was mandated, the nursing station, government housing, an all-weather road, and an airstrip were built (Smith 1981, 267).

Ida Swan, a school teacher interviewed by Siggins (2006, 46), felt that the experience of residential schools “has undermined the generosity and co-operation that was at the heart of Cree Society.” She stated, “I think the old people still have it. If you help the old people, some way or

another they'll find a way to help you. It's my generation. We were sent to residential school and all that got killed off. And we in turn have passed it on to our own children" (Siggins 2006, 46). My local collaborator, John, and his daughter Clorice shared with me that they had both gone to residential schools, as most people their age in the community had. They agreed with Ida that the experience of being separated from friends and family because of residential schools has 'broken up' kinship groups and changed the community because a bond has been forcefully broken.

On reserve, most housing is built for and assigned to residents, although some community members build their own houses. When residents rely on Band housing, there is little to no negotiation to be done; one must accept the house one is given. This is much different than when kinship groups lived in close-knit clusters of dwellings. Clorice spoke about how modern housing has also divided families. She explained: "We kind of lost kinship in our communities when our houses were built for us. You have to have your house here, take it or leave it." Clorice continued, "But before they used to build their own cabins, and then families would build around each other, and they would be close. And I notice some of the families that live closer together they bond better." Many residents have had a difficult time adjusting to the reserve, and some felt that something has been lost through the physical and mental separation caused by residential schools and an inability to choose where they live.

Grass tends to be sparse and unmowed, there are few decorative trees or shrubs, toys and garbage are often present in yards, and most houses do not have any exterior decoration aside from graffiti. The homes are generally one story, made of a thin plywood exterior with poor insulation, and sometimes have mould caused by trapped condensation. Many windows are broken, and they are covered with plastic bags or other material to shield the interior from the elements. The Nation is in charge of repairs, but money is tight, and they can take an extremely long time (Siggins 2006, 8). While I was living there, one house, surrounded by others, was in such poor shape that it fell before I left.

Overcrowding and a lack of appropriate housing were issues for most residents. The PAGC Engineering 2008 community housing survey found that Pelican had fewer than 450 houses on the reserve, with an average of three bedrooms per dwelling, and an average of over seven people living in each residence (PBCN 2019d). Additionally, the community has been experiencing "an increase in vandalism, break-ins, and arson to homes and facilities" (PBCN 2019d).

Many intersections did not have any stop signs. The best example of this was ‘confusion corner,’ a four-way intersection without so much as a yield sign. Navigating these cross-roads was confusing for locals, and dangerous for newcomers. The roads were unpaved, pitted, washboard roads covered in gravel. They were graded, but the grading seemed to make them worse because the grader often unearthed large rocks and left deep potholes. Another truck sprayed the roads in the summer to cut down on the dust, but this only worked for a short amount of time, did not come into town, and the dust returned shortly after the road had been sprayed. Approaching the community, there are great drops on either side of the road, and one must be careful to leave enough room for another car to pass without risking getting too close to the edge. Some locals drive at over 100 kilometres per hour, which made driving in and out of town seem even more treacherous.

The only road to the community, Highway 135, was built in 1968. At the time, the local Elders did not want the road and saw it as bringing trouble. In some ways, they were right: with the road came many issues including drinking, drugs, and social workers that impinged on their lives (Siggins 2006, 50). After the road was built, Jan Lake, a resort just off of Highway 135, became populated with mostly white people and became a summer destination for them. Early on this meant jobs for the people of Pelican, but as time went on attitudes about the ‘natives’ became more negative, and young white people took those jobs (Siggins 2006, 50). When I was there, some Pelican residents worked as guides for those visiting Jan Lake, but they worked for themselves and did not own any of the lucrative cabins.

Part of the community is divided into two sides by a large chain-link fence which spans hundreds of feet from the housing behind the Health Centre for visiting doctors and nurses to near the main road and has a path and breaks in the fence for pedestrians and vehicles. One side is Anglican, and the other is Catholic, each with their own church. Siggins (2006) described this as a division of the haves and have nots, with the Catholic side housing the haves, and the Anglican side housing the have nots. Although this religious division exists, many people do not actually attend church (Siggins 2006, 102). Their relationship with Christianity tends to be half-hearted, with people often holding both Christian and traditional beliefs (Siggins 2006, 102). Many people feel that traditional religion is “utter nonsense,” but still believe in non-Christian supernatural spirits, traditional stories, and medicine men (Siggins 2006, 102).



When speaking of the Assin'skowitiniwak, a deep spiritual relationship with nature is often cited as a core traditional belief (e.g. Goulet 2013; Laderoute 1994; Siggins 2006; Sitchon 2013). An inherent connection to nature still works to promote “respect for all living things on mother earth including animals and plant life” (Laderoute 1994, 13). *Wahkohtowin* is a Cree word that describes how we are all connected within a natural order of humans, non-humans, and non-sentient entities because the Creator has animated the world with souls (Goulet 2013, 16). In other words, people are inherently connected to the land, non-humans, and one another “spiritually, emotionally, mentally and physically” (Sitchon 2013, 10). Much of Assin'skowitiniwak cosmology revolves around a “belief that animals were either created before, or at the same time as, man” (Siggins 2006, 104), and that man and animal used to be able to communicate with one another, a skill that has since been lost.

Elders remain essential pillars of their communities and are respected for their knowledge and wisdom, which they use to support and teach others (Beatty 2006, 102). Elders are also highly respected; “We regard them as our first teachers and philosophers.” (Michell 2005, 34). They are especially important in helping to keep the knowledge, identity, and history of the Assin'skowitiniwak alive through their knowledge keeping and acquired skills (Sitchon 2013, 4). “Elders teach the children about the old, good way of life—the generosity that was once so prevalent in society” (Siggins 2006, 168). They work to sustain traditional ways and activities by speaking Cree, preferring and eating traditional food, and offering advice to younger people, which they sometimes express with stories of spiritual characters.

Storytelling is an integral part of Cree culture. These stories are often entertaining, but also express “morals, values and beliefs. They are teaching tools for individuals who feel the best way for a child to learn is to listen and share one's personal experiences” (Laderoute 1994, 1). Laderoute (1994, 153-156) found six common themes in Cree Elders' stories: “respect and desire to maintain the Cree way of life,” “respect for teachings from Elders and parents,” “the importance of good work ethics,” “the positive and negative ends of child rearing [*sic*],” “hunting and trapping was a way of life,” and “stay away from disrespectful and undesirable behaviour.” These lessons reflect Cree values and ethics and represent both a disciplinary and a learning experience.

My collaborator offered me advice several times in the form of a story about the trickster. At the time of his telling, I found them hard to relate to my problem, but upon reflection, I saw

he had offered me great insight into the issue I faced, and I felt he had invited me into an Elder-child relationship. These stories remain important but seem to be less listened to as the younger people in the community become more involved in school and work and move further away from traditional language, religion, food, and thought.

One participant described the community as “a very toxic place,” meaning that it did not hold many possibilities for the residents, but still drew them to stay. Siggins (2006, 172) explained, “The reserve may be a turbulent place at times, but it is home and therefore fathomable; the city is so daunting and complex.” I was told that over half of the people who live on the reserve are on welfare, which can lead to depression, drinking, and violence and, in turn, can guide their children into the same lifestyle.

While there were stories of tragedy tied to many residents, there was also resilience. Humour was one of the ways people coped with their losses and hardships. Small things—like one man’s joking attitude that his wife died and so now he could go find a “hot young thing” for himself, people joking about the fire, or another resident’s constant good-humoured joking even though he lost part of both legs and one arm to an electrical accident about 20 years ago—all illuminated the good, and not the bad, in their lives. Michell (2009, 70), a Cree man, stated: “No matter how serious our life circumstances are, we still laugh, and we laugh at anything and everything.”

Interpersonal relationships represent another resource for resilience. Community members often banded together, drove each other places, offered to care for each other’s children, baked each other birthday cakes, threw parties, held community events at the school, held merchandise bingos to raise money for weddings or other events, shared children’s clothes and formula, ate, played, and joked together and so on. The spirit of generosity and reciprocity was still hard at work despite the many issues, even though it may have been dulled by their colonial history.

#### **1.4 Cultural Theory**

This thesis relies on two cultural midrange theories. A midrange theory is a locally situated set of “predictive generalizations” that arise from the data and are linked “to broader theoretical approaches or paradigms” that can be tested and applied to data (Trotter, Schensul, and Kostick 2015, 667). Cultural midrange theories attempt to identify important patterns “of

thought or behavior in specific domains of culture” which are representative of a particular group of people in a given context (Trotter, Schensul, and Kostick 2015, 667). Simply put, “midrange theoretical models describe, explain, and/or predict what is going in one or more cultural and behavioural domains in a specific local environment” (Trotter, Schensul, and Kostick 2015, 667).

The two complementary midrange theories employed here are social construction theory and cultural scripting theory. Social construction theory argues that “cultural knowledge, norms, skills, and behaviors are co-constructed through a negotiated group process in specific cultural contexts” (Trotter, Schensul, and Kostick 2015, 669). In this theory, interpersonal exchange and relationships are involved in the transmission of culture; we ‘learn’ culture from others and internalize it (Trotter, Schensul, and Kostick 2015, 669). Like social construction theory, cultural scripting theories argue that culture is locally and socially situated, and is learned, but also changes over time (Trotter, Schensul, and Kostick 2015, 669). “Cultural scripts are selectively used, modified, and adapted as people make choices in their lives and implement their understandings in interpersonal scripts with friends and partners” (Trotter, Schensul, and Kostick 2015, 669). In this theory, individuals, groups, and institutions can make cultural change by changing the ‘cultural script’ and are not assumed to share all of the same cultural beliefs (Trotter, Schensul, and Kostick 2015, 669). Together these two theories provide a framework for the concept of culture which is socially constructed, shared, and learned, but also changes over time and does not assume all members of a group share exactly the same cultural beliefs.

How one conceptualizes culture also speaks to how agency can be enacted. For my purposes, agency is “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahern 2001, 113). According to this definition, all actions are “socioculturally mediated, both in [their] production and in [their] interpretation” (Ahern 2001, 113). Seeing agency as unmediated free will “ignores or only gives lip service to the social nature of agency and the pervasive influence of culture on human intentions, beliefs, and actions” (Ahern 2001, 114). As human actors we are able “to evaluate our desires, to regard some as desirable and others as undesirable,” instead of always choosing what we ‘want’ without thinking of context or consequences (Taylor 1985, 16). Because agency is socially and culturally mediated and actors evaluate their choices, there can be no radical choice, totally freely choosing subject, or ‘free will’ without boundaries (Taylor 1985).

Taylor (1985, 16) argued that actors make weak evaluations and strong evaluations, where the former is concerned with the outcome and the latter is concerned with the quality of

the motives and desires behind them. Weak evaluations ask which option is more attractive, while strong evaluations ask which option is higher or lower, honourable or dishonourable, brave or cowardly, and so on (Taylor 1985, 24). The motives and desires one acts on are tied to “the kind of life and kind of subject that these desires properly belong to” (Taylor 1985, 25), and in making strong evaluations “we are reflecting about our desires in terms of the kind of being we are in having them or carrying them out” (Taylor 1985, 26). Thus, one's identity is tied up in “certain evaluations which are inseparable from ourselves as agents” (Taylor 1985, 34).

Bandura (2000, 75) argued that agency can be enacted in three different forms: “personal, proxy, and collective.” Personal agency, defined above, involves the actions of an individual actor (Bandura 2000, 75). Proxy agency refers to situations where one does “not have direct control over social conditions and institutional practices that affect their lives” and thus requires another person with greater expertise, influence, or power “to act on their behalf to get the outcomes they desire” (Bandura 2000, 75). Collective agency delineates those actions that involve a group of people with shared beliefs and “their collective power to produce desired results” which may have been impossible with personal agency alone (Bandura 2000, 75). This type of agency is “the product not only of shared knowledge and skills of its different members, but also of the interactive, coordinative, and synergistic dynamics of their transactions” (Bandura 2000, 75).

## **1.5 Methodology**

### **1.5.1 Positioning Statement**

Before continuing further, I will situate myself briefly. Reflexivity, which is now commonplace in ethnography (Robertson 2002, 786), is an “awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher’s own contribution/influence/shaping of intersubjective research and the consequent research findings” (Salzman 2002, 806). Positioning one’s self in research provides those reading it to assess it; “By being told the ‘position’ of the researcher, we can see the angle and view from which the findings arose” (Salzman 2002, 808).

I am a woman in my late 20s raised by white parents on Prince Edward Island. I grew up as an only child in a very small rural community where I spent most of my time in the woods or on the beach playing alone or asking questions about my surroundings to the adults around me. I have always been immersed in and loved nature. Pelican residents were sometimes impressed at

my ability to identify types of trees, animals, birds, and plants I encountered, as well being able to find, identify, and pick mushrooms.

I obtained my undergraduate at the University of Prince Edward Island with a double major in Psychology and Anthropology and a minor in Sociology. My research interest has always been Canadian elderly people, and this project offered a new opportunity to delve into my passion in a new context with a supportive and knowledgeable supervisor. I moved to Saskatchewan in the summer of 2017, having never lived outside my home province. Aside from my master's work, I had not spent much time in Saskatchewan and had little knowledge of the community I would be studying. Before arriving for my fieldwork, I scoured all the resources I could find relating to the area and the Rocky Cree. With little current information available, I was still unsure of what I would discover when I arrived.

I spent 8 weeks living on location, which some may feel is not enough time to immerse oneself in a new community. While more time in the field would have likely had many benefits, within the scope of this research project, much more time spent on location would not have been possible. Like many researchers, I intended to do useful work and assist the community in making change. Some of my descriptions might be contested by some residents, or by members of the Saskatchewan government, but I have done my best to represent both sides as accurately as possible.

### **1.5.2 Methods**

The methodology for this ethnographic research is community-based and person-centred, emphasizing human behaviour in cultural and social context. Community-based projects seek “to reduce the power imbalance for underserved and marginalized populations” by involving such communities in the research process (Schensul et al. 2014, 185), to create knowledge and change (Schensul et al. 2014, 190). This project is community-based because it involves Pelican Narrows and PBCN in many aspects of the research, excluding the development of methods and analysis (Hacker 2013). This research has also adhered to a modified set of OCAP principles (ownership, control, access, and possession of data) negotiated with the community.

The involvement of PBCN and the community of Pelican Narrows in the research process was facilitated in a number of ways: a meeting with the Health Board of PBCN in November of 2017 where board members approved the project and saw benefits to Pelican and

other PBCN communities; a meeting with the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) about the project in December 2017, where a previous related study completed with my supervisor, Dr. James Waldram, another student, and PAGC, was discussed in relation to this study; a Band Council Resolution (attached as Appendix D) created and signed by PBCN shortly after our meeting with the Health Board; the inclusion of John Merasty, an Elder from the community, on our research team as a translator, cultural and social guide, and collaborator; the development of questions and interview protocols through an iterative process with Mr. Merasty during fieldwork; ensuring he had the opportunity to ask non-scripted questions of interviewees; the ownership of information by the PBCN; the dissemination of reports as well as a community meeting when the project is completed to share information in an accessible way; and, finally, the community's ability to decide what is done with the data with the support of myself and my supervisor.

Person-centred ethnographic approaches (Levy and Hollan 2015; Hollan 2001) focus on individual experiences within a specific cultural context, rather than trying to elucidate generalizations. This type of ethnography seeks to find “experience-near ways of describing and analyzing human behaviour” and “enables one to investigate, in a fine-grained way, the complex interrelationships between individuals and their social, material, and symbolic contexts” (Levy and Hollan 2015, 313).

In this approach, interviewees are treated as ‘informants’ and ‘respondents,’ with the former being a person who can provide broad information about culture and behaviour, and the latter being “an object of systematic study and observation” (Levy and Hollan 2015, 316). The interviewer treats the participant as a knowledgeable informant, but also “observes and studies the interviewee as he or she behaves in the interview setting, as he or she reacts or responds to various probes, questions, and topics” (Levy and Hollan 2015, 316). This technique is used to elucidate the relationships between individual and context to see when an individual “conforms to conventional models and scripts of behaviour and if and when [they] do not” (Levy and Hollan 2015, 314).

Questions directed at the ‘informant’ treat them as an expert witness on their community's beliefs, practices, knowledge, and experiences. For instance, I asked several people, “What makes an Elder an Elder?” (Levy and Hollan 2015, 316). Questions directed at the ‘respondent’ ask about their direct experiences, such as “How have *you* been helped by an

Elder?” Balancing this “combination of informant and respondent” is what distinguishes person-centred approaches from most other types of inquiry (Levy and Hollan 2015, 316).

My fieldwork lasted eight weeks, and during that time, I lived in an apartment on reserve meant for visiting doctors while completing semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Though I had planned to carry out participant observation in several settings, many of the activities I had hoped to take part in either no longer existed (the bingo hall), did not occur while I was there (spending time on the lake), or were discouraged by my collaborator (spending time alone in town on foot). I carried out observations during my interviews and while travelling with Mr. Merasty, but this was more limited than I expected. I was able to attend a community lunch event at the elementary school, Treaty Day celebrations, and fishing derbies. I also spoke to many people at the convenience stores, Health Centre, and Administrative Office, and gained insight from the time I spent interviewing people in their houses.

Although there were fewer opportunities for participant observation than I had expected, they serve to provide the broad context for my interviews, and I was still able to gather information about the town and the people who live there. For instance, much of the physical description provided in the introduction came from my observations, which could not be found in other sources. My time spent speaking to people, attending activities, and being an active member of their local Facebook group gave me a glimpse into their everyday lives, and allowed me to meet people I would have otherwise passed by. I found that residents were friendly but wary of (white) outsiders, they tended to work together to solve problems, and the extended family was paramount for most residents.

My collaborator John Merasty attended almost all the interviews. He acted as a translator, facilitated the interview process, and provided a familiar presence for interviewees. Mr. Merasty is an Elder and a student of Environmental Studies who lived in the community for most of his life. He has children and grandchildren who live in the community, and he seemed to be related to almost everyone I met, either by marriage or blood, which is common in Pelican. He offered great insight, and as a long-time resident who now lives in Saskatoon, he was able to relate to both city and rural life. Mr. Merasty found most of our older participants by knocking on their doors in his customary firm-but-friendly manner. John’s presence gave me an air of credibility, and with his help, I was seen as less of an outsider over time. His knowledge of the area and people were indispensable, and the project would not have been the same without his assistance.

A handful of interviews were conducted in Cree, but the majority were completed in English with some Cree conversation mixed in. Mr. Merasty was an excellent facilitator, but there were issues with the interviews that required full translation. While I was asking questions, it was difficult to ascertain what he had asked the participant, he often did not fully translate what the person had said back to me in real-time, and the conversation tended to get off track because he knew the participants. It became challenging to direct these interviews, and no interviews completed entirely in Cree made it into the thesis. It was my intention to complete a double translation process, in which material would be translated in the field and then again later by a separate expert to ensure the accuracy of the translation, but the number of interviews (N=3) that would warrant such a process was small enough that it was unnecessary to do so.

The semi-structured interviews conducted with 56 residents, including 25 elderly people, focused on their evacuation experiences. Each participant was interviewed once. The average interview was approximately 30 minutes long, with some lasting only 15 minutes, and others lasting over an hour. No follow-up interviews were conducted. We allowed for multiple shorter interviews if necessary, but no one required or asked for this option.

Although it was hoped that we would have office space in the local administrative office, upon arrival, none were available, and so most interviews took place in the participants' homes or at my apartment on the hill overlooking the Health Centre. Additional interview locales included a classroom in the continued learning building beside the elementary school, the staff room at the Family Centre in Sandy Bay, and on a large rock near the lake. While it was preferable to interview individuals with only Mr. Merasty and myself in the room to reduce noise and distractions, some interviews took place with family, friends, or other interviewees present if the participant so desired. Since interviews were conducted in people's houses or my (a stranger's) apartment, Mr. Merasty and I allowed anyone to accompany the interviewee, and we all adapted to our given environments.

Participants were chosen on the basis of their willingness to participate, availability, and ability to take part in an interview, which included issues of age (because no one under 18 was interviewed), health (including conditions such as dementia), and our ability to find a mutually suitable time and place to meet. Random sampling was not possible because of the small number of aged people in the community and the emergent and qualitative nature of the research. Instead, I sought to include as many people as possible. I had intended to carry out a triadic



approach, in which an evacuated senior, a family member who accompanied that senior, and another who was required to go elsewhere, would form a single evacuation ‘case.’ This approach was not possible because we had difficulty locating individuals who were a part of a triad and were willing to be interviewed. John and I spent weeks making phone calls, sending Facebook messages, visiting, and asking previous interviewees to suggest participants who would finish a triad, with very little success. Because of my limited knowledge of Pelican and its residents, I relied heavily on John to find triads, but this technique was not possible with the amount of time available to us in the field.

I attempted to interview local government officials and workers but found that it was difficult to get them to agree to do so. I conducted one informal interview with a member of local government and interviewed an Elder who had been a member of council during the evacuation. I went to the administration office multiple times, asked my collaborator to assist me in getting officials to take part in interviews, and sent emails, all to no avail. One reason for this hesitancy may have been that when we arrived, our council contact was out of town for some time and could not provide us with formal introductions and credibility. Many people simply did not know we were coming.

Participants were recruited using multiple methods. While the local government had agreed to provide a list of older individuals who would be willing to participate, I did not receive such a list. Instead, John Merasty located most of the older participants because of his knowledge of the community. Posters were also displayed in the Administrative Office, Health Centre, and gas stations, and participants were asked if there was anyone else that they would suggest as possible interviewees. Finally, an ad was placed on the ‘Bulletin Board of Pelican Narrows’ Facebook group, which drew many younger interviewees. Each participant was given a small honorarium for their time, and Elders were given tobacco as well.

Participants were able to give oral or written consent to participate. The consent information was available in both English and Cree, and, when necessary, Mr. Merasty explained the form. Oral consent was always gained with the presence of a third party. Each participant was given the option of being identified or not. Forty-six of my participants wanted to be identifiable, and ten did not. I have made every effort to remove recognizable features from the interview transcripts of participants who did not want to be identified, but they were informed that there was no guarantee they would not be identifiable to other members of the community

before they participated. Interviewees were also allowed to withdraw from the research at any time during my fieldwork without question or repercussion. No one asked to stop an interview already in progress, and only one participant asked after our conversation for their statements not to be included in the research.

The interviews were conversational and exploratory to allow individuals to share their unique experiences and stories. Like Scharbach and Waldram's (2016) study, this research was interested in all parts of the evacuation, from the moment participants knew about the fire, to the aftermath one year later. All interviews began by asking them to tell a little bit about themselves, followed by a question along the lines of "What were your experiences during the evacuation last year?" This type of broad question was chosen to allow participants to share the experiences that were most meaningful to them. What they decided to offer from a broad range of possible story options represented relevant data.

Depending on the types of answers given, different follow-up questions were used to probe the various episodes of the evacuation experience, such as: learning of the threat; travel; anxieties; the social context of the evacuation centers; family issues when families were separated; adjustment to the city; engagement with social and recreational services in the city; the return trip; and recommendations to improve the evacuation experience. Follow-up questions flowed directly from the opening narrative and varied with each participant. Interview guides worked as lists of possible questions that were not exhaustive or intended to be asked sequentially. Interview guides for older residents, family/community members, and local government officials have been attached respectively as Appendix A through C, although the guide for government officials went unused.

Data in the field consisted of digital recordings and transcripts of interviews. A digital audio copy was made immediately following each meeting. Specialized SONY USB memory sticks that could not be read without the appropriate software and equipment containing the digital data were stored separately from the recorder in a discreet location when not in use or on my person. All recordings and text were removed from the community when the interviewing phase was complete. Password-protected files were used to secure information that was not on USB drives.

### 1.5.3 Analysis

Because of the large number of participants interviewed (N=56), I chose to pare down the number of interviews to be transcribed and utilized in this thesis. After all of the interviews were completed, I listened to each interview and took detailed notes, after which I decided to set aside those that lasted 15 minutes or less, had sparse and short answers, or took place with individuals who did not engage meaningfully in response to my questions. The more informative interviews (N=32) were transcribed fully.

I employed grounded theory in my analysis, which involves a process of becoming “increasingly ‘grounded’ in the data, developing ever richer concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied really works” (Saldaña 2013, 541). This type of analysis relies on in-vivo and descriptive coding, developing themes, and keeping memos relating to methods, hunches, and questions relating to the data until you reach theoretical saturation, meaning there are no more emerging codes or themes (Saldaña 2013, 541-542).

A code refers to a word or phrase “that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña 2013, 3). A code can be assigned to “words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, sections, chapters, books, writers, ideological stance, subject topic, or similar elements relevant to the context,” (Berg 2003, 271) as well as themes, characters, items, and concepts (Berg 2003, 273-274). Descriptive codes refer to “the basic topic of the passage of qualitative data” that is not explicitly stated in the text (Saldaña 2013, 88). For example, I coded ‘I left in my truck’ as ‘mode of travel.’ In-vivo codes refer to “the terms used by [participants] themselves” (Saldaña 2013, 91); for instance, ‘I was firefighting’ was coded as ‘firefighting.’ Grounded theory “usually involves meticulous analytic attention by applying specific types of codes to data through a series of cumulative coding cycles that ultimately lead to the development of a theory” (Saldaña 2013, 51).

The first round of coding began by reading through the transcripts twice, identifying descriptive and in-vivo codes, adding them to a codebook, and finally applying these codes to each transcript using NVIVO software. When data stood out, I applied it as a code to all the included transcripts and continued to do so until no novel codes were being created. I also compiled attribute coding information into a separate document, including demographic information on each participant from my fieldnotes. Attribute coding refers to information about

participants such as name, age, setting, participant characteristics, the date and time of our interview, and so on (Saldaña 2013, 70).

In my second round of coding, I altered some of the codes for clarity and reviewed all of the coded data. Some information was moved from one code to another until it felt like it was the right fit. Once I had completed my second-round of coding, I moved on to theming the data, beginning with providing a sentence to describe what each code means (Saldaña 2013, 175), and then working to develop “higher-level theoretical constructs” by clustering similar themes together (Saldaña 2013,176). A theme is simply a topic which is usually repeated. “In its simplest form, a theme is a simple sentence, a string of words with a subject and a predicate” (Berg 2003, 273), which promises analytical salience because of its relevance to the broader research question.

Some themes did not have much theoretical meaning, as they had come from in-vivo codes, and at this stage, I attempted to narrow down the number of themes and “develop an overarching theme from the data corpus” that integrated themes throughout my interviews into a clear narrative (Saldaña 2013, 176). This was done by identifying which themes were ‘essential’ and which were ‘incidental,’ and focusing on the essential themes (Saldaña 2013, 176). Once themes were identified as ‘essential,’ significant statements from participants (exemplars) were taken from the data as examples that summarized or helped to explain the theme as a whole in the participants’ own words. After organizing and understanding the essential emergent themes, a thesis statement was created, relating the themes to the axial, or central code (Saldaña 2013, 223), then the writing began.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed the timeline of the evacuation, the ethnographic context of the evacuation, and an overview of my methods. Chapter 2 addresses the experiences of residents during the 2017 evacuation, including family separation, a lack of access to traditional food, and feeling as though they did not have control over the evacuation. Chapter 3 speaks to issues of vulnerability, risk, and resilience as they relate to disasters generally, and this evacuation specifically, including the repercussions of identifying and treating some evacuees as especially vulnerable. Chapter 4 explains how the evacuation was called, executed, and funded, and relates to issues of power and agency. The government and residents of Pelican advocated for increased

funding and involvement in disaster mitigation efforts affecting their community. Chapter 5 provides a conclusion, including a possible solution for future evacuations in the form of culturally safe policy and a list of recommendations.

## Chapter 2: Community Evacuation

### 2.1 Introduction

Around the world, Indigenous peoples are more likely to be affected by natural disasters, development, and climate change (Marteleira 2017, 9). In Canada, Indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by wildfires, often experiencing multiple evacuations (Marteleira 2017, 11) because they tend to be isolated, relatively remote, and built in fire-prone areas with limited emergency services (SCINA 2018, 1). They are also more susceptible to local community fires because the housing conditions are often unsafe and prone to fire, with residents of these communities being 10.4 times more likely to die in a structural fire (SCINA 2018, 1). With fires likely to reoccur in these areas, developing ways to mitigate deleterious outcomes for Indigenous communities is imperative.

Disasters such as wildfires are social and cultural events (Oliver-Smith 1999; Button 2002; Laska and Morrow 2006). Collective and individual experiences of trauma are influenced by culture “at many levels: the perception and interpretation of events as threatening or traumatic; modes of expressing and explaining distress; coping responses and adaptation; [and] patterns of help-seeking and treatment response” (Kirmayer et al. 2010, 156). Culture gives meaning to disasters and helps make sense of them.

In a report from the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (SCINA) (2018, 22) regarding wildfire evacuations from First Nations communities, Dr. Laurence Pearce explained: “culture provides protection and security, a buffer from trauma.” However, the same report also noted that workers assisting evacuees did not know enough about Indigenous communities and cultures, which caused issues in many evacuations. Although culture shapes how individuals and groups make sense of these events, “Cultural issues have been only minimally integrated into current disaster guidelines” (Kirmayer et al. 2010, 168).

This chapter addresses the experiences of Pelican residents during their 2017 evacuation. My respondents focused on the multiple fires threatening the community, the evacuation process, the city, their unmet needs, the separation of families, and other negative outcomes including excessive worry and burned cabins. While many of the issues they have addressed may not seem inherently cultural, they are related to the disruption of their routine culture which is defined by “*roughly* the same people, or groups, repeatedly reoccupying the same places at the same times” (Downing and Garcia-Downing 2009, 228). The essence of culture is found in the largely

unreflective familiarity of daily life in one's "local social world," (Kleinman 1997), which means even short-term evacuation to new communities and social contexts risks severe disruption.

## **2.2 Fires in Pelican Narrows: Past and Present**

Fires are common in Pelican. While I was there in the summer of 2018, several forest fires started in the area. One fire in late June led to the evacuation of Southend, another PBCN community. A second occurred around the same time near the Health Centre in Sandy Bay, a PBCN community accessible only by travelling through and past Pelican via a dirt road until you reach a dead-end. The response to the fire in Sandy Bay was slow, taking an hour and a half. I was told the fire-suppression teams for Indigenous communities are often not well funded, have poor or insufficient equipment, and are understaffed. Two interviewees also told me about their experiences of destructive house fires, one of which took a young child's life, and the APTN News (2014) reported the deaths of three children in two house fires over four months during the winter of 2013-14.

Residents are accustomed to lightning strikes and human-made fires; the latter sometimes being lit by local children. Recently, RCMP officers offered to trade children a frozen treat for a lighter in the summer to reduce fires in the community. Children continued to be seen lighting fires, even after the recent evacuation. Cheryl, a teacher, asked, "Why are these kids starting so many more fires even after the evacuation? Even after the fact that people were saying 'I hate Prince Albert, I hate eating French fries; I hate living in a hotel, I hate being blamed for things by the police?'"

Pelican has experienced two other evacuations in recent memory, one in the 1980s and another in 2008, with the latter caused less by the threat of fire, and more from billowing smoke. In the 1980s residents fled to islands in the water surrounding the community and took refuge in tents until the fire had passed. The 1980 evacuation was much more memorable than the one in 2008, and many people spoke to me about it in relation to the evacuation in the summer of 2017. Harold, an Elder and former councillor, remembered the 1980s evacuation as being disorganized, and Noah, an Elder and friend of my collaborator, remembered it as being very rushed. Two other older people remembered that evacuation fondly, because they went out on the land instead of being in a city, regardless of the risk they faced with the fire and smoke so close. But a majority of residents I spoke to stated that the most recent evacuation was better managed and

planned than it had been when they had to evacuate to the islands.

The three fires surrounding Pelican that necessitated the 2017 evacuation had been burning for weeks before a state of emergency was declared by the Province and announced by the Nation. The Globe and Mail reported that the Granite fire covered 50,000 hectares, the Preston fire burned 13,000 hectares, and the Wilkin fire covered 6,000 hectares, with each being between three and fifteen kilometres away from the community (Lesko 2017). The Chief of PBCN disagrees with these numbers, asserting that “Over 185,000 hectares of traditional lands were impacted by these fires, affecting PBCN member’s ability to hunt, trap and gather either traditional medicines or other plants” (PBCN 2017, 2).

By the time the evacuation was called, fire was blazing on both sides of the only road out of Pelican and Sandy Bay. The smoke was thick and had been present in differing amounts over the weeks leading up to the evacuation. Noah said, “This community was boxed in, there was a fire in Jan Lake area, Deschambault, Mirond Lake. We were surrounded. No matter which way the wind blew we were getting smoked out.”

The delay in response to the fires was a concern voiced by many residents, and PBCN argued that much of the damage and the evacuation could have been avoided had the fires been put out earlier (PBCN 2017). Over a third of my participants expressed that a state of emergency should have been called more promptly, mentioning that the fires had been burning for quite a while, and got dangerously close before the Province deemed it a threat to their community. Emil, an Elder with firefighting experience gained in his youth, said, “I kind of thought to myself, you know, why did we wait so long to get an evacuation order? This could potentially have become a disaster. And, that kind of angered me. Not even kind of, it did anger me because we shouldn’t have to wait that long to make that call.” Reasons for the delay in calling the evacuation are addressed in Chapter 4.

### **2.3 Attachment to Place**

Regardless of the imminent threat from the encroaching smoke and fire, many residents did not want to leave. Although many residents had wanted the fire to be fought and the evacuation to be called earlier to protect their community, they also wanted to stay to ensure their homes, belongings, and pets were safe. This protective reaction could have been related to a lack of faith in the province’s wildfire management policies, which many residents did not see as



valuing First Nations land and property.

One teacher mentioned that some of her friends wanted to stay to look after their houses, which confused and worried her. She was glad that residents were forced to leave because otherwise, they might have remained in a dangerous situation. Clara, an Elder, said that her husband refused to evacuate, and while the RCMP tried to find him to force him to, he did not leave until a week after the general evacuation. Another Elder mentioned that his brother stayed behind until the smoke aggravated his heart so much he had to leave. Wayne, a resident who works for PBCN, wanted to stay, but felt chest pains after three days and evacuated.

Five people I spoke to chose to stay in Pelican for more than a week during the evacuation. Gordon and Russell stayed for a week or two each, Ralph stayed for about three weeks, and Marina and Ronald remained in the community during the entire evacuation. Gordon was taken out of the community by ambulance after a week due to a medical emergency, but the others stayed behind to work. Russell worked as a 'boat man,' which meant he was to keep his boat in the water and be ready to take others out if the fires got too close to the community. Ralph stayed to work on call as a Holistic Health Worker, taking calls from Pelican residents in need. Ronald worked as security. Marina fought the fires. The town remained quiet, with only a few people breaking into houses or drinking excessively, after which they were promptly removed.

Food was an issue for those who stayed behind because no one was bringing in more supplies. Some people went door-to-door asking if anyone could spare some of their food until the evacuation was over. Overall, those who did not evacuate seemed to appreciate being able to stay in their homes and work and enjoyed the peace and quiet of the empty town, despite the smoke and looming danger.

## **2.4 Evacuating to the City**

Evacuees left on buses or with their own vehicles and were sent to Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina, although I did not speak to anyone who went to Regina. Each of these places is much larger than and very different from Pelican. As mentioned in the introduction, many residents have not spent much time off the reserve, which makes any city daunting and unfamiliar. Every senior I spoke with did not like the city. Ralph, who stayed in Prince Albert and visited his elderly grandparents often during the evacuation, said "you know, they've lived

most of their lives in a camp setting or maybe on a trapline or a fish camp. So, it's kind of hard for them because they are used to being in the wilderness (laughs)." He continued, "It's very different in the city. I can spend a couple of days in the city, maybe a week, but after that, I don't like it at all."

While some younger people did not mind being in the city, for the most part, the people I spoke with did not care to spend much time there. One Home Health Aide noticed that after being evacuated for a while, "Everybody was getting tired, you could see the stress on their faces. They went outside and saw cement. That's not good." A teacher spoke about one of her students who said that after the 2017 evacuation, "there was no way I would go to the city. I would never go to the city; I would rather stay here. He was adamant." She continued, "It's almost like an oil and water thing; we have our own way of doing things in Pelican that doesn't mesh with living in the city." This stance was a common one; a city is a place from which to procure goods and services, not a place to live.

Cheryl, a thoughtful teacher and member of PBCN who moved to Pelican 25 years ago, tried to check in with the evacuated children in Saskatoon to make sure they were alright because she did not think anyone was talking to them about what was going on. She explained that in the community children could walk around, and they are safe because they know everyone, but in Prince Albert or Saskatoon, children should not walk around alone because they might find themselves in a dangerous situation. In Saskatoon, there were stories of students spray-painting a gang tag on a building that a rival gang saw, which could have led to violence. Cheryl was concerned that no one had addressed these issues with the children. She continued: "I think some people brought some grief upon themselves because they just didn't understand the dynamics of city living. It's different here."

While people often felt uncomfortable and out of place in the city, Prince Albert was the most familiar of the evacuation locations because residents often travel there for groceries, and it is where the PBCN Central Administrative Office is located. There are also three urban PBCN reserves in and around the city. While evacuated to Prince Albert, people stayed in hotels, or with family or friends, which was more common there than in Saskatoon, where evacuees tended not to know anyone. Hotels and family residences were overcrowded during the evacuation. Some people who stayed in hotels were moved several times with their children, which they found frustrating, but could not control. In Saskatoon, many stayed at the Henk Ruys Soccer

Centre, and others in hotels. Residents did not want to have to go to the Soccer Centre, where people stayed on small cots in a large area with very little privacy.

Overcrowding, fighting, and stealing were issues at the Soccer Centre; one resident saw over 1,000 people at the gym in Saskatoon. John, my collaborator, pointed out that overcrowding is already a problem in Pelican, “and when it spills over to some other places like that, it gets even worse.” Some evacuees reported stolen ID’s and money, and disagreements were common. Harold lamented the living conditions at the Centre. He said it was “terrible:”

But there was not much I could do when I came there. I just advised and recommended to Red Cross people, as much as I could, that certain people should be put in hotels due to their conditions. Perhaps even some families wanted to keep their families together to control them better. With the wide-open spaces, kids are almost uncontrollable. They can really get in the way of other kids, other people, get into mischief.

The gym was hot, and some people stayed there with four or five children and no one to watch them if their parents had to leave or needed a break. This large housing site was seen as a problem; the PBCN (2017, 3) stated in a report to the House of Commons that “Congregate shelters have had on-going concerns regarding such things as the safety of ‘at-risk’ populations, maximum length of stay, utilization of traditional foods and activities to name a few.”

#### **2.4.1 An Alternative to the City**

Twelve participants mentioned that they would have preferred a camp setting to the city. I was told the bush is more familiar and serene, and that a camp would allow for families, no matter how large, or in what way ‘family’ is defined, to stay together. Young people would have room to play, and a camp would feel more like home to them. Residents would also be able to stay out of trouble because family groups would be together to keep an eye on one another, and it was assumed there would be no access to alcohol. The community members I spoke to about a camp setting as an alternative to the city also focused on the familiarity of the scenery, presuming the camp would be similar to those owned by residents. They envisioned open spaces, trees, hunting, fishing, fresh air, and lakeshores. Wayne said, “I think the food would taste better and people would sleep better, you know, getting up would be more comfortable, more at ease. If we had similar surroundings, you know.”

Similar suggestions were made by PBCN (2017), and the First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership (n.d.). Both agree that evacuated First Nations communities should be

housed in familiar environments, “due to the higher level of cultural familiarity and availability of social support” (FNWEP n.d. a, 2). These familiar environments could be nearby First Nations communities that have been retrofitted for evacuations (PBCN 2017), or a camp setting (FNWEP n.d. b, 2). Both sources suggest these options would be superior to, and more comfortable than, a large housing site such as a gym.

Michell (2005, 38) suggested that “To displace and disconnect Woodlands Cree people from the land is to sever the umbilical cord and life-blood that nurtures an ancient way of life. Our Cree way of life requires that we maintain a balanced and interconnected relationship with the natural world” (Michell 2005, 38). This connection to the natural environment suggests that evacuations of northern residents to southern cities should continue to be a last resort. Other more appropriate options include developing hosting capacity in northern Indigenous communities or on First Nations reserve lands in smaller northern cities such as La Ronge or Prince Albert where social, cultural, and health resources and capacities are well developed (complete with the necessary budget lines and access to services). Serious consideration of a more permanent evacuation centre is needed. Where evacuation centres are utilized, such as arenas, the evacuated residents should be afforded active and meaningful roles in centre procedure and governance to the practical extent possible.

## **2.5 The Unmet Needs of Evacuated Community Members**

The needs evacuees mentioned most frequently were food, money, transportation, and lodging, which was addressed in the above section. Evacuees quickly became tired of eating the same food day after day. Some residents received vouchers for restaurants. Others ate at the Allan Bird Centre in Prince Albert or the Soccer Centre in Saskatoon or used vouchers or their own money to purchase food from grocery stores. Some restaurants that accepted vouchers given by the Red Cross had lineups that took one or two hours to get through.

The hotel rooms offered no way of cooking food other than a microwave, so options were limited. Some evacuees had family in Prince Albert and went to their houses to cook and eat together, which made their experience better. Other residents, and especially the elderly, found the change in their diets to be hard on their bodies. They wanted tea but were only given coffee. They wanted porridge but were given bacon and eggs.

Some residents felt sick, which they attributed to the food they were being served that

was quite different from what they would be eating at home. A Home Health Aide said, “my kids were not used to eating steak or mashed potatoes from a box. Those kinds of foods, my kids were throwing up, they had diarrhea.” She eventually had to ask for vouchers to purchase other foods so her children would not be so sick.

Pearce, Murphy, and Chrétien (2017, 18) point out that when people are used to living off of the land and suddenly lack traditional foods, they can experience “digestive and gastrointestinal related physical illness,” which points to the importance of making foods available that are “healthy, fresh, and customary.” These authors suggest consulting Elders to determine which types of food people are accustomed to eating and making these foods available to all residents throughout the evacuation process whenever possible (Pearce, Murphy, and Chrétien 2017, 18).

Six participants talked about the importance of traditional food. In Prince Albert and Saskatoon, a few residents brought duck soup, fish, bannock, blueberry jam, and tea to the elderly and other community members. Several people mentioned that the older residents appreciated having traditional food available to them. Cheryl stated, “People said the same thing; ‘I can’t believe that it’s so hard to get some kind of comfort food here.’” While some evacuees were able to procure traditional food, and at times it was available at the gym in Prince Albert, others did not have access to it.

Harold stated that, at one point, someone in charge said the Nation could provide traditional food, such as wild meat or duck soup, but after some time they were told that they could no longer serve it because it wasn’t made in an inspected kitchen. He explained, “They said no. I think it had to do with food handling or whatever. I know there is always a concern, but, our people have always eaten those kinds of foods.” A Home Health Aide also mentioned that residents, including elderly community members, were not allowed to eat traditional food that was brought into the hotels in the dining rooms. They had to eat it in the lobby where there were no tables.

Money was tight for most evacuees, and some family members who housed them found it difficult to support them. Frances, an Elder from Sandy Bay who evacuated voluntarily with her daughter and granddaughter, mentioned that she was upset that everyone she knew seemed to be having financial trouble during the evacuation. She noticed that friends and family housing evacuees “couldn’t really support them; they felt they were a burden. You know, imposing on

them. And not only that but using the food, whatever they had. So, I don't think the families and friends really mind, but it was like 'Okay, you know, I can't really afford this.'"

Many people paid for things themselves while evacuated. While vouchers were provided for food, hygiene products, and clothing in Prince Albert, there were no vouchers for items such as gas, tobacco, and other necessities. Related to the issue of money was transportation. Without much money, people could not afford taxis to visit with family, go to the Administrative Office, or shop. The Nation provided transportation in Prince Albert in the form of a van-taxi service, but there were not enough vehicles or volunteers to assist everyone. The host cities did not lend themselves to walking, and many evacuees complained that they found it difficult to get around unless they had their own vehicle.

Childcare was an issue mentioned by six participants, mostly young mothers, which they felt should have been better addressed during the evacuation. Babysitters were often unavailable, and when they were accessible, the parents did not necessarily have the money to pay them. One female teacher noticed that quite a few mothers were nearing their 'wits' end.' She helped run activities for the evacuated children, such as movies, bowling, and swimming, which parents were supposed to attend too, "but parents didn't come with their kids because for them that was probably the only hour that they would not have their children (laughs). I'm sure they needed to have a break." She noted that if childcare and a support system for mothers had been available, or if extended families had been kept together, it would have likely alleviated a lot of the parents' stress. Another volunteer from Pelican thought that if free childcare had been provided in a central location where children could be left, it would have led to fewer calls being made to the mobile crisis line.

The three female Home Health Aides I spoke with were mandated to work throughout the evacuation and noted that it was difficult to find someone to care for their own children while they were working. Often their children were left alone in hotel rooms. The Home Health Aides were frustrated that they had to work while being evacuees themselves, especially because they did not have the support they needed. The youngest stated, "If you're evacuated, you're evacuated, you're not there to work. We were in our own crisis; we had to deal with our own family." She continued, "Family comes first, right? You have to take care of your family first before you take care of someone else. The stress levels were crazy."

One young mother heard that Child and Family Services were seen at the Soccer Centre

because children were being left unattended. She said,

The parents were leaving their children in the gym with other parents to keep an eye on them in that big area. Even at the Travel Lodge, they hung up a paper, and they put it to every hotel room because too many kids were in the hallways wandering around alone. They put ‘If we find your kids in the hallway, we are going to keep them for half an hour downstairs in the lobby, and if you don’t come, we are going to call mobile crisis.’ ‘Cause it was getting out of hand. It was all these kids running around all over. They stopped as soon as they handed out the posters.

## **2.6 The Importance of Family and Experiences of Family Separation**

People in Pelican tended to have big, blended, extended families. For example, Suzette, an Elder who worked at the Health Centre, had ten children and sixty grandchildren, all of whom were important to her family group. One Home Health Aide explained, “It’s totally different for First Nations people. Like me, I have my niece living with me, and I have an adopted brother, I have a step-father, you know? It’s not married with children (laughs).” A second Home Health Aide elaborated,

First Nations families are different from the South. It’s not a nuclear family; it’s extended. And I think that’s what the government doesn’t understand. When they say ‘immediate’ family they mean your spouse and your children, but what about your adopted baby, or you’re caring for your grandmother?

The importance of the family unit was a theme throughout 28 of my 32 interviews, where participants referenced either family separation or staying together during the evacuation. Being separated caused much distress during an already trying time, which could have been avoided. When I asked Russell what he remembered about the evacuation, he said “Mainly, the bad thing would be, not being with family. Some of them were separated from their families.” He explained, “I know two of my daughters were in Prince Albert and two of their sisters were in Saskatoon. They would like to stay together, at least in the same hotel. That’s too much to ask for with that many people (laugh).”

During the evacuation, residents shared stories, photographs, and videos through Facebook, text messages, and phone calls. Family members visited with one another if they had available transportation, but with some evacuees in Prince Albert, and others in Regina over 350 kilometres away, this was not always possible. Those who stayed behind gave updates to evacuees, generally through Facebook, about the progression of the fire, and let them know their houses had not burned. While some residents were able to communicate with their families,

others did not know where their family members were and could not ensure they were safe.

After a state of emergency was declared, those seen to be most ‘at risk’ were evacuated from the community first, leading to the splintering of family groups. In both the Wollaston and Pelican evacuations, families tended to be separated because they left at different times from different places and did not necessarily know where their families had gone, often not knowing where they would end up themselves (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 63). Some people had to leave children and spouses behind, which left them “feeling ‘lost,’ ‘stressed out,’ and ‘anxious’” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 64). Referring to a flood in 2011 that occurred in Little Saskatchewan, Dr. Barry Lavalley M.D, stated,

Displacement occurs when people have to leave their homes or even if they stay in their homes and half of their family is gone, and there is no social structure left inside the community. When communities and families are displaced like that, and they are separated, people become lonely, they want to be around their loved ones and that can lead to depression. Really, clinical depression, and clinical depression itself leads to poorly controlled diabetes and other chronic diseases that people experience. (Ballard 2016, n.p.)

Family separation during evacuations is not uncommon in Canada. The First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership released five two-page reviews on wildfire evacuations from different First Nations communities. Four of these briefs mention the importance of keeping extended families together during evacuations (FNWEP n.d. a, b, c, d). The study completed at Meander River, Alberta (FNWEP n.d. a, 2) found that “Keeping families together provided tangible and emotional support to evacuees,” and suggested that accommodation should “allow for large families to be together whilst avoiding disturbances and overcrowding.” A second study completed with the Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation in Ontario (FNWEP n.d. b) also supported keeping multi-generational families together throughout evacuations. A third carried out with the Whitefish Lake First Nation (FNWEP n.d. d) suggested that First Nations families are unique in their large size, but that every attempt should be made to keep these groups, however defined, together. A fourth study, carried out with residents of Sandy Lake First Nation in Ontario stated, “Many evacuees were separated from their family members. A lack of information on family members’ whereabouts and the lack of family support was a stressful experience for many participants” (FNWEP n.d. c, 1).

Both Scharbach and Waldram (2016) and the First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership (n.d. c) mention the importance of keeping older community members, their



caretakers, and their dependents, together. One Health Centre employee said that many elderly residents were separated from their families, which meant Home Health Aides had to care for them throughout the evacuation. In an ideal situation, entire communities would be kept together (FNWEP n.d. c, 2), to help ensure as much normalcy and social support for community members as possible.

Families allowed to stay in the same hotel, or at least the same city, reported that they were happy to be together and helped one another. For example, Frank mentioned that staying with his father meant he had access to a vehicle, Gordon's presence allowed him to help his daughter and grandchild, and Marina was happy that her children got to stay with her parents while she stayed behind as a firefighter. Harold stated,

I'd rather see families stay together. The people that are comfortable and identify that they feel a lot better staying with certain people, that's who should be staying together. They should be given that option, instead of just being ordered, 'just because we are providing the service you are going to do what we tell you.' I don't like that attitude. There should be a little bit of discretion given to people.

## **2.7 Negative Outcomes from the Evacuation**

There were several negative outcomes from the evacuation including negative emotions, a feeling of unfairness, 'bad' behaviours from evacuees, and subsequent news reports about those behaviours. Emotions ran high during the evacuation, and many residents worried about their family and friends, as well as the possibility of their houses burning or being broken into. Grandparents worried about grandchildren, and parents worried about their children, but there was a tendency for older people to worry about younger people more than the younger people seemed to worry about their older family members. I mentioned this disparity in an interview with my collaborator's daughter Clorice, and she agreed: "I don't think [the younger people] have that sense of belonging." Adam, an Elder with eight adult children, kept receiving calls from his family asking for help. Adam had nothing to offer them and became very upset because he could not solve their problems. John stated, "The young people still rely on the Elders to save them from discomfort and from a bad situation. It's pretty hard for the Elders to help out with their limited resources. It was hard for the Elders too."

The experience of the fire and evacuation has left a lasting impression on several people with whom I spoke. Cheryl was still worried another fire was going to come and threaten the

community. She said, “I still feel, sometimes, ‘Gee, do I smell smoke in the air?’ You know? It looks kind of hazy out, doesn’t it? And I almost feel like I have, not PTSD full-blown, but I feel like I have that same sense of caution.” A second middle-aged woman was also very affected by the evacuation. She mentioned that she felt the emotional impact was not addressed, stating, “there is that emotional, ‘if my house burns and my photos burn, my family history in that house burns;’ I don’t think the emotional side of it was addressed as much as the physical needs were.” Both women were happy to have someone to talk to about the evacuation and felt that no one in the community wanted to talk about the disaster after it was over. The second woman stated, “you don’t have people coming and asking how you are feeling afterward. You know, what we’re told, is ‘Hey, it’s in the past, move on, deal with it.’ But still, there is a lot of trauma that was involved with that evacuation.”

The First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership (n.d. d, 2) suggested that it would be helpful to bring local leaders and their communities together for discussions after an evacuation to “provide emotional support and identify lessons learned.” Three women agreed with this suggestion. They would have liked a debrief after the evacuation to instill confidence, update and communicate future community evacuation plans, allow residents to vent their fears and feelings, and share their experiences as a community. Post-evacuation counselling could also be useful for some community members.

Some residents felt that during the evacuation, they were mistreated due to their race. One middle-aged female volunteer from Pelican said there was “a lot of racism happening” during the evacuation in Prince Albert and recalled several experiences. In one incident, she was walking, and someone yelled at her from a truck to “Get the F\*\*\* out of PA.” In a second encounter, an older white woman working at one of the hotels was “very stingy” with their breakfasts:

She was even blocking people. At one point she asked me ‘So when do you think *you people* are leaving?’ And I ignored her. She kept asking ‘When do you think *you people* are leaving?’ I knew she wanted to get into some kind of conflict, so I told her I didn’t come here to make conversation.

Several evacuees reported issues with hoteliers. Harold felt there should have been more allowances made for those who were evacuated, such as not kicking people out of hotels after their first offence, and they should be treated with more respect and understanding. The cases where evacuees staying in hotels were treated poorly were reflective of the situation in Wollaston

Lake, where it was found that some residents who stayed in hotels for health reasons felt they were discriminated against by hotel staff (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 64). In both cases, vulnerable people who were taken to hotels to reduce their vulnerability experienced discrimination because they stayed there.

Three Home Health Aides mentioned that they felt older residents should have been better accommodated. In one hotel, the oldest Home Health Aide noted that the hotel staff wanted elderly residents to go up and down a flight of stairs to get their meals, which they were not always able to do. She asked if they could eat in the dining room or the kitchen, and after much time, frustration, and arguing, the hotel staff agreed.

A middle-aged Home Health Aide also mentioned that at the hotel she was staying at, the pool was mysteriously and suddenly closed after the evacuees arrived. A younger Home Health Aide had heard stories from another hotel where the chlorine levels were intolerable, to the point that children got chemical burns. The same younger Home Health Aide stated that her children went to the pool often, and would return to their room, then go back to the pool, which the hotel staff did not appreciate. Her children were left alone during the day because she had to work and did not have childcare, and she felt their behaviour was not bothering anyone.

An unexpected example of racism occurred when a white man who lived in Pelican and was married to a Pelican resident was accused of not needing help by the Red Cross. He was wearing golf shorts and a nice shirt and looked like he was “from the city.” Cheryl recalls, “He said, ‘I’m from Pelican Narrows,’ he was telling this Red Cross lady, and she says, ‘Well you don’t look like you need a voucher.’” She went on, “And he said, ‘She shouldn’t be judging me, I’m the one who is in a situation here. I’m here to get some help.’”

### **2.7.1 ‘Bad Behaviour’ and the News Media**

I was told of ‘bad’ behaviours that occurred during the evacuation, but many residents felt that a few bad apples had made them all look like they were out of control law-breakers. A group of children tried to light fires and got into mischief, and some adults drank too much, committed theft, and got into fights. Cheryl was shocked when she found children attempting to light a tree on fire in Prince Albert because they had just been evacuated due to fire. She asked the children to keep an eye on one another and let an adult know if anyone was causing or in trouble. Cheryl explained, “We don’t need anyone saying, ‘Oh Peter Ballantyne caused a lot of

grief in Prince Albert,' and blame everybody for the actions of one." She continued, "A lot of people were concerned about that. They were saying, 'Those [evacuees] should be more thankful,' but people don't all cope with stress the same way."

A middle-aged Home Health Aide suggested that many children were bored and had nothing to do, and people simply assumed they were being mischievous because they seemed out of place. Another middle-aged woman noticed some children were getting into trouble, which she thinks could have been averted with better parental supervision. She also remembered adults drinking heavily and being disrespectful to the hotel staff. "That was, I thought, sad for them, for the people. It's embarrassing. Too much drinking. They were disrespectful to the staff. I saw at least two incidents where there was theft in a hotel room, but those people got evicted."

Tommy thought that the reason people were getting in trouble in the city was that the rules were different than in their community. "[In Pelican] you could go anywhere [and drink] here, out on a country road. But in the city, if you hang around there is nowhere to go." In their community, people often walk down the road with open liquor containers without repercussion, but in the city, one is supposed to sit indoors to drink, which can be quite costly if one has to go to a bar. "It's just the place; they couldn't go anywhere, like, not no place private."

A handful of people mentioned that the news coverage had made them look bad because the stories were overstated and negative. One teacher from became angry at reporters because they were trying to interview evacuees who did not know they did not have to speak to the news. She told residents that they did not have to talk to reporters, and they could simply walk away. The types of questions they were asked also angered her, "They were more for the 'aren't you devastated, your home is going to go up in flames' kind of thing, trying to get a reaction from people." She continued, "They would camp outside the fieldhouse [in Saskatoon] waiting for people to come out. I'd say, 'don't go out there' and then I started telling everybody, 'you don't have to say anything to them if you don't want to.'" The reporters focused on a sensationalized story of loss and the negative aspects of the evacuation. In the process, they represented Pelican in a poor light.

The feeling that the news media had depicted them improperly was echoed by Harold and a local government worker, both of whom felt that the reporters who documented the evacuation exaggerated their behaviours and made them look like they were not doing a good job of policing their own people. He said, "Well, that's the thing I don't appreciate myself, this sensationalism,

they don't really understand the situation." Another resident agreed and said the reporters blew the theft and drinking out of proportion, and they even interviewed drunk people, which made everyone look bad.

Scharbach and Waldram (2016) found similar experiences with the news media in their study of the Wollaston Lake evacuation and suggest the same type of media reaction also occurred after Hurricane Katrina. In these cases, "Some very unflattering headlines regarding the evacuation suggested a whole host of adjustment problems," which damaged their "public image" (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 65). It was expected that the people who lived in the host communities would know that evacuees were not used to the city and do not all speak English, but the media "represented them as problematic without contextualizing the situation" (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 65).

One news report about the evacuation in Saskatoon stated, "Area residents raised concerns over yelling at all hours, fights in the field and garbage being strewn as evacuees poured in from the northern community last week" (Grimard 2017, n.p.). In the same report, J.B. Custer, an Elder from Pelican Narrows, apologized for their poor conduct and suggested more activities were needed to prevent this kind of behaviour. He recommended traditional activities such as dancing, conversations with Elders, and drum circles would be helpful, but the ultimate solution was being allowed to go home. Custer made it clear that many evacuees had never been to a large city, and that they were punishing the children who were acting out. He said, "They're used to the countrysides [*sic*] where there's fun" such as "swimming and hunting – they've never seen cities like this before" (Grimard 2017, n.p.). Although I did not hear of any of these traditional activities taking place, they may have happened in smaller groups, or with people with whom I did not speak.

There is a need for insightful and empathetic reporting by the news media in such situations. Communication between community officials and the media, including regular briefings, would be useful. It is important for the media to be respectful and make a true effort to understand the community's situation. One solution would be to encourage them to seek information from official channels, rather than to approach evacuees who are unlikely to have experience with the media.

### **2.7.2 Burned Cabins**

Another issue raised by interviewees was suspected racism regarding how the fires were fought. Emil mentioned that firefighters seemed only to attack them when they got close to the resort village of Jan Lake. He said, “The way I was looking at it, they were kind of prejudiced. Caucasian over here, native over here.” Ralph echoed Emil’s thoughts, “I don’t want to sound racist or anything. This Caucasian man said they had more boots and machinery on the ground in Jan Lake than they did in Pelican. That’s what he said.” A government worker in explained that eight fire crews were sent to Jan Lake, where property owners had insurance, and fewer were sent to Pelican, where almost no cabins or houses are insured, and they had “more to lose.”

While no property was burned in Pelican during the fires, several nearby cabins owned by residents were destroyed, and I heard of a small number of break-ins. Martial’s experience was the most negative that I encountered. His house was broken into during the evacuation, and tens of thousands of dollars worth of belongings were stolen. His family’s cabin also burned down, along with several other cabins in the area. In the break-in, he lost his electronics, including a television and sound system, and in the fire, he lost his cabin, which had a generator, guns, and many amenities, but not insurance. John, my collaborator, mentioned that there was a time when the community had tried to set up a blanket insurance policy for trappers in case their cabins burned down, but it did not come to fruition. Now, with no insurance, the only way for him to replace his items and rebuild would be with money from his own pocket.

Martial’s daughter Lillian explained that they had gone to their cabin three or more times to try to save it, to no avail. Eventually, they had to stop trying because the fire was dangerously close. They had mentioned to North Bay, the fire station near Pelican, that the fire was encroaching on their cabins, but North Bay could not save their cabin either. It should be noted that many of the cabins I saw were nicer than the houses. They were well made and well maintained and reminded me of the type of place one would rent in the woods to have a peaceful vacation.

Martial mentioned that another man’s cabin across the water from his, at Granite Lake, was saved and it was “green all around his cabin,” meaning that the fire had not come close to the structure, which Martial attributes to firefighters putting more effort into saving the cabins belonging to white people. Cheryl noted something similar; several of her students had family cabins burn down during the fire, but Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management

had protected other cabins. One of the cabins that were saved was owned by a white man, which the children assumed was the reason for his cabin being saved instead of theirs. They felt a great deal of unfairness in this outcome, and it created animosity.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

Throughout the evacuation process, there was a disruption of the social patterns and physical comforts that were usually present in the evacuee's lives. Their needs were not well anticipated, and it was difficult, and in some cases impossible, to get the Red Cross and the Province to make concessions for the community. Some issues they encountered during the evacuation include having trouble adjusting to the city, family separation, and access to childcare and traditional food. Residents also lamented the loss of cabins during the fires. Most their suggestions were not difficult or costly to carry out. Many of the complaints involved physical needs, such as lodging and food, and wanting to feel more at home in a physically and culturally familiar setting.

What evacuees could do, eat, and buy was often controlled by outsiders who did not necessarily understand the importance of things such as tobacco, being housed with loved ones, having enough space, and feeling a sense of freedom and agency. Some vulnerable residents felt they were treated with racism at a few of the hotels, which in itself is a problem.

The youngest health care worker I interviewed mentioned that she had spoken with two Elders, and another two middle-aged men, all of whom stated the evacuation was "like residential schools all over again." Similar experiences were heard by the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, where Indigenous "witnesses from British Columbia and Manitoba said that the way the evacuations are conducted triggered the traumatic memories of being taken away to residential schools and/or the 'sixties scoop'" (SCINA 2018, 22). During the evacuation, some residents were taken out of the community without their families on school buses with no washrooms for a four to six-hour trip, not knowing where they or their family members would be evacuated to.

Waldram (2004, 229) described residential schools as "total institutions," which were "not unlike penitentiaries" and regulated every aspect of the lives of the children who lived there. That the analogy between residential schools and the evacuation process was salient for Pelican Narrows residents is deeply disturbing. Evacuees faced forced family separation, a loss of

control, having to adjust to an unfamiliar environment not of their choosing, a lack of knowledge of their values, language, and culture from those assisting them, and missing home, which were reminiscent of being taken away from their communities in their youth. This reaction is precisely what fire policy and those assisting evacuees should be trying to avoid.



## Chapter 3: Elders, Risk, and Vulnerability

### 3.1 Introduction

The stories told by community members in Chapter 2 illuminate their unmet needs and desires, and understandings of the evacuation, which could be used to improve fire policy that regularly impacts similar communities across the region. My participants, like those of Langan and Palmer (2012), *wanted* to tell their stories. They felt they had something to offer to their community and others by sharing their experiences, with the hope that future evacuation experiences would improve. The inclusion of these experiences in disaster planning is of paramount importance to the success of wildfire policy, especially in northern Indigenous communities.

This chapter investigates issues relating to old age, vulnerability, risk, and resilience in the context of the 2017 evacuation from Pelican Narrows. Many of the themes addressed by participants in Chapter 2 were related to a form of risk triage where some community members were seen as especially vulnerable during the evacuation, including older persons, very young children, pregnant women, and those with chronic illnesses. Because of their ‘vulnerable’ status, they were evacuated first, away from their community the longest, and often transported and housed without their family members. While this understanding of vulnerability is used to try to protect those thought to be the most at risk, the removal of these individuals from the rest of the group can lead to adverse outcomes for the entire community (Scharbach and Waldram 2016).

This chapter specifically addresses the assumption that the older population is categorically more vulnerable than the general population and contends that not all aged people experience the same personal issues, health status, and levels of social and financial support. I argue that the aged should not be understood as equally at risk or vulnerable simply because of their age. Furthering Scharbach and Waldram (2016), this chapter maintains that a form of risk triage, where individuals are marked as ‘at risk’ because of a particular ailment or issue, rather than categorically by ‘old age,’ should be used in evacuations, and that a person’s ‘risk’ should not be seen as static throughout the evacuation, time away, and recovery, because risk emerges under different circumstances for different people.

It should be noted that the terms ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ seemed to hold little meaning to the residents I spoke to, even though they are important aspects of this study because they are concepts employed by the provincial government to describe some community members during

an evacuation. Interviewees understood that certain people had a more difficult time during the evacuation but did not use the terms ‘risk’ or ‘vulnerable.’ My questions relating to these concepts had to be altered to be understood. Initially, I asked participants who they thought was most vulnerable during a disaster, but the question morphed over time into “Who has the hardest time in an evacuation?” Often their responses simply reiterated the Saskatchewan Government’s definition of vulnerability, with participants listing categories of people who are considered especially vulnerable community members by the province. Their reactions to my questions may have been related to the fact that people who continually experience “hazardous conditions as part of their everyday existence” can grow accustomed to these circumstances and may not conceptualize themselves as ‘vulnerable’ at all (Haal bloom and Natcher 2012, 324).

### **3.2 Priority One Evacuees**

All Saskatchewan communities are expected to “maintain a ‘Priority One list of vulnerable persons’” to be used during an evacuation (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 63), which represents those community members who are assumed to need extra assistance during an evacuation. With forest fires, this Priority One list consists of “categories such as (i) people with respiratory or cardiac conditions, (ii) the elderly and infirm, (iii) infants under age two, (iv) people requiring special care, such as disabled individuals, and (v) women in late stages of pregnancy” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 63). This checklist is more or less seen as best practice to risk triage in Northern Canada.

Two principles are invoked in this model: the first is to ensure each vulnerable person travels and stays with a caregiver throughout the evacuation, and the second is to keep families together (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 63). The family group is not required to be the extended or even nuclear family, as only those who ‘need’ to be together are considered a family. In the cases of the Hatchet Lake and Pelican Narrows evacuations, neither of these principles were followed, and the provincial government’s definitions of vulnerability did not fit with local understandings of the extended family as fundamentally important (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 63).

This type of risk triage is commonly used in northern Indigenous communities, regardless of its “southern, non-Indigenous cultural sensibilities about family and community structure” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 66). This model assumes that individuals, not families, are at risk

and relies on “an egocentric model of the self” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 66), in which each person is seen as a discrete, autonomous entity. It overlooks the importance of the extended family, cultural considerations, and the “sociocentric model of the self that intimately interconnects individuals” in many Indigenous communities (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 66), where the self is understood relationally (Suh 2009, 319).

This model also assumes risk is a medical and health issue, not a social and cultural issue. For instance, older Indigenous individuals are seen as at risk because of their age, not because of their “unilingualism in an Indigenous language and lack of familiarity with non-Aboriginal, southern ways” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 66). Not speaking or understanding English and being unfamiliar with the city were problems for many older evacuees, who often had issues adjusting, causing unnecessary stress that could have been avoided or mitigated had risk been conceptualized differently.

The Health Centre in Pelican was the main institution in charge of identifying Priority One evacuees and encouraging community members to evacuate. While the evacuation was managed mostly by the local Health Centre, and they were required to have an updated list of vulnerable people, there was no funding allocated to them for this purpose (PBCN 2017, 2). The three Home Health Aides I spoke to, who work for the Health Centre, suggested using a registry for future evacuations where people could identify themselves as vulnerable, partially because their priority list was out of date. An older female Home Health Aide stated, “When we were using the list, it was dated back maybe a decade. The chronic registry, and that’s what we were going by.” She continued, “Some of them, their names are not on there, or their type of condition, so we didn’t know if they were Priority One.” Ultimately, those who work for the Health Centre had to identify Priority One evacuees based on their knowledge of community members.

A second, younger Home Health Aide explained, “We try our best here to keep up, but there are so many people and people come and go, some people die, some people move, some people come back home. (Laughs).” They stated that not knowing the number of people who live in the community, let alone those who are Priority One, becomes problematic during an evacuation, because “there is no system in place to count each member.” While self-registering, or registering loved ones with chronic issues might not be a perfect solution, it is a step toward improving the vulnerability framework currently in place.

### 3.3 Risk

Risk is “a measure of the probability and severity of adverse effects” (Haimes 2009, 1648), or, in other words, the likelihood that a person or group will face a given hazard. Risk is an attempt to understand the possibility of exposure to an adverse event, and thus relies on probability and past experience to estimate who is most likely to be affected (Kaplan and Garrick 1981, 12). Risk also spans more than the disaster event itself. Disasters are often thought of as an event rather than a process, but the disaster does not end as soon as one is out of harm’s way, because disasters span the hazard onset, time away, return, and recovery (Oliver-Smith 2002; Adams et al. 2011). As Scharbach and Waldram (2016, 63) show, immediate, predefined risk “may give way later in the process to other social and cultural risks affecting those individuals not initially seen to be ‘at risk’ at all.” Through the immediate evacuation, time away, return, and recovery period, people may become at risk when they had not been before, depending on what circumstances they find themselves in and the resources they have to address the threats they face.

In the case of Pelican Narrows, younger people who were removed from hotels for their behaviour, single women without childcare, those without transportation, Cree-speakers without translators, those unable to access traditional foods, and so on, were initially thought to be low-risk, but their needs were not met, and thus they faced negative repercussions. ‘Risk’ was contextual and dynamic throughout the disaster process of the 2017 evacuation and addressing it categorically was not sufficient.

Ulrich Beck (2006, 329) described the notion of a ‘risk society,’ in which “the highly developed institutions of modern society—science, state, business and military—attempt to anticipate what cannot be anticipated,” which is risk. He refers to the “narrative of risk” as a “narrative of irony” (Beck 2006, 329), because what we have experienced in the past encourages us to anticipate risk as something we can pre-empt or control, but “disaster arises from what we do not know and cannot calculate” (Beck 2006, 330). The nature of risk is that we can never fully forestall its referent, but our ‘risk society’ acts as though it can and attempts to prevent and manage risks accordingly (Beck 2006, 332). Beck (2006, 333) argued that objectivist accounts of risk involve “a hidden politics, ethics and morality” because risk is socially constructed, with some people or agencies having “a greater capacity to define risks than others.” Thus, defining

risk “is a power game,” especially when “Western governments or powerful economic actors define risk for others” (Beck 2006, 333).

### **3.4 Vulnerability**

Vulnerability and risk are linked together because even when we can anticipate risk, some people are unable to mitigate it; “Such a situation is the essence of vulnerability.” (Oliver-Smith 2002, 42). The most common definition of vulnerability during disasters involves “the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard” (Oliver-Smith 2002, 28). While risk speaks to the likelihood that a person or group will be exposed to a hazard, vulnerability involves the ability, or inability, of those people to cope with that hazard.

Vulnerability “arises from interactions between advantages and disadvantages accumulated over the life course and the experience of threats in later life” (Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti 2006, 28-29). Thus, vulnerability involves “exposure factors” that change over time and “the ways in which individuals manage or fail to mobilise social, material and public resources to protect themselves from bad outcomes” (Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti 2006, 29), resulting in “degrees of vulnerability” in the face of the same disaster (Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti 2006, 12).

Northern Indigenous populations are frequently understood as being vulnerable in a broad sense, partially due to climate change (Haalbloom and Natcher 2012). They tend to be seen as ‘underdeveloped’ and thought to be in need of Western assistance, with such interventions often creating ongoing dependencies on those agencies assisting them (Haalbloom and Natcher 2012). Understandings northern Indigenous communities as vulnerable “detract[s] from the positive and existing capacities of indigenous [*sic*] peoples to cope with environmental change, as well as from longer histories that demonstrate this ability” (Haalbloom and Natcher 2012, 324). Residents could be seen to be vulnerable because of their marginality related to issues of class, age, gender, disability, and indigeneity that affect “their command over basic necessities and rights as broadly defined” (Bankoff 2001, 25). The low socioeconomic status of most community members, along with the health issues and unilingualism of some, exacerbates their vulnerability. But their vulnerability still cannot be understood as categorical in this way, because within the community, people with the same barriers respond differently to disasters.

Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda (2018) suggest that vulnerability is often seen in one of two separate ways, but these two overlap. Vulnerability can be harm-based, which attends to those who are more likely to incur harm, such as a “pregnant woman, being vulnerable because of her ‘specific physical condition,’” or it can be agency-based and pay attention to a person’s ability to live “in accordance with their own fundamental values, preferences, principles, and goals in life” (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018, 235). In the latter definition, one is at risk if they are unable to “form, express, and enforce their own will and make informed decisions” which makes them “more susceptible than others to manipulation, deceit, and force, preventing them from deciding and acting according to their own preferences and values” (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018, 235).

These are two sides to the same coin, and vulnerability, as a concept, would work best if it was to incorporate both negative physical outcomes and a loss of agency. When individuals are defined only as physically vulnerable and thus needing protection, it can lead to “overriding their priorities” and thus their disempowerment (Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti 2006, 15). While residents were often well taken care of physically, including access to hotels, food, and sometimes transportation, their ability to mitigate their circumstances was stunted because they relied on outside agencies to assist them, who often did not consider their needs relating to being agentive and making informed decisions. For the most part, evacuees felt they had to follow the instructions they were given and take what was offered to them, suggesting they did not feel they had much if any control over the situation, leading to agency-based vulnerability.

Although on the surface it may seem straightforward, vulnerability is a concept that should be unpacked to better understand its implications (Oliver-Smith 2002, 29), especially when the label is applied to entire communities. We must pay attention to who is framing people as vulnerable (Fass 2016, 19), and the effects these framings have on those who are categorized as such. Local people have not been empowered to define their vulnerability, and instead, the government does this for them.

As mentioned earlier, Beck (2006) noted that defining risk is a “power game,” and by the same token, so is defining vulnerability, because “By applying the label of vulnerability, subjects are created that can be addressed by top-down disaster management processes” (Bankoff and Hilhorst 2013, 7). Labelling groups and individuals as vulnerable can influence how they see themselves and can “hinder their efforts to gain greater autonomy over their own affairs”

(Haal bloom and Natcher 2012, 319). Consequently, vulnerability is a “power-laden concept” that holds “very real consequences” for those labelled as such (Haal bloom and Natcher 2012, 320).

The Saskatchewan government’s understanding of vulnerability removes agency by assuming that those faced with a disaster “must be organized, directed, cajoled, and ordered by authority” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 66). Humanitarian organizations, both state and non-state run, tend to focus on vulnerabilities in the context of recovery efforts, which ignores local knowledge and capacities in favour of treating them like “objects to be controlled and treated by expert specialists” (Fass 2016, 22). They can paint these ‘victims’ as powerless and passive, which can make their communities seem “unsafe and backward,” justifying continual interventions (Fass 2016, 15). Such interventions are often presented as inevitable and as a simple transfer of resources to assist ‘vulnerable’ societies, ignoring the political implications of such assistance (Haal bloom and Natcher 2012, 322).

If local people have no control over disaster response, it is easy to see them as without agency and thus needing others to control the situation, which begets a circular argument. This type of disaster management has been highly criticized for its “hierarchical forms of governance,” and there has been advocacy for “more participatory forms of management for vulnerability, disaster, and development” (Bankoff and Hilhorst 2013, 8). This community, given the right resources, is capable of running their own evacuations. They seemed passive because they had no alternative action, but this does not mean that they were not able to care for themselves. In fact, they would have likely carried out the evacuation in a way that attended to both physical and agentic needs, based on the suggestions made by participants.

Many Priority One evacuees I spoke to did not refer to themselves as vulnerable but understood others to be. The negative connotation around ‘vulnerability’ may explain why residents did not tend to define themselves this way, even if they were considered part of an at-risk group. People also seemed to understand their vulnerability as a community as being created, in a way, by North Bay’s and the province’s inaction, rather than being a quality that they possess within themselves. They did not see vulnerability as a pre-existing trait of older people or other groups, but rather they saw the entire community as being put at risk by a policy that allowed fires to burn without actioning them until they became a major threat.

### 3.4.1 Old-Age Vulnerabilities

Most interviewees understood older residents as individuals, each with their own family units, who sometimes needed, and sometimes did not need assistance. While some elderly people did not have family members to spend time with them, many others had children and grandchildren to assist them. Some aged community members felt they were at risk during the evacuation, and others did not. Many longed for home and stated that they would want to go home early if they were allowed, regardless of the smoke and fire they would face when they got there, and their Priority One status. The elderly people I spoke to did not usually conceptualize themselves as more vulnerable or at risk than other community members unless they had a chronic illness or impairment, and even those with these conditions did not always say that they felt more vulnerable than younger residents.

Community members often spoke about Elders as being wise guides, but elderly people were also described by younger people, and sometimes other older people, as being feeble and in need of assistance, often in the same breath. Elders and the elderly are categorized as vulnerable people in a disaster, as are infants. While talking about the evacuation, elderly people were sometimes infantilized or compared to children. For instance, Clorice suggested that as the elderly get older, “their mindset is more like a toddler ,like their attention span is shorter,” and John suggested that Home Health Aides had to “babysit” older evacuees. Part of this infantilizing is related to the perceived poor health and related dependency of elderly people; they were seen as a vulnerable group.

The residents who saw the elderly as needing special care did not express that they would have this need for any discrete reason, such as heart issues, diabetes, frailty, family separation, or even their high social status. Instead, they seemed to lump all older residents into one category, which was marked by general poor health and a need for care. While some older residents do need a great deal of care, Home Health Aides would have likely been assisting them before the evacuation as well as during it. That being said, their need for care did increase when they were separated from their family groups, which the Health Centre provided. Residents seemed to uncritically accept the concept of Priority One evacuees, except when that label was applied to themselves. While some Priority One evacuees did feel they needed to leave first and stay evacuated the longest, most spoke about others, especially other elderly residents, as being ‘at risk,’ while not conceptualizing themselves that way.



Although many residents saw Elders and the elderly as needing assistance, and sometimes as being akin to toddlers, older people were also described as willful and independent. The Home Health Aides I spoke to referred to several elderly evacuees as “difficult,” because they were drinking and smoking cigarettes until 2 am but had walkers and needed their assistance. I also heard of four older residents who initially stayed behind during the evacuation but left soon after. They refused to leave when they were told to do so, even though they had been categorized as vulnerable.

One Home Health Aide mentioned that there were 90-year-old’s in the community “that are on their own, and we don’t do much for them.” Another resident mentioned that the Health Centre hired his 79-year-old father during the evacuation in Saskatoon. “He was making money over there, so he was having fun, and he wasn’t bored. He was free in the evenings. He was okay with it.” There were many seniors I met in who appeared to be in good physical shape, had no mobility issues, cared for their families, and were active members of the community.

It is not uncommon to associate old age with vulnerability during evacuations, which is at least in part due to a well-documented higher mortality rate among the elderly in disasters (Barusch 2011, 348; Tuohy and Stephens 2012, 26). But “old age should not, in and of itself, be used as a marker of vulnerability,” because ageing is a variable process “that can develop in a variety of different ways and is not always associated with particular experiences of vulnerability” (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018, 233).

While elderly people are often seen as vulnerable, one resource they often have that younger people may not is experience. Many older people have more experiences to draw from than younger cohorts because they have lived through “the personal, familial, and professional strains and crises that trouble adolescence and middle age” (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018, 234). Many older people also report being more satisfied with their lives and having more monetary resources than younger people (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018, 234), even after disasters. For instance, initially during Hurricane Katrina, elderly people were more at risk of death, but a year later those elderly people that survived seemed to cope better with the aftermath than younger people (Adams et al. 2011, 247). They approached the disaster “with a long view, comparing its impacts to those of other traumatic events in their lives” that they had previously overcome (Adams et al. 2011, 264).

Research done with flood survivors also demonstrates that older people coped well and

reported fewer negative emotional effects than younger survivors (Tuohy and Stephens 2012, 27). Ngo (2001, 83) suggests that older age can have a protective effect during disasters and cites several studies demonstrating that older people tend to be more mentally resilient after disasters than younger people. Most older residents I spoke to had experienced multiple evacuations, were used to fires starting in the area, and were knowledgeable about fire management techniques. Often Elders felt they needed to protect and assist younger people, suggesting they felt they had mental resources that could assist themselves and others. If older adults have resources for combating stress that younger people do not, we must question their inherent vulnerability (Tuohy and Stephens 2012, 26).

Older adults also have “valuable contributions to make in a disaster. One of these is to provide ways for others to make sense of an extraordinary event” (Tuohy and Stephens 2012, 33). Elders remain an important part of their family and community. Younger people lean on them for comfort, advice, and assistance. Many interviewees saw having an Elder nearby as a useful resource, rather than a burden. I was told that Elders, like grandparents in many families, can act as ‘the glue’ of the kin group, often keeping an eye on the younger people, and acting as guardians. For example, Martial said his children listen to him: “they do what I ask them to do. I just want to let you know I was the head boss.”

The individuals who make up the elderly population differ in terms of their age, even though that is what they are said to have in common. According to Ngo (2001, 80), older adults can be “young old (65–74 years), aged (74–84 years), oldest old (85 years and beyond), and frail elderly (65 years or greater, with physical or mental infirmities),” representing a wide range of years lived, levels of socializing, ability, and health (Ngo 2001, 80). Elders can be even younger than 65 because the term ‘Elder’ represents a life phase that is not marked by a certain age but is attained by being knowledgeable, helping others, and helping one’s self. Some older residents are still very active, remain involved in their community, and are self-sufficient, while others need multiple daily visits from Home Health Aides and additional care from family members. In this way, the terms ‘Elder,’ ‘senior,’ or ‘elderly person’ hold very little meaning regarding the age, needs, and desires of any individual resident.

Because of the growing number of older people in many countries, and concerns about their care, the ‘Third Age’ has been offered as a way to speak about those older people who require assistance because it “explicitly distinguishes between older persons who do not require

significant care from others and those who do” (Buch 2015, 282). This distinction offers a better categorization for vulnerability than ‘old age’ alone, because “it does not seem plausible to consider people suffering from early-onset Alzheimer’s disease less vulnerable than those with the more common late-onset form simply due to their younger age” (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018, 236).

If one employs a needs-based approach that takes into account “special age-associated syndromes, such as frailty or dementia” and we assume ageing itself is not a pathological process, “the assumption that the elderly are per se vulnerable is simply no longer self-evident” (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018, 236). It appears that “the common categorization of the elderly as vulnerable seems to result from widespread deficit models and negative stereotypes of ageing and old age in terms of being miserable, helpless, and dependent” (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018, 236). Rather than assuming the needs of all older individuals are the same, we should focus special attention on those people who are more likely to be vulnerable “for some specific reasons,” such as their “physical or cognitive constitution,” or “social situation” (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018, 238), which would highlight the needs of residents from any age group.

### **3.5 The Reified Category of ‘Elderly’**

Ageing has become a topic of interest for Western biomedicine, which focuses on the health of bodies and populations. Foucault noted that the health and physical wellness of the general population has become “one of the essential objectives of political power” (1984, 277). National and political focus has been directed at encouraging and increasing the health of “the social body as a whole (...) and, if necessary, constrain[ing] them to ensure their own good health. The imperative of health: at once the duty of each and the objective of all” (Foucault 1984, 277).

Medicine and medicalization represent control mechanisms which help to ensure the health and well-being of the population. Medicalization is a process where “personal and social problems and behaviours come to be viewed as diseases or medical problems that the medical and allied health professions have a mandate to ‘treat’” (Kaufman 1994, 45-46). Ageing became a problem for biomedicine when “Medical interests expanded in several directions during the 18th and 19th centuries,” and “By the mid-19th century other life-cycle transitions, including

adolescence, menopause, aging, and death had been medicalized” (Lock 2004, 1). In short, the medicalization of ageing means older age has been placed under the umbrella of biomedicine.

Medicalization and biomedicine have helped to perpetuate a homogenized picture of senior citizens as dependent and in need of specialized and extensive care. The medicalization of old age is exemplified by the ‘need’ for a specialized medicine of older age - gerontology. Cohen (1998, 89) stated, “The language of gerontology is alarmist.” He continued, “the problem of aging is taken as an originating point. It is assumed, not demonstrated” (Cohen 1998, 89). Gerontology assumes ageing bodies are a medical ‘problem’ but fails to make the discrete reasons for their problematicity clear. During the 2017 evacuation, seniors were understood to be an at-risk group because their age is associated with health problems which may or may not affect any given older person. It was assumed that old age is a marker of physical decline leading to a need for increased assistance. The assumption that older people are at risk because of frailty or physical impairment missed many of the needs of evacuated residents because it did not attend to those needs that were not health-related.

The pathologizing and medicalizing of ageing influences the way the general population see senior citizens. They are often thought to be frail, problematic, dependent, threatening, and unlike healthy middle-aged people because ageing has become entangled with disease and pathology. While ‘frail’ elderly people are sometimes equated with all older people, there is much disagreement about what ‘frailty’ means in older adults (Markle-Reid and Browne 2003, 59). How we define frailty matters; “if frailty is defined predominantly in terms of physical losses, assessment and management strategies will focus solely on this aspect. This may lead to fragmentation of care, with lack of attention to the whole person” (Markle-Reid and Browne 2003, 65).

Common definitions of frailty generally represent “a positivist, predominantly biomedical perspective of frailty” (Markle-Reid and Browne 2003, 61), with requirements such as “functional impairment and dependence on others,” “poor physical health,” “disability, impairment or depression that require care,” and “simply old age” (Markle-Reid and Browne 2003, 59-60). Thus, frailty is often perceived as an impairment, either physical or cognitive, that impinges on an older individual’s ability to be independent. This definition does not consider an individual’s ability to cope with these impairments, to make changes, ask for assistance when needed, and to adapt; it only suggests that if someone needs assistance, they are ‘frail.’

Much like definitions of vulnerability, definitions of frailty tend to ignore personal and social factors which can help individuals cope with their difficulties. I met one Elder who had what most people would consider to be an extensive physical impairment. While he had trouble at times, he was able to leverage his own resources and relationships with others. He was still able to drive his own car, stayed at the Soccer Centre in Saskatoon during the evacuation with no complaints or intentions of moving to a hotel, and was known to help others when he could. This Elder could be seen to be ‘frail’ or ‘vulnerable,’ but his perceptions of himself, and ability to draw on social resources, make these descriptions inappropriate.

Although frailty is understood as an impairment that leads to a need for care, we all require assistance at some point, especially when faced with a disaster. Cohen (1998) argued that many Americans see themselves as bounded individual bodies, not created by relationships, but consisting of singular entities. Individuality and independence are more complicated concepts than they might initially seem because individuals are never truly autonomous. We require daily help from other people, institutions, and infrastructure. If dependence or the need for assistance is the main factor in determining frailty in old age, then frailty has very little real meaning, because relying on others, infrastructure, and government is part of the human experience.

### **3.6 Resilience**

Resilience involves “the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, or more successfully adapt to actual or potential adverse events” (Kirmayer et al. 2011, 84). It is not the opposite of vulnerability, but rather “a separate concept referring to the capacity of a society to withstand impact and recover with little disruption of normal function” (Oliver-Smith 2013, 277). In other words, resilience is “the ability to do well despite adversity” (Kirmayer et al. 2011, 84).

The term ‘resilience’ comes from the Latin “*resilire*, meaning to rebound, recoil, or spring back” (Hatala, Desjardins, and Bombay 2016, 1914), and, following the Latin definition, early research tended to see resilience as residing in an individual and returning them to their previous state after a traumatic event (Kirmayer et al. 2011; Fleming and Ledogar 2008). More recent research has focused on community resilience (Fleming and Ledogar 2008) and the social dimensions of resilience (Kirmayer et al. 2011), as well as the updating the concept to show it is

an ongoing process rather than a static individual or community trait (Fleming and Ledogar 2008, 1).

Resilience in Indigenous contexts does not refer to a ‘springing back’ to a previous state, as the original definition suggests, and instead represents a process of transformation and adaptation (Hatala, Desjardins, and Bombay 2016, 1914). Kirmayer et al. (2011, 85) defined resilience in this context as “A dynamic process of social and psychological adaptation and transformation” that involves individuals, families, communities, and larger groups and is “manifested as positive outcomes in the face of historical and current stresses.” Canadian Indigenous peoples tend to see resilience as being “grounded in cultural values that have persisted despite historical adversity or have emerged out of the renewal of indigenous [*sic*] identities,” including distinct concepts of personhood that are rooted in connectedness to the environment, collective history, language, traditions, non-human spirits, agency, and activism (Kirmayer et al. 2011, 88).

This understanding of the term is reflective of the concept of ‘cultural resilience,’ which refers to the ways culture helps to make individuals, communities, and entire cultural systems resilient. Cultural resilience is “the capacity of a distinct community or cultural system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to retain key elements of structure and identity that preserve its distinctness” (Fleming and Ledogar 2008, 3). In Indigenous communities, the use of tradition can generate resilience (Wexler et al. 2014, 696). Feeling connected to and involved with one’s culture, family, and community can help one make sense of a situation, create solutions, foster relationships, and connect one to a “larger shared context, and to history” (Wexler et al. 2014, 696).

Some specific Indigenous cultural factors for resilience identified by scholars of psychology and Indigenous studies include: “spirituality, traditional activities, traditional languages, and traditional healing,” “symbols and proverbs from a common language and culture, traditional child-rearing philosophies, religious leaders, counselors, and Elders” (Fleming and Ledogar 2008, 3), the natural environment (Spence et al., 2016, 303), being on the land, peer and mentor relationships, social connectedness, and feeling culturally-rooted (Wexler et al. 2014, 702). Implicit in these factors is the importance of the family – in its extended form – as the core of Indigenous cultural resilience.

To varying extents, residents demonstrated resilience during the evacuation because they were able to adapt to a stressful evacuation process and adjust to their lives after their return. Interviewees also wanted to instigate change, further supporting their resilience. But Pelican residents' experiences of the evacuation suggest that, in many ways, their ability to tap into cultural resilience was stifled because families were separated, child-rearing philosophies could not be followed, the community was divided and spread out over great distances, and many evacuees did not have access to Elders, religious leaders, traditional food, or a familiar environment.

Most participants spoke about the negative aspects of the evacuation, but there were also positive outcomes. There was an increased production of mushrooms after the fires, that community members picked and sold, often for a large profit. During the evacuation, people cared for one another by volunteering, providing support, physical care, transportation, and traditional food when they were allowed to do so. Some evacuees developed their own small communities in hotels. Clara spoke about her time at a motel in Prince Albert, stating, "people came around, and they were happy, and we got along, talking about things, and some of those people gave birthday parties for their kids, which was nice, and we were invited. So, it was okay with us."

Some evacuees felt the evacuation went well, considering the large number of people evacuated and the limited resources of the Nation. Ralph shared, "Well, I think the Chief and Council handled it pretty well. You can't expect top-notch care, because this was a very big evacuation." He explained, "They actually did a pretty good job. It's just that, logically speaking, I think it's not possible for everything to work smoothly. There is always going to be complaints, but the teams actually did pretty good, yeah."

Although some residents were able to draw upon their community and culture to mitigate the disaster, many could not tap into cultural resilience, because they did not have access to the people, tools, or a familiar setting that would allow them to do so. Enabling communities to come together and maintain their social fabric is a way to tap into cultural resilience, which should be encouraged and facilitated during evacuations. Thinking of resilience as an individual trait ignores the importance of relationships and social supports, but in Indigenous contexts, it seems that resilience often originates outside of the individual (Kirmayer et al. 2011, 89).

### 3.7 Conclusion

This chapter addressed risk, vulnerability, old-age vulnerabilities, and resilience. The current form of risk triage, where Priority One vulnerable people are evacuated first and kept away the longest, led to family separation that, in most cases, was not necessary. The Saskatchewan government's current understanding of vulnerability is not tailored to an Indigenous context and ignores the importance of the extended family. This risk model also misses emergent risk because of its focus on categorical risk. A vulnerability framework would work best if it incorporated both negative physical outcomes and a loss of agency as 'risks,' and accommodate emergent risk, which can change throughout the evacuation process.

Elderly people are generally assumed to be at a higher risk during disasters, but we cannot assume that all older adults are equally at risk, because many have experiences and social connections which assist them and others during times of heightened stress (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018). It would make the most sense to distinguish among older people, and other residents, who need care and those who do not while focusing on specific reasons people might be at vulnerable.

Although it seemed that residents wanted to tap into Indigenous modes of resilience, they were prevented from doing so by top-down approaches which removed agency. The issues addressed in this chapter, including risk, vulnerability, and disaster mitigation all involve power. So far, disaster mitigation has tended to fall into the hands of outsiders, with very little involvement from affected First Nations communities. In order to improve the evacuation process, power should be shared between the Federal, Provincial, and local government, as well as the non-governmental organizations that assist during a disaster. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this evacuation reminded some residents of their residential school experiences, which speaks to the unequal distribution of power that existed then, and now. Without addressing the inherent power imbalance that exists between these groups, evacuations will likely continue to affect northern communities negatively. The issues of power and government are addressed at length in Chapter 4.



## **Chapter 4: Jurisdictional and Coordination Issues**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter addresses issues identified by Pelican Narrows residents regarding government, firefighting in Saskatchewan, and the Red Cross. Interviewees often stated that they did not know who was in charge of what parts of the evacuation or how the evacuation was to be funded. One reason for their confusion was that communication between the provincial and local governments, and between local government and local people, was lacking. Residents were also frustrated that local people had not been employed as firefighters, even when they were certified. They felt that the province had all of the control in fire suppression efforts for their community and that not hiring local people was related to “white” crews wanting to hire “white” firefighters. Tensions were also high at times between the Red Cross and local people, with interviewees mentioning that many people were afraid to ask Red Cross for what they needed, fearing they would be turned away. This fear speaks to a greater issue within the community, where white outsiders are often not trusted, and non-Indigenous government is seen to be run by southern people who do not prioritize their specific needs and culture.

A report regarding fire safety and emergency management from INAC stated that First Nations people should be treated as equal partners, that roles and responsibilities should be clarified, and that funding should be available for First Nations involvement in emergency management, planning, and fire prevention campaigns (SCINA 2018, 3-5). These suggestions were not well implemented during the 2017 evacuation. Future disaster planning would benefit from an increase in knowledge sharing between the provincial and local governments, which would help to adapt disaster planning to a community’s particular needs and could lead to increased resilience in the face of disaster (Marteleira 2017).

### **4.2 Calling the 2017 Evacuation**

On Indigenous reserves in Saskatchewan, an emergency must be declared by the Chief of the community (PNWBHA 2012, 1), but they must consult with “other [provincial] agencies regarding the nature of the smoke distribution, weather predictions, where the smoke is coming from, road visibility, etc.” before doing so (PNWBHA 2012, 4). This consultation process is not necessarily an equal, two-sided conversation, because “In order to ensure coverage for expenses of transportation and accommodation,” the Chief was required to consult with one or more of:

“[the] Saskatchewan Ministry of Health Emergency Management; Saskatchewan Public Safety – Sask 911; Regional Medical Health Officer or Emergency Planning Coordinator; *and* Social Services” (PNWBHA 2012, 4). This required consultation process suggests that if the Chief, who is required to declare the state of emergency, feels the fire is a threat, and one or more of the agencies they consult with do not, then the transportation and accommodation for the evacuation may not be funded.

John and other residents stated that the evacuation order had been made by the province and was then announced by the Nation. I was told that if local leadership called the evacuation on their own, they would bear the cost, and so there had been a waiting game to see who would declare a state of emergency. John said, “The province was in charge of the evacuation to give the order. They just told the Chief, and the Chief gave the order, but the province made the order.” Harold, an Elder and council member at the time of the evacuation, agreed, “We have to get [the Provincial Government’s] approval to declare a state of emergency.” But he felt that in cases like this, where a fire is threatening the community, “local leadership should be given a little leeway in terms of making that call right away without having to worry about who is going to pay the cost. We should be using the Jordan’s principle here; it’s something similar.” He continued,

We shouldn’t care about who is going to take on the cost; we will talk about that later. That’s the least of the worries right now. Right now, we have an emergency, we need to do something about it, and if we feel that we are threatened, that the lives of our people are threatened, then we should do something about it quickly.

The ‘Jordan’s principle’ is a policy that is in place to ensure Indigenous children have access to the same supports, products, and services that are available to non-Indigenous children, including speech therapy, educational support, and mental health services (Indigenous Services Canada 2019b). It is intended to provide fast care by requiring that the “government department of first contact” provides these services, and then applies to be reimbursed through this federal program (Indigenous Services Canada 2018). Harold’s suggestion would mean that the province would fund the evacuation and then be reimbursed, rather than requiring the Nation or local government to cover much of the costs until they are refunded, which would eliminate any fiscal standoffs during a disaster.

#### **4.2.1 Reimbursement of Evacuation-Related Expenses**

In Canada, provincial governments tend to “oversee the planning and creation of structural mitigation systems, while First Nations fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government and must coordinate this type of infrastructure planning with INAC” (Marteleira 2017, 11). The provincial government deals with the fire, and the federal government reimburses ‘eligible costs’ (SCINA 2018, 1). The Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs suggests that the claims process for reimbursement is too slow and needs to be clarified (SCINA 2018, 5). For First Nations communities who have been evacuated, restitution has been a problem, because the process takes time and many communities are not being fully reimbursed for their costs (SCINA 2018, 26).

The Indigenous Services Canada (Formerly INAC) Emergency Management Assistance Program funds emergency management, including mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery covered (Indigenous Services Canada 2019a). Although it is suggested on their webpage that costs relating to these efforts will be reimbursed, there is no list of eligible expenses, and a community must apply without knowing what will, and what will not, be covered (Indigenous Services Canada 2019a). But in a situation like the 2017 fires, finances should not be a factor in local decisions to evacuate. By requiring that the Chief and Council consult with other agencies before being funded for an evacuation, the community, and Nation’s ability to self-govern is jeopardized.

Several interviewees were concerned that the community had to cover many expenses related to the evacuation, and that assistance from the Red Cross during that time would have to be paid for out of pocket until the federal government reimbursed them. One teacher said, “I don’t know if this is factual or not, but I was told that the money we got from Red Cross would have to be reimbursed by Indian affairs or by the Band.” She felt that local people had been misled because they did not know that the costs associated with Red Cross’s assistance would have to be paid for by the Nation. She said, “They were just first responders helping us temporarily. It’s going to cut into our budget somewhere, somehow, and then no one could actually say what budget that was.” She asked, “What does that mean now for the future? Does that mean we aren’t going to get coverage? Or we aren’t going to get coverage for education? Is it the education budget that has to pay this back?”

A member of the local government confirmed a year after the evacuation that they had still not been refunded for most of their costs. He explained that dealing with INAC was a frustrating and challenging process and that they had only been reimbursed for about 33% of the \$700,000 that was spent. He felt the evacuation would not have been necessary if provincial fire suppression teams had taken the fires seriously when they were small and controllable and that it was unfair that they should have to bear the cost for provincial inaction and an inefficient federal reimbursement system.

Individual residents of First Nations communities are also able to apply for provincial disaster relief money provided through the Provincial Disaster Assistance Program (PDAP) in Saskatchewan (PDAP n.d.). This program is meant to assist individuals by reimbursing them for costs related to “uninsurable essential losses, cleanup, repairs and temporary relocation” after a disaster (PDAP n.d., n.p.). PBCN members were reported to be waiting on funding from PDAP for an evacuation from another PBCN community in 2015, but the province has indicated that there is no record of them applying for PDAP funding (CBC News 2019, n.p.). With such a response from the province, it is clear that it is not always possible for residents to rely on this program to recover their losses after a disaster.

#### **4.3 The Importance of Open Communication**

As was the case with the 2017 evacuation of Pelican Narrows, communication and coordination between the Federal, Provincial, and First Nations governments are lacking in many evacuations (SCINA 2018). Often “First Nations expertise and culture are not considered during emergencies,” and they are usually ‘left out of the loop’ and not involved in decision making (SCINA 2018, 17). One younger man who worked at the Health Centres in several PBCN communities said that when the evacuation order was made, he felt that there was a lack of communication between the Provincial government and local government because “decisions and plans were made without consultation.”

Harold agreed that there should be better communication between the province, other agencies, and local government so that the local government can understand its roles and responsibilities. He suggested a yearly roundtable where “we could all sit down before the fire season to refresh and go over certain things,” including developing a clearer action plan for if something like this happens again, which would involve “a step-by-step procedure.” If the

community is under threat, Harold suggested there should be daily meetings with wildfire management and local council members to “update and plan as we go,” so local government understands the situation and can inform community members and be better prepared. Chief Beatty also recommended that during an emergency in a First Nations community, representatives from the community should be present at all provincial and federal meetings regarding “event management, strategy, or provision of services affecting the first nation [*sic*]” (SCINA 2017, 2).

The Chief stated that it is essential for First Nations communities to have input into fire management strategies, not only to keep local government updated but also because they have useful knowledge and expertise regarding fire control and emergencies. According to Beatty, “There is valuable input that anyone can get from our communities, if only they would approach us and engage us in that process” (SCINA 2017, 7). Local people can offer additional information and skills to address disasters, and their involvement creates tailored solutions that are appropriate for that community (Fjord and Manderson 2009). Not involving local people and forcing communities into a “one-size-fits-all disaster paradigm” can increase vulnerabilities and lead to unnecessary frustration (Fjord and Manderson 2009, 70), as addressed in Chapter 2.

It was a source of great frustration to local people that the lines of communication were not open between the province and the community regarding fire suppression efforts, and PBCN was not invited to be a part of the provincial meetings regarding strategy and decision making (PBCN 2017, 1-2). But it is not appropriate for the provincial and federal governments to take over once a state of emergency has been declared because, according to Richard Kent, the commissioner of Saskatchewan First Nations Emergency Management, local people are “perfectly capable of looking after themselves. We need to provide them the tools and the training to do it, because nobody can look after their community better than their own community” (SCINA 2017, 7).

Often, cultural differences, such as the importance of the extended family, traditional foods and language, and agency are missed when First Nations people are not involved in their own emergency planning, and the easiest way to remedy this issue is to engage them in ongoing discussions regarding evacuations and disaster mitigation efforts (SCINA 2017, 4). Advanced planning, including pre-evacuation consultations and plan-making along with ongoing

discussions during the disaster with those agencies assisting the community, would resolve many of the issues mentioned above.

Another source of confusion for local officials was the technical language used by the province. ‘Actioning’ the fire was one phrase that led to a misunderstanding on the part of local government. The province said they were “actioning” the fire, which residents took to mean that the province was acting to suppress the fire, but to the province “actioning” can refer to watching the fire as it progresses; “Actions range from extinguishing the wildfire completely, to monitoring the wildfire’s progress on wildfires that are not imminently threatening any values at risk” (Michaels 2013, 2). Harold stated, “They say we are monitoring; we are ‘actioning’ the fire. Well, certain terminology, by saying ‘actioning,’ they are just watching the fire, they aren’t doing anything to extinguish the fire, they are just managing it more or less. So that’s not, to me, that’s not ‘actioning’ a fire.” Others echoed these complaints, saying they had assumed that ‘actioning’ referred to action, not inaction.

#### **4.3.1 Communication with Community Members**

Some community members felt there could have been better communication between the Nation and its residents as well. For instance, Cheryl wished there had been a daily notification on Facebook to provide updates on the fire’s progression. She stated, “I felt the lines of communication for the common person were not there, and like it was up to me to decide shall I go, or shall I stay. I guess they don’t have a responsibility to us to inform us what the situation is.”

While some residents saw council members and the Chief while they were evacuated, others did not. One middle-aged woman I spoke to felt that seeing authority figures and being able to discuss issues with them during the evacuation would likely make many community members feel better. She said, “I think it would have really helped to have them come by and say, ‘How are you doing?’ You know, do some glad-handing. ‘How are you? I’m concerned for you, is there anything you need?’” She noted that she did not see this type of interaction happening while she was evacuated to Saskatoon and felt that it would be useful for residents to see that the Chief and Council were “still thinking about them and were concerned about them.” A perceived lack of communication from the Chief and Council led to concerns from some

residents, which could have been addressed early in the evacuation process to quell the fears of community members.

Pearce, Murphy, and Chrétien (2017) explain that communication that is clear and open is critical during disasters. They suggest that evacuees should understand the “roles and responsibilities of the federal government, provincial agencies, emergency social services, and the host community” before the evacuation takes place, and that this information should be available in multiple formats and languages. Clear, culturally relevant communication is important because it “can prevent real or perceived injustice and reduce confusion throughout the evacuation” (Pearce, Murphy, and Chrétien 2017, 30).

As well as feeling lost during the evacuation, a handful of people were not confident that there was a community evacuation plan in place because the evacuation felt hectic and disorganized and residents had not been briefed on the evacuation process. Cheryl felt there should have been a plan in place that involved education and health staff. She stated, “I’d sure like to see if anybody has actually sat down and met to come up with a plan, A, B, and C because as far as I know, nothing has been done with our staff.” She thought a plan should be in place before an evacuation occurs that included a list of things people should have ready for families, information about what is the Nation’s responsibility and what is not, and who should be evacuated first. She asked, “If you have a family with five kids and the baby is asthmatic, what does that mean? Do the mother and the baby get to go on the bus? Or the mother and all of her children?”

Frances, a female Elder and resident of Sandy Bay, also thought the evacuation was disorganized. She suggested increased planning, and notifications to the community about those plans, as well as the inclusion of community members in the improvement of future evacuations. Frances suggested that people might have been less fearful if they had been confident that the Nation had a plan. As mentioned in Chapter 2, she would have liked to have a debrief after the evacuation to learn from the experience, improve future evacuations, and instil confidence in the community.

The three female Home Health Aides I spoke to, who work for the Health Centre which oversaw the immediate evacuation, also felt that planning was lacking, and should be improved. One stated, “Plan for the crisis. It’s going to happen again,” do not “just throw them on a bus and go.” A female teacher I spoke to also doubted any plans were in place, and Wayne agreed. He

said, “It wasn’t organized before the evacuation, so everything was in a rush. It happened so fast, and there was a lot of confusion, a lot of complaints and not enough manpower.” He suggested a type of yearly program or training where people could learn to be prepared for evacuations. Wayne explained an evacuation can seem like “going overseas for the first time,” because people do not know what to bring or expect, but they can learn more about the place they are going, which would “prepare you mentally, so once you get there you don’t freak out.”

Harold stated that the Chief and council had previously spoken about what they would do in case of an evacuation. Although there was a plan in place, he said “I’m not sure if it was exactly put on paper, you know, as such, in terms of something you look at a glance and you know what to do. I don’t know if we got that far. But I know we did have a plan.” While discussions have been had, and an emergency plan was in place, a clear strategy that was available to those in charge, which was also communicated to community members, would have been useful. Harold explained that one of the problems the Nation has with this type of preparedness is that there is currently no funding for emergency planning, even though Indigenous Services Canada is supposed to fund these planning efforts.

#### **4.4 Firefighting in Saskatchewan**

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment oversees fire suppression for most of the province, and provincial fire suppression in the area is run out of the North Bay Fire Centre, which lies just outside of the community. Local people explained that “white” government workers run the Fire Centre and have all the decision-making power and equipment; they have “the final decision with respect to whether wildfire suppression activities are undertaken” and to what degree (Michaels 2013, 3).

Several community members reported the fires that caused the evacuation when they were deemed small and manageable. For instance, Russell went to North Bay and told them the fires were likely going to get out of control if they did not fight them, “and sure enough it came to Pelican. They just dismissed me like I didn’t know anything.” Ronald stated that the Chief was also trying to get the firefighters from North Bay to attack the fire, because “nobody was there fighting,” and then the fires got worse. He continued, “That’s crazy. Why weren’t they there?” Chief Beatty agreed that it was difficult to get North Bay to attack the fires and use local certified



firefighters. He stated, “We couldn’t get them out on the fires to do any of the work that was needed” (SCINA 2017, 5).

The province trains firefighters through the Ministry of Environment (Government of Saskatchewan 2019b), which follows the National Fire Protection Association’s Standards for the professional qualification of firefighters (Government of Saskatchewan 2019a). There are three types of firefighting crews in Saskatchewan. Type 1 crews employ “trained and experienced seasonal Ministry of Environment staff,” and are used for initial attack as well as sustained action on wildfires (Government of Saskatchewan 2019b, n.p.). Type 2 crews “are contracted through formal agreements with First Nations organizations and northern communities (Northern Forest Protection Worker Training Program),” and employ five firefighters per community (Government of Saskatchewan 2019b, n.p.). Type 3 crews use “qualified fire fighters [*sic*] hired on an emergency basis,” and support both Type 1 and Type 2 crews but are usually only used for fires that are already under control (Government of Saskatchewan 2019b, n.p.).

Type 1 crews are heavily relied upon and are regularly brought in to fight wildfires while Type 2 crews consist of only a handful of workers, are often underutilized, and can only fight fires when approved by the province. Chief Beatty said, “We have First Nations firefighters who are funded by the province, but they react to fires only when they’re allowed to by the province. They’re not really under the direct control of the local leaders. That’s something we need to work on as well” (SCINA 2017, 8).

#### **4.4.1 Hiring Local Firefighters**

In the case of the 2017 evacuation, many outside firefighters were brought in instead of relying on local people, which frustrated residents. A report from the PAGC (2018, 3) stated that “Some northern Elders question why southerners are even allowed to come north to fight our fires when it is our forests and we are protectors and stewards of the land.” Similar complaints were made during the evacuation from Wollaston Lake, where some men complained that they were not able to protect their community from the fires (Scharbach 2014). They felt that they bore some of the responsibility to save their community, and experienced distress when they were not allowed to do so (Scharbach 2014, 25-26).

The consensus in Pelican was that local people should be trained and hired to fight the fire before bringing in outsiders. For instance, Emil, an Elder who fought fires for many years, felt local people should be hired, along with “all of the local people from the surrounding communities too, not hire people from down south who don’t even know how to firefight.” He was frustrated that ‘southern’ government workers were brought in instead of relying on local people who know and value the land and would financially benefit from the work.

Russell, a slightly younger man with firefighting experience, also thought they should have used local firefighters because they are devoted to the land and were willing to fight the fire; “That’s the thing. So many able-bodied firefighters here, and still they brought down some other people.” Ralph agreed, “I just didn’t like the way SERM [Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management] treated the firefighters that wanted to go. I understand it was dangerous, but they should have at least had them on standby, or for a mop-up crew or something.” He clarified, “They turned a lot of the guys away, but I heard a couple of busloads [of local firefighters] came in after all of the complaints.” One council member told me that workers (including cooks, cleaners, firefighters) were brought in from the outside, including Dene people, who were “laughing that Pelican Narrows didn’t care about their homes and they were lazy.” This upset many people because they were literally not allowed to help themselves in this situation.

One of the reasons local people were not utilized as well as they could have been is that the province requires certification to be a firefighter but does not offer training very often. A few residents suggested that training was necessary to keep firefighters safe, while others stated that they had not needed this training in their youth and that the need for certification has gotten out of hand. Emil thought the rules around certification were unnecessary, “I told them [North Bay] ‘to hell with you, you were in pampers when I was fighting fires.’ I don’t need to be certified to fight fire.” He stated that now people must be certified for everything, including cutting grass “and using a shovel.” Russell stated, “I’ve been a firefighter for many years. I know how to firefight. I know how it behaves. But I don’t have the papers they do, that’s the thing.” Other residents echoed these statements and felt the reliance on highly certified firefighters created an unnecessary barrier for local people wanting to fight fires imminently threatening their community.

While the fires were burning in 2017, the Nation was able to certify firefighters, which is usually done by the Province, but was previously run by the community. John thought this should be an option at any time, and not just during an evacuation. Marina, who was certified as a firefighter and crew leader, and stayed in behind to fight the fires. She said they had to train more firefighters, “because there were hardly any firefighters around, and they had to call firefighters from Sandy Bay, Deschambault, Dillon, First Nations crews came.” But this might have been because many willing certified firefighters had been evacuated instead of being utilized.

A retired Conservation Officer I spoke to explained that training has gotten more complicated and the tendency in recent years has been to rely on highly trained groups deployed from a central location. Some residents perceived this reliance on highly trained “white” southern people as the Provincial Wildfire Management crew “sticking with their own” to the exclusion of local people. This speaks to issues of race and power. Harold stated, “That’s one thing that really burned me. They wouldn’t utilize our local firefighters, our Class 3 or Level 3. And they’re certified, right? But yet, they wouldn’t use them.” Another council member agreed: “Local firefighters were not allowed to fight the fire even though they were certified. They did not have the right level, but they have always fought the fires here.”

#### **4.4.2 How it Used to Be**

Many older people in the community, both men and women, have had experience fighting fires. In the past, certification was not necessary, and anyone could fight the fires if they were 16 years or older and were physically capable. They would often firefight at night when it was cooler, and embers were more visible. Fires were “overkilled” with many people fighting almost every fire, focusing on extinguishing the perimeter. Men and women worked on the ground and used helicopters primarily for transport, only occasionally relying on water bombers. Gordon said, “Firefighting was a lot different, yeah. I think it was a lot easier back then than it is today. Even though they have more modern things, easier to fight fire with, but we learned the old-school way (laughs).”

Chief Beatty agreed that the way they had fought fires in the past was how it should be done today. He explained that fires must be dug out of the ground, “You have to do all of that hard work if you’re going to put the fire out” (SCINA 2017, 5). He stated that if fires are to be

managed and directed around communities, “you may well be able to do that with heavy equipment, then air tankers, and then helicopters, but I think that has to be rethought, that part of the firefighting strategy, especially within proximity of populated areas and infrastructure” (SCINA 2017, 5).

Noah, an Elder who was a firefighter in his youth, recalled,

Yeah, way back in the 60s and 70s and 80s you know, there were fire towers, and if they spotted smoke, they would radio La Ronge at the fire centre, and they would send an airplane, a Beaver aircraft. It was real communities, Deschambault and Pelican. Every able-bodied person was conscripted, you know, taken off the road and pack what little you have and blankets and you’re on that plane. You know, 16 and up, eh? There were no certificates, no training at that time. They sent you out into the forest fire, and you put it out within a week. (...) It used to work. No community was in danger.

Local firefighting teams used to have older people work as cooks and foremen, but now most of the people are young, with very few firefighters being over 50. The older firefighters used to “be in charge and give them their wisdom.” For instance, one Elder stated, “When you’re out in the fire, you have to know how the wind shifts. In those days we were taught, I don’t know if they teach them now.” Older, more experienced firefighters taught younger ‘greenhorns,’ and by the time they had finished their first season, “they knew everything. They were set for life.”

Many residents mentioned Saskatchewan’s ‘let it burn’ policy, by which they meant that provincial fire suppression policy lets fires burn if they are 20 kilometres or more away from a northern community. Before this policy was in place, all fires would be put out. Emil stated, “That’s one thing I’ve noticed when there is a big fire, people just leave it. We used to firefight.” Adam, an Elder and retired firefighter, agreed. “I think it was better before that let it burn policy, eh? Cause we used to go and fight the fire right away. We had initial attack when it was small. And we never had any big fires like that when we were firefighting. We used to put them out.” He explained, “Other firefighters would come support us. We didn’t lose against the fire.”

#### **4.5 The ‘Let it Burn’ Policy**

The Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs found that fires are often dealt with too late (SCINA 2018, 2), and Chief Beatty agreed that it took too long to fight the 2017 fires threatening Pelican, stating that the impacts on their community and lands would have been lessened if the fires had been fought when they were small and controllable (SCINA 2018, 20). The Chief reported that Saskatchewan has a ‘let it burn’ policy: “In our view, in practice,

that is what it is – letting it burn to a point that it becomes a threat and then you try to action it” (SCINA 2018, 20). Residents agreed. They believed that small fires should be put out, that the ‘let it burn’ policy caused more harm than good, and it would have cost less to put the fires out when they were small than to address large wildfires. This policy represents a drastic change from the past, threatens traditional lands, and is not supported by local people.

Although the province denies having a ‘let it burn’ policy (StarPhoenix 2015), they do have “Full Response Zones,” which represent “a 20km radius surrounding a community, where initial attack and sustained action with the intent to extinguish all wildfires takes place” (Michaels 2013, 6). Outside of this designated 20km zone, fires are often left to burn unless they impact what the province calls ‘values,’ by which they mean “human lives, communities, major public infrastructure and commercial timber” (Michaels 2013, 6). But the ‘values’ that the province feel are important are not necessarily aligned with the priorities of First Nations people. For instance, “a value at risk with the province is a structure, building, cabin, or something like that. When we talk to our chiefs, elders [*sic*], and people in the communities, the values at risk for them are the forests next to the communities” (SCINA 2017, 4). Additionally, the fires encroaching on the community came within three kilometres of the community, meaning these 20km thresholds are not always enforced (PBCN 2017, 1).

Traditional lands, trap lines, camps, medicinal plants, animals, and so on, were all negatively impacted by wildfires during the 2017 fire season. A report from the PAGC (2018) stated,

First Nations peoples in the northern region have a right to hunt, fish, trap, and gather not only for food to support the local economy, but also as the basis for their cultural and social identity. Many hectares of their traditional territories have burnt destroying animal habitats and animal species. Woodland caribou food sources are depleted. Even one tree that is burned is a significant loss. (PAGC 2018, 2)

Michell (2005, 38), a Rocky Cree man stated, “When the land and resources are misused and destroyed, Cree people and their ways of life are profoundly affected.” He explained, “When one aspect of nature is destroyed, all life forms are impacted. It is like throwing a pebble in a pond with reverberating repercussions” (Michell 2005, 38). The impacts of the 2017 fires and the province’s slow response to them affect the lives of local people and will have repercussions for the community for years to come.

A younger male resident agreed. He explained that although the province denied having a ‘let it burn policy’ they let the land burn and said it is healthy for the environment, which he suggested might be true, but allowing those fires to burn negatively affects the land and the people who rely on it. He stated that the policy is “destroying people’s livelihood, you’re destroying trap lines, you’re destroying cabins.” He continued, “And once that little spark goes to a little outfitter, who probably pays taxes, there is a whole suppression going to shut off that spark, but they let the trapline burn.” This statement, along with others, suggests that local people felt as though these full response zones disproportionately affected First Nations people and that threats to their values are seen as less important than threats to the values belonging to white citizens.

Many experts argue that fires in Northern Saskatchewan should be allowed to burn when they do not pose a threat to the values listed above, because fires are inevitable, and allowing them to burn in a controlled way can help to prevent large-scale wildfires from affecting communities in the future (Eaves 2015). They also advise that allowing these fires to burn has ecological benefits, such as black spruce releasing their seeds from their cones after a fire (Eaves 2015, n.p.). But local people tend to disagree that letting wildfires burn is an appropriate solution. Noah stated, “They say that it regenerates the forest and kills the bugs, but it doesn’t work that way.” These conflicting ideas of what to do about northern forests make this discussion especially difficult because those running fire suppression efforts decide how traditional lands are dealt with during a wildfire, but those lands are incredibly important to community members.

These full response zones have been criticized by Indigenous governments and communities because they tend to leave remote communities vulnerable to wildfire (Eaves 2015, n.p.). Much like the case of the Wollaston Lake evacuation (Scharbach 2014, 6), Pelican residents often blamed the provincial government for the damage to their lands and saw them as having caused the evacuation through their inaction. They felt the evacuation was preventable, and that if they had been in charge, the fire would have been controlled.

#### **4.6 Experiences with Red Cross**

The Red Cross assisted with the daily needs of evacuees such as lodging, and vouchers for food, clothing, gas, and laundry. Thirteen of my participants felt the Red Cross was helpful

and treated them well; they were happy for their help. Evacuees knew where to find Red Cross workers because they had booths set up at the Allen Bird Centre in Prince Albert and had workers at the Soccer Centre in Saskatoon. One Health Centre employee stated, “The Red Cross was very accommodating. They did a great job, we had clients that needed certain services, and we worked with them to accommodate them.”

Although some evacuees had positive experiences with the Red Cross, others did not. A few residents volunteered with them, but for the most part, Red Cross workers were white and unfamiliar. During the evacuation, some evacuees had negative interactions with the Red Cross, including an air of general distrust, issues with translation, trouble registering, and being denied assistance. One local government worker suggested that the Red Cross did whatever was easiest for them, not what was best for the people. He felt they were “not trying hard enough” to accommodate those who were evacuated and focused on physical, rather than social and cultural needs.

Local Home Health Aides acted as advocates and translators for community members dealing with Red Cross because there was no one working them who could do so. One middle-aged Home Health Aide stated, “They [Red Cross] looked to us for a lot of ‘Can you vouch for this person? Do you know who they are? Can you help us talk to them?’ We aren’t from Red Cross; we are from Health.” Cheryl stated one female volunteer from the community

basically bee-lined to the Elders and to people who looked totally lost, and she would say ‘If you know of anyone who is struggling, please let me know and I will help them find the help that they need right now.’ And so, thank God for her, because she was the only Cree-speaking volunteer. She was the only brown-face working behind the counter (laughs). And if they didn’t feel confident to ask a question, they didn’t ask it because they didn’t recognize anyone behind the desks.

Some evacuees also had trouble registering with Red Cross. Several residents felt that registering was too complicated, because people were required to have an ID and a permanent address to register, which many people do not have at all, or may have forgotten to bring with them. Wayne, a Social Development worker, said “Yeah, I had to vouch for people, for others, yes. I had, a few times, I did that for others because they didn’t have IDs.” Some residents do not have identification because it costs money to get it, or they face other barriers to receiving one. Wayne stated that some residents do not go to clinics or hospitals for extended periods, and when they apply for a health card after a long hiatus, they are questioned about their Saskatchewan

residency. He explained that residents in this situation are asked, “Are you really a Saskatchewan resident? Can you prove this? Do you have other IDs?”

Wayne clarified that in order to get a photo ID and treaty card, residents must first get other identification, such as their SIN number, a health card, and birth certificate which can be difficult to obtain. He explained, “I deal with that pretty much every month with the local people. Getting IDs, that sort of thing.” The requirements for registering with Red Cross seem to have overlooked that some residents cannot prove that they live in the community and thus created extra work and stress for local people such as Wayne and the Home Health Aides, who had to vouch for other community members.

Another significant issue was that some evacuees from Sandy Bay were denied assistance from Red Cross, even though they had evacuated because of the encroaching wildfires. Frances, an Elder from Sandy Bay, explained that in her community, the evacuation was voluntary. The local Health Centre announced that if anyone wanted to leave, a bus would be coming shortly, but at that time she did not feel that she had been given enough information to make an informed decision. She said, “I thought they should be coming to tell us what is going on, but they didn’t. And everybody, of course, stretches the story, gets everybody all worked up.”

Frances later decided to leave with her daughter and granddaughter, and when she arrived in Prince Albert, she was denied assistance. She said, “They [Red Cross] asked me where I was from and I told them, so they gave me a ticket to take a taxi from their office to up the hill. So, I went there to see if I could get any help. I did register, you know, and lining up and all that, and I was denied. I was denied help.” Frances also heard that others from Sandy Bay were not being assisted if they had not left on the bus that had been provided to take evacuees out. She phoned the Red Cross office and explained her situation to them. Then she was told to call the main office in Calgary, where the employee she spoke to did not know about the evacuation from Pelican Narrows. Francis stated, “I thought ‘Don’t they have anyone here in Saskatchewan that can make those decisions?’ You know? I was explaining where I was from and where Sandy Bay was. I was trying to fill her in, and she didn’t sound like she had a clue where I was.” Even after contacting the Red Cross main office, Frances did not receive any assistance during the evacuation.

Many of these issues could have been avoided if Red Cross had worked together with local people in the planning phase, and not simply asked for their assistance in the moment.



Numerous residents suggested that the Red Cross should work in tandem with local people in a more effective way to improve evacuation experiences. They recommended that the local council be involved in the evacuation mitigation efforts, but that the Red Cross should remain involved. Wayne suggested that the membership clerk for the community could assist Red Cross during an evacuation because they have a list with all of the names and birthdates of community members as well as their scanned ID's, SIN numbers, treaty numbers, and health card numbers, which would make it easier to register for those people who do not have their ID's during the evacuation.

#### **4.7 Not Speaking Up**

One theme throughout my interviews was that evacuees were often afraid to speak up about their worries or needs to outsiders. One Home Health Aide stated, “As Aboriginal people, you don't voice your concerns. If you have a question, you don't ask it. That's probably why some Indians say nothing and just went without their family unit.” During the evacuation, people generally did what they were told without asking questions, regardless of the impact it would have on their evacuation experience. Another Home Health Aide explained,

They came to us, the local people. They didn't seek the support or the help from the third party because it was so, it was so new, and it was almost like invading, ‘I don't want to ask them, I don't know who they are, can I trust them?’ Like, ‘You go ask, you know English, go ask and tell me.’ It was like that for our members. Even the younger people. I had 15, 16-year-old girls come up to me and ask for sanitary pads or shampoo, ‘Can you go ask for me?’ I said, if you have your ID and your bracelet, there is nothing wrong with asking, it's a basic need. They said they didn't want to ask because [Red Cross] would say no.

A teacher also saw this happening. “People would just sit there,” she said, “and when you sit there and don't speak up, its almost like you're agreeing with everything the person says.”

In their study of a northern Indigenous Community's evacuation, Scharbach and Waldram (2016) found the community was completely dependent on the government for their evacuation, which became like a martial state. They found that the “pre-existing cultural patterns, combined with historical experiences—especially those involving the colonizer's state structures and services—explain to a significant degree how these Indigenous residents experienced the evacuation” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 60). In the case of the Pelican Narrows and Wollaston Lake evacuations, evacuees “dutifully followed instructions” given by the

government, but “Such deference can be seen as a response to more than a century of state-sponsored policies of manipulation and oppression of northern Aboriginal peoples” (Scharbach and Waldram 2016, 67).

Smith (2012) argued that “Within many indigenous communities there is a deep conservatism and an unwillingness to upset the status quo, and in these environments any agents of change – whether educators, researchers or activists – are regarded as suspect” (Smith 2012, 343). McKay (2013, 32) explained that in many social situations it is common for Indigenous peoples not to “answer questions unless asked, nor will they ask questions out loud and do not wish to contradict their fellow human beings” but this “reluctance to speak does not necessarily mean disinterest.” A hesitation in stating their position to outsiders may be because invitations to participate are perceived to be “monitored by a racist ideology waiting to prove Aboriginal inferiority” (McKay 2013, 35).

Many residents have faced abuses by those in positions of power in residential schools, where they could not always speak up to their care-givers, for fear they would not be helped, believed, feelings of embarrassment or self-blame, or denial or unwillingness to talk about it (Waldram 2004, 231). The residential school experiences of residents are “an important element in the overall health and psychological profile of Aboriginal peoples” (Waldram 2004, 231).

Their bilateral cross-cousin marriage kinship system (Smith 1974, 758), along with being a fairly insular group, means that most of the people residents rely on day-to-day tend to be related to them in one way or another and implicated in a system of implied reciprocity. This relational entanglement, cultural values of self-sufficiency as individuals and as a group (Smith 1975, 179), and a history of colonialism and residential schools come together to offer an explanation of why a Pelican resident would hesitate to speak ‘up’ to those in positions of power.

First Nations people might not speak up to outside authorities because of a long history of being dismissed and undermined, but they are more than happy to complain to local people and authorities. Haalblom and Natcher (2012, 322) explain that when the fur trade was being phased out, Indigenous peoples were forced to relocate to settlements in the 1950s and 60s, which “closely resembled coercion, and its acceptance reflected indigenous peoples’ feelings of intimidation, fear, and subservience towards government administrators.” Thus, the seeming acceptance of outside control and coercion by northern Indigenous peoples is entangled in a long history of interactions with colonial rule.

In Pelican, people tend to be racially aware. They know when a new white person, such as myself, comes into town, and often assume these people hold some sort of power. It was presumed by several people that I was a new police officer in town, or that I held a position of authority aside from being a researcher. This might be because most white people who live there are not permanent residents. Instead, they tend to work for a short amount of time at the RCMP office or Health Centre, both of which hold power in the community. There is also a frustration with ‘white people,’ who are seen as ‘powerful strangers who do not understand their culture but are able to exercise power over them. ‘White people’ run the provincial and federal governments, which are often seen as institutions that either ignore or force the hands of local people. This racialized power dynamic is yet another reason to have local government involved in emergency planning because no one should feel uncomfortable asking for shampoo during an evacuation for fear of being denied.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

In the above-mentioned interactions with the provincial and federal governments, along with Red Cross, centralized, top-down approaches have been used, likely with the intention of improving services for residents and reducing costs for those agencies. While these intentions are good, the outcome, in this case, was the marginalization of Indigenous peoples and knowledge. At once, individuals and communities are encouraged to be responsible for themselves and yet have very little real agency, creating a catch-22. For instance, campaigns such as FireSmart (2018), which community members are encouraged to follow in Saskatchewan, suggest that individuals have a responsibility to prevent wildfires in many ways, such as tending to their land to remove deadfall and building fire-resistant homes. Although they are responsabilized prior to a fire’s ignition, the community has very little control over what happens when a fire does start, and often their firefighters are not used, or new local firefighters are not trained.

Another example is requiring that communities have their own evacuation plans and Priority One lists regardless of available funding while having external agencies run a majority of the evacuation with little input from local officials. Such plans are only useful when they are integrated into emergency response, which did not appear to occur during the 2017 evacuation. Local governments are also expected to call an evacuation but require consultations with other agencies to receive funding, meaning they do not truly hold the power to declare an emergency

on their own unless they are able to fund the entire evacuation. Finally, relying on local people to assist Red Cross in the moment, but not seeking and integrating their suggestions beforehand, represents yet another example of the responsabilizing of individual citizens, without enabling community agency.

Drawing on Foucault, Lemke (2001, 201) suggests that responsabilization represents an intervention from neo-liberal forms of government in which “indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them” takes place. This shifts the responsibility from government agencies to individuals and collectives, expecting them to “rationally assess the costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to other alternative acts,” placing the success or failure on the shoulders of those being responsabilized. In this case, responsabilization is not separate from, but entangled with, government, because although citizens are responsible for taking appropriate action, they are also controlled by external government agencies, regardless of their advanced preparedness.

This combination of responsibility and external control led to many of the frustrations mentioned in this chapter. Local people were discouraged because they were not invited into discussions with the province and other agencies, the language used by the province was sometimes inaccessible, and their knowledge and expertise were not taken seriously, leading to a loss of control over fire suppression efforts even when it affected their traditional lands. Perhaps the evacuation could have been avoided had their suggestions been heard by workers at North Bay. Responsibility is not a negative word here. Many residents would like for their local government to have increased responsibility and funding and to be equal parties in discussions regarding fire suppression and evacuations, rather than simply following instructions to ‘be prepared’ with little available action when a wildfire or evacuation occurs.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### 5.1 Chapter Review

Many of the themes throughout this thesis are related to power, external control, and subsequent frustrations. Chapter 1 provided a timeline of the 2017 evacuation, a short ethnographic description of the people of Pelican Narrows, including a history of negative experiences with outsiders, and an outline of my methodology. Chapter 2 offered an overview of the experiences of residents during the evacuation. Cree culture was important to evacuees but was not well understood by the governmental and non-governmental agencies assisting them. Some of their needs were not met, they were often unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the city, and families were separated, causing distress throughout the evacuation process.

Chapter 3 addressed risk, vulnerability, and resilience in the context of evacuations and disasters with a focus on Elders and the elderly. Priority One evacuees were taken out of the community first, which led to family separation. This categorical understanding of risk missed emergent risk, did not serve the community well, and did not reflect vulnerability as experienced by residents throughout the evacuation. Not all seniors were equally at risk, and not all young or middle-aged people were less vulnerable than all aged community members, which suggests that a focus on specific reasons people of any age may be at risk would be a more appropriate solution. Additionally, allowing communities to be a part of disaster mitigation efforts and tapping into cultural modes of resilience were suggested as possible improvements for future evacuations.

Although risk and vulnerability can be useful concepts during disasters, they should be conceptualized differently when applied to Indigenous communities. The unit of risk should be reconceptualized in relational terms; risk is not an individual experience; it is a family experience. Hence it is the social group that is 'at-risk' when a particular individual exhibits a risk factor. Additionally, understanding vulnerability as only a health issue misses many aspects of risk, including social, economic, and cultural issues. Vulnerability should also be understood as being both harm-based, and agency-based, meaning that it should attend to physical issues and agency. If an individual is in danger of physical harm, they are vulnerable, but if they face manipulation or force that prevents them from living their lives in a meaningful way, that is a form of vulnerability that should be attended to as well. If risk had been marked by a particular ailment or issue and attention was paid to issues such as unilingualism, the importance of family,

community, and culture, and the location of the evacuation, risk and vulnerability would have been more effective policy tools. One solution would be a system that encourages self-registering, or registering loved ones, with the Health Centre before or during a disaster would ensure that those who felt at risk or had a particular ailment, would be evacuated first and housed in hotels with their families.

Encouraging First Nations' involvement in disaster planning and mitigation would allow communities to tap into cultural resilience by keeping families together, providing access to traditional food and activities, choosing familiar environments for evacuations, and allowing communities to decide what they need as an evacuated community. The current provincial policy does not allow these communities to be agentive, which works as a barrier to resilience. While all residents survived the fire and evacuation, they often remembered the evacuation as a negative experience over which they had very little control, and some likened the experience to being taken to residential schools.

Chapter 4 spoke to issues relating to outside agencies, including the provincial government and the Red Cross, as well as control over fire management and the evacuation process. The evacuation was mostly run by the province and Red Cross, who generally did not consult with local people or government. There was confusion about responsibilities, issues with funding and reimbursement, and a lack of communication between these agencies and local government. Local leaders were 'left out of the loop' regarding planning and decision making and would have liked to be involved in planning efforts before, during, and after a disaster. Community members also felt ill-informed, which led to a loss of confidence in the disaster plans of the local government.

Firefighting efforts are currently controlled by the province and tend to use highly trained, centralized groups of firefighters dispatched from southern locations. Residents of wanted to fight the fires, but officials at the North Bay fire station failed to engage their expertise and experience. Local people also did not support the so-called 'let it burn' policy of the province because it was a change from how things used to be and threatens traditional lands. In the past, certification and permission from the province were not required for local people to fight wildfires. Each fire was attacked with the intention of putting it out. Now the province controls these efforts, and often leaves northern fires to burn if they are not within 20 kilometres of a community or asset, as defined by the province. Community members explained that by

allowing the fires to burn, traditional lands, traplines, animals, medicinal plants, and so on, are destroyed, compromising the community's ability to use their traditional territory.

Red Cross workers were seen as a group of unfamiliar outsiders, which led to general distrust. This distrust was likely related to a greater issue within Pelican, where 'white people' are often seen as untrustworthy or threatening, resulting in many residents not speaking up about their needs. This was compounded by issues with translation, registering, and being denied assistance. Some residents had issues communicating with the Red Cross, did not bring the right identification with them, or simply did not own the identification required by the Red Cross to register. One Elder from Sandy Bay stated that she had been denied assistance, as had other residents from the same community, and was told that because they were under a voluntary evacuation, they were not covered by the Red Cross unless they had left on the busses that were provided. This interaction affected her greatly; it brought her to angry tears to talk about it a year after the evacuation.

In summary, the residents of Pelican Narrows have different abilities and needs than southern communities. They tend to have large, extended families, have experienced a history of residential schools, and already feel disenfranchised and unheard by 'white' government. Residents found the city unfamiliar and uncomfortable, with many suggesting they would prefer a more familiar setting. Additionally, countless community members had extensive experience fighting fires, and the community has its own local government, which is distinctly different from a city's government. Provincial standardization and reliance on top-down, centralized approaches stunted the community's agency and did not address their specific needs. This led to separated families, unmet physical and cultural needs, negative emotional experiences of the evacuation, and frustration due to the lack of acknowledgement of their skills and knowledge. Community members wanted themselves and their government to be more involved in firefighting efforts, disaster mitigation and planning, and to have more control and agency during evacuations.

## **5.2 A Possible Solution**

So how then do we solve the problem of preventing the loss of life while also accounting for the needs and desires of Indigenous communities? I argue that 'we,' that is, white, southern researchers and policy-makers, are not going to solve this problem alone. Communities and

individuals should be involved in their own disaster mitigation planning and efforts, allowing them to assess their own risk and vulnerability in a way that accounts for the variable nature of vulnerability apparent in any disaster.

Planning must be flexible to be effective and useful (Pekovic, Seff, and Rothman 2007, 40). Those assisting evacuated Indigenous communities should respect and understand “indigenous [*sic*] responses to disasters,” and allow “indigenous [*sic*] people to participate in devising their own strategies” (Lauer 2012, 184). Local social norms and vulnerabilities should be integrated into disaster planning because when they are not, it can lead to unforeseen and unnecessary distress. The importance of the community and extended families, and the ability to exercise agency are important factors that were missed in the 2017 evacuation. This would have been easily recognized as problematic by community members, had they been more involved in the disaster mitigation.

One way of attaining the goal of involving communities in disaster preparedness and mitigation is to use strength-based ‘culturally safe’ policies and procedures. Cultural safety was developed in New Zealand with the purpose of improving health-care for Maori people (Nguyen 2008, 991), and thus much of the literature on the subject involves health-care (e.g. Darroch et al. 2017; Gerlach et al. 2014; Nguyen 2008; Papps and Ramsden 1996; Wilson 2014; Smye and Browne 2002), but the concept can be expanded to other domains as well, such as disaster management.

Cultural safety can be seen as an extension of cultural competence (Brascoupé and Waters 2009, 8). Cultural competence is concerned with the cultural training and knowledge of professionals in order to provide effective cross-cultural care (Brascoupé and Waters 2009, 28). The National Aboriginal Health Organization of Canada defined cultural safety as

what is felt or experienced by a patient when a health care provider communicates with the patient in a respectful, inclusive way, empowers the patient in decision-making and builds a health care relationship where the patient and provider work together as a team to ensure maximum effectiveness of care. Culturally safe encounters require that health care providers treat patients with the understanding that not all individuals in a group act the same way or have the same beliefs. (NAHO 2008, 19)

Strength-based cultural safety emphasizes strengths accumulated and developed over a lifetime, rather than deficits (Smith et al. 2007, 323), and focuses on “the positive underlying basis of the person’s resources and resilience, drawing upon their own community supports and resources” (Yeung 2016, 6). Strength-based approaches are empowering because they recognize individual



and collective strengths and “the influence of social and relational contexts,” while encouraging the use of “neighbourhood networks, community organizations, a sense of ownership over community wellbeing, as well as spiritual and cultural beliefs and values” (Smith et al. 2007, 323). Central to strength-based culturally safe policy in Indigenous communities is the extended family and cultural resilience.

Cultural safety does not require that people providing assistance know everything about the culture of those they are assisting; rather it necessitates that the care provider recognizes and respects the difference of any person (Papps and Ramsden 1996, 494). It is focused on the experience of the person receiving care and the attitude of the practitioner or agency providing it (Nguyen 2008, 991). Ultimately, the former decides whether the care they received is culturally safe (Papps and Ramsden 1996, 494). This focus on experience allows the person receiving the service “to express degrees of felt risk or safety” (Papps and Ramsden 1996, 494). In order to achieve the best outcome, cultural safety and cultural competence should be employed together, leading to “awareness and knowledge of Aboriginal culture and history, cultural self-knowledge by the service provider, and a mutual and respectful relationship” (Brascoupé and Waters 2009, 18).

In cultural safety, the term ‘culture’ is used to represent a multitude of factors, including “a particular way of living in the world, attitudes, behaviours, links and relationships with others,” “morals, beliefs, attitudes, and standards” (Papps and Ramsden 1996, 493). This understanding of culture also addresses variability within a given culture including factors such as “class, socialisation, sexual orientation, age” (Papps and Ramsden 1996, 493), gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religious or spiritual belief, and disability (Papps and Ramsden 1996, 496). These categories represent culture in a broad sense, but each is important because one cannot provide effective care “if they have unconscious negative attitudes towards patients who are different from them in any of these categories” (Papps and Ramsden 1996, 496).

An acknowledgement of the ongoing and historical relationships between Indigenous peoples and the state and its agencies is central to cultural safety in Indigenous contexts (Gerlach et al. 2014, 21), including issues relating to “racism, discrimination and chronic cycles of poverty [which] are rooted in underlying structural inequities in contemporary Canadian society” (Gerlach et al. 2014, 20). Stereotypes and negative beliefs about Indigenous peoples can be unknowingly enacted by those providing them with assistance (Gerlach et al. 2014, 20). Cultural

safety addresses these relationships by emphasizing that those providing care need to “critically reflect on the colonial precedents of the care that they provide that contribute to these power imbalances” (Nelson and Wilson 2018, 25).

Those providing services, including government organizations, need to “turn the lens inward” to understand how their “taken for granted and largely unquestioned assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives” may not be shared by the people they are assisting (Gerlach et al. 2014, 21). Cultural safety implies a shift in attitude. Instead of expecting the Indigenous person to change to fit the pre-existing system, the dominant system is expected to change and adapt to the needs of Indigenous peoples (Gerlach 2012, 153). Because it is the responsibility of the care provider, and the institutions they work for, to change and adapt in order to provide culturally safe care, they must be flexible, reflective, and reflexive (Gerlach et al. 2014, 21). Instead of learning about Indigenous peoples, the goal should be to “create time and space to learn *with* and *from* Aboriginal peoples as genuine partners and allies” (Gerlach et al. 2014, 20).

Employing culturally safe policies can help attune governmental and non-governmental organizations to the people they govern and serve (Brascoupé and Waters 2009, 10). This type of policy is also explicitly political because it involves a transferring of power. This transfer of power also brings a cost, imposing responsibility onto the Indigenous government, institutions, and individuals (Brascoupé and Waters 2009, 17). But this is likely a burden worth carrying, because “In the historical context of mistrust and trauma caused by colonization, the building of trust within cross-cultural interaction is critical to policy effectiveness” (Brascoupé and Waters 2009, 7), and trust is hard to build without a sharing of power. In short, “A culturally safe delivery system could strengthen the capacity of communities to resist the stressors and build resilience to those forces that push them from risk to crisis” (Brascoupé and Waters 2009, 7).

Another complementary solution, mentioned in Chapter 3, would be to have those who feel at risk identify themselves to authorities, rather than having authorities presume the risk of those people. The San Francisco City and County Department of Public Health Emergency Services Section maintains a “voluntary ‘Disaster Registry’ for elderly and disabled individuals with confidential information about their medical condition, functional abilities, and social resources” (Ngo 2001, 87). Flanagan et al. (2011) suggest a similar registration program “for the disabled, frail, or transportation disadvantaged” (Flanagan et al. 2011, 3), where they or their loved ones can identify them as vulnerable. The Home Health Aides I spoke to also suggested

that self-registering, or registering loved ones, would alleviate much of the confusion about who is, and who is not, vulnerable in a disaster. Such a registry would allow local people to become involved in conversations about vulnerability and disaster response, and work with the agencies that are attempting to assist them (Bankoff and Hilhorst 2013, 8).

### **5.3 Community Action**

PBCN and the PAGC are invested in changing fire policy in Saskatchewan. In 2018, the PAGC created a task force to facilitate dialogue with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment regarding wildfires (Pasiuk 2018). This task force is concerned with fires that threaten northern communities and traditional lands and aims to improve wildfire response (Pasiuk 2018). In 2018 the PAGC also signed an agreement with the Canadian Red Cross to facilitate a good working relationship between both parties which relies on open and clear communication (Eagle Feather News 2018b). This is the first agreement of its kind for the Red Cross in Saskatchewan and “includes an agreement to formalize the overall scope, roles, responsibilities and expectations of the organizations for evacuation planning and response but is legally non-binding” (Eagle Feather News 2018b, n.p.). The agreement means that these two organizations will work together to improve future disaster response.

Chief Peter Beatty has taken part in parliamentary discussions with the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (2017), and a written report from PBCN (2017) was also submitted. Their suggestions were later integrated with the testimony of 46 other witnesses into a report from the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (2018) entitled “From the Ashes: Reimagining Fire Safety and Emergency Management in Indigenous Communities.”

### **5.4 Recommendations for Improving Disaster Response in Indigenous Communities**

Many recommendations have been made by the PAGC (2018), PBCN (2017), and the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (2018) to improve disaster planning, mitigation, and recovery in Indigenous communities. The suggestions included here are each related to and supported by the experiences addressed in this thesis. The PAGC’s (2018, 4-5) recommendations include: ensuring there are enough local firefighters in any given community, relying more heavily on “boots on the ground” and less on water bombers, training additional

Type 3 (First Nations) fire crews, involving First Nations people in climate change solutions, and improving emergency procedures. Recommendations from PBCN (2017) involve improving communication between Wildfire Management and local government, including operationalization of terms and involving First Nations communities in all Provincial and Federal meetings that affect the community (PBCN 2017, 1-2), providing faster responses to wildfire (PBCN 2017, 2), and developing better funding processes for disaster preparedness and recovery (PBCN 2017, 3).

The list of suggestions from the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (2018) is lengthier than the two mentioned above. Some pertinent recommendations from this report include:

1. Recognizing Indigenous peoples and communities “as equal partners,” working with them, and clarifying the various roles of each involved party “regarding emergency management in First Nation communities” (SCINA 2018, 3). Which includes ensuring “that all pertinent information be communicated with relevant contacts from a First Nation community” (SCINA 2018, 4)
2. Reviewing the Emergency Management Assistance Program to ensure that available funding meets community needs, including monies for emergency preparedness (SCINA 2018, 3), and fire prevention campaigns (SCINA 2018, 5). As well as clarifying the claims process for the refunding of monies related to “emergency response and recovery expenses on reserve,” as well as requiring faster claims reimbursement (SCINA 2018, 5)
3. Training and employing local community members to engage in fire prevention and suppression whenever possible and compensating them accordingly (SCINA 2018, 3).
4. Incorporating First Nations knowledge and expertise into fire control and prevention (SCINA 2018, 3)
5. Increasing and mandating training for agencies and/or individuals assisting First Nations communities in traditional culture and practice to ensure “culturally appropriate services are delivered” (SCINA 2018, 4)
6. Requiring one or more people to assist “with the registration of evacuees and to highlight their specific needs” (SCINA 2018, 4).

7. Ensuring there is always a contact person available “throughout an evacuation to respond to emerging needs or concerns, which could include but not be limited to translation services, medical care and mental health supports” (SCINA 2018, 4).
8. Creating “an independent Indigenous Fire Marshal’s Office in order to promote fire safety and prevention in First Nation communities” which would address “public education and awareness campaigns, implementing standardized training for fire safety officials, developing and enforcing fire safety standards and building codes, and conducting regular building inspections” (SCINA 2018, 5).

The suggestions made by these three agencies represent culturally safe procedures. They encourage the meaningful involvement of Indigenous communities and governments in disaster planning, mitigation, and recovery, and suggest increased training and funding to make these tasks manageable. This enables communities and governments to make decisions and plans for themselves while increasing provincial and federal support. Many of these recommendations implicitly or explicitly argue that Indigenous knowledge and expertise are valuable tools for disaster mitigation and suggest flexible planning which can be tailored to context. They also recognize the importance of Indigenous culture and tradition and suggest that government and other agencies are responsible for changing, not Indigenous communities and peoples.

Each recommendation from PBCN, PAGC, and the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs included here are supported by the experiences and suggestions of Pelican Narrows residents which have been explored throughout this thesis. They wanted their knowledge to be taken seriously, to be involved in all stages of disaster mitigation including firefighting, to be funded and refunded accordingly, and to have those assisting them understand and accommodate Cree culture. Without using the term ‘culturally safe,’ residents, PAGC, PBCN, and the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs suggested similar culturally safe changes which would improve their fire preparedness, as well as increase their involvement in firefighting efforts and evacuations.

This thesis furthers Scharbach (2014) and Scharbach and Waldram’s (2016) work on wildfire evacuations from northern Indigenous communities. Scharbach (2014, 86) made seven suggestions for improving future evacuations in her thesis including: keeping families together, or, at the very least, ensuring they are able to communicate with one another; involving community members in the protection of their community through firefighting and other efforts;

ensuring access to basic necessities during the evacuation; evacuating to a familiar environment where people speak the same traditional language; creating a clear evacuation plan including a decision-making hierarchy and disseminating it to community members; prioritizing Elders because of their special status; and encouraging ongoing consultation between all involved parties. These are all useful recommendations, but I further suggest that evacuees should have access to traditional foods, activities, and Elders whenever possible. While access to basic provisions is certainly of paramount importance, so is access to culturally important aspects of their lives while evacuated. Similarly, while I agree that Elders are important parts of their community, I argue that elderly people should not receive special treatment during an evacuation unless they need it. Instead, Elders should be drawn upon for their knowledge and experiences, as well as their influence and status within the community. Including Elders in disaster response could help to create culturally safe evacuations which encourage cultural resilience, but treating them as 'special' community members in need of increased care if they do not require it can lead to the separation of families, and a loss of resources for cultural resilience for entire communities.

This research supports the finding that disasters are social and cultural processes (Oliver-Smith 1999; Button 2002; Laska and Morrow 2006), which expose degrees of vulnerabilities (Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti 2006, 12) during the hazard event, evacuation, time away, return, and recovery. Thus, vulnerability should not be understood categorically, but rather as a contextual, social, changing phenomenon (Fjord and Manderson 2009, 67; Scharbach and Waldram 2016), which could be combatted by drawing upon cultural resilience and employing culturally safe policy. Vulnerability should also be understood as harm based (e.g. one is at risk of harm because of a physical or mental condition) and agency based (e.g. one is at risk because one is not able to live their life in a meaningful way) (Bozzaro, Boldt, and Schweda 2018). This altered understanding of vulnerability would allow more families to stay together because seniors and other Priority One evacuees would not be unnecessarily separated from their communities. There is an opportunity to draw upon Indigenous traditions and Elders to help to promote cultural resilience in the face of disasters and evacuations which was not fully taken advantage of during the 2017 evacuation because provincial policy stunted their ability to be meaningfully involved in their own disaster mitigation efforts and separated families.

While those faced with a disaster are often organized and controlled by outside agencies that rely on centralized, top-down approaches (Bankoff and Hilhorst 2013; Haalblom and Natcher 2012; Fass 2016; Scharbach and Waldram 2016), this method of disaster mitigation ignores the abilities of these communities, and often create further dependence on outside agencies (Fass 2016). But, as Richard Kent, the Commissioner of the Saskatchewan First Nations Emergency Management stated, these communities are “perfectly capable of looking after themselves. We need to provide them the tools and the training to do it, because nobody can look after their community better than their own community” (SCINA 2017, 7).

According to Anthony Oliver-Smith, there is a “need to link theory to practice in applied anthropology” (Oliver-Smith 2013, 275). Policies and projects relating to disasters must be “based on a solid understanding of human behavior in general and cultural behavior specifically” to ensure their success (Oliver-Smith 2013, 275). This project sought to inform public policy as it relates to disaster mitigation in northern Indigenous communities. It is not simply a documentation of the experiences of Pelican, but rather it is a call for change.

Community-based research should continue to be carried out in northern Indigenous communities affected by flood or fire in an effort to improve evacuations. The experiences of older community members in these scenarios are not well understood and should be investigated further. Specifically, a focus on risk and vulnerability as concepts applied to evacuees, their understandings of themselves as vulnerable or not, and the effects of categorizing them as such, would prove useful, as would addressing how these concepts differ from location to location and change over time.

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## **Appendix A: Sample of Interview Questions for Elders**

### ***Background Information:***

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. What makes an Elder an Elder?
  - a. What types of knowledge do they have?
  - b. How could they help the community during the evacuation?
3. What were your experiences of the evacuation last summer?

### ***The Evacuation:***

1. Were you worried that the fire was dangerous?
  - a. Why? Why not?
2. How did you find out that you were going to be evacuated?
  - a. Did anyone explain to you why you had to evacuate first?
  - b. How did you feel about being evacuated?
3. How were you taken out?
  - a. What was the journey like?
    - i. Did you feel emotional?
    - ii. What made you feel this way?
4. Do you have family members in the community?
  - a. Were you concerned about them during the evacuation?
  - b. Did you stay with them during the evacuation? Why? Why not?
  - c. What happened to other family members?
  - d. How did you feel being separated from your family and/or community?
5. Did any elderly people stay in the community during the evacuation?
  - a. How many?
  - b. How were they supported during the evacuation?
6. Were you worried about your family or community members?
  - a. What made you worried? [The fire? Family being taken to another city or complex? Cultural/social issues?]

### ***Being Evacuated:***

1. Where did you stay?
  - a. How did you feel there?
  - b. How did you spend your time there?
2. What sorts of things were you worried about? [Were you able to get food? Medicine? Medical care?]
3. What do you think the needs of older Indigenous people who are evacuated from the community are?
  - a. Were the needs of seniors you know met?
    - i. How? Why not?
4. Were your needs met?
  - a. How? Why not?

- b. Did you use anything that the Red Cross was offering?
  - c. Did you need anything that they weren't offering?
  - d. How did you get anything you needed that the Red Cross wasn't offering?
- 5. What are the needs of other community members who are evacuated?
  - a. Do you feel their needs were met?
- 6. Were you able to communicate with your family?
- 7. How did you cope with being worried or stressed?
- 8. Were you able to stay informed about what was going on with the fire?
- 9. Were there any positive outcomes from the fire and/or evacuation?
  - a. What were they? Who did they affect?
  - b. How would you suggest we make the experiences more positive for yourself or others?
- 10. Were there any negative outcomes from the fire and/or evacuation?
  - a. What were they? Who did they affect?
  - b. How do you think this could have been improved?
- 11. Have you heard any complaints or compliments about the evacuation?
  - a. What were they?
- 12. Did you have any complaints or compliments about the evacuation process?
- 13. How did you make it through the evacuation so well?
  - a. What would you tell others to improve their evacuation experiences?
- 14. What type of person does best in an evacuation?
- 15. What kind of person does the worst or experiences the most problems?
- 16. Do evacuations get easier or harder?
  - a. Why/why not?
- 17. Do you see yourself as vulnerable or 'at risk'?
  - a. In what way?
- 18. Do you feel you were treated as vulnerable during the evacuation?
  - a. How?
  - b. Do you feel being seen as 'vulnerable' is good or bad? How?

***Returning Home:***

- 1. How did you find out that you'd be going home?
- 2. Did other family members head home before you?
  - a. What was it like being there without them?
- 3. How did you get home?
  - a. How was the trip back?
  - b. Who was you with?
- 4. How did you feel when you arrived home?

***Community Fragmentation:***

- 1. What do you think are the effects of separating elderly people from the rest of the community during an evacuation?

2. Did you or your family experience any negative effects from being separated from one another or the rest of the community?
  - a. What were they?
3. Is there a way to prevent the separation of elderly people from other community members?
  - a. How? Why not?

***Closing Questions: (let the participant know we are nearing the end of the interview)***

1. Do you think evacuating was necessary?
2. If you had been able to stay with your family how would the evacuation have been different?
3. If there was an evacuation in the future, what would you do differently?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## **Appendix B: Sample of Interview Questions for Family/Community Members**

### ***Background Information:***

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. What makes an Elder an Elder?
  - a. What types of knowledge do they have?
  - b. How could they help the community during the evacuation?
3. How did you make it through the evacuation?
  - a. What would you tell others to improve their evacuation experiences?

### ***The Evacuation:***

1. What were your experiences of the evacuation last summer?
2. How did you find out that you were going to be evacuated?
3. Have you heard any complaints or compliments about the process of the evacuation?
  - a. What were they?
4. Did you have any complaints or compliments about the evacuation process?
5. Were you worried that the fire was dangerous?
  - a. Why? Why not?
6. Were you worried about any particular group or the community at large during the evacuation?
  - a. What made you worried?
7. How did you feel being separated from your family and/or community?

### ***Elders and the Elderly:***

1. Do you have senior family members in the community?
  - a. Were you concerned about them during the evacuation?
  - b. Did you stay with them during the evacuation? Why? Why not?
2. (If accompanied by elder) What was it like to have an elder with you?
  - a. What benefits were there to the elder and yourself?
  - b. Did others benefit from having an elder present?
3. (If not accompanied by elder) What was it like being without the elder?
  - a. What issues arose from being separated from one another?
  - b. What would have been different if the elder had been with you?
4. Did any elderly people stay in the community during the evacuation?
  - a. How many?
  - b. How were they supported during the evacuation?
5. Do you see elderly community members as vulnerable or 'at risk'?
  - a. In what way?
6. Do you feel seniors were treated as vulnerable during the evacuation?

- a. How?
- 7. What does 'resilience' mean to you?
  - a. Do you feel that you older family members are resilient?
    - i. Why/Why not?
- 8. What are needs of older Indigenous people who are evacuated from the community?
- 9. Were the needs of seniors you know met?
  - a. How? Why not?
- 10. What are the needs of community members who are evacuated?
  - a. Do you feel their needs were met?
- 11. Were your needs met?
  - a. How? Why not?
- 12. What do you think are the effects of separating elderly people from the rest of the community during an evacuation?
- 13. Did you or your family experience any negative effects from being separated from your family members or community?
  - a. What were they?
- 14. Is there a way to prevent the separation of elderly people from other community members?
  - a. How? Why not?
- 15. Were there any positive outcomes from the fire and/or evacuation?
  - a. What were they? Who did they affect?
  - b. How would you suggest we make the experiences more positive for yourself or others?
- 16. Were there any negative outcomes from the fire and/or evacuation?
  - a. What were they? Who did they affect?
  - b. How do you think this could have been improved?

***Closing Questions: (let the participant know we are nearing the end of the interview)***

- 1. Do you think evacuating was necessary?
- 2. If you had been able to stay with your family how would the evacuation have been different?
- 3. If there was an evacuation in the future, what would you do differently?
- 4. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## **Appendix C: Sample of Interview Questions for Local Government Officials**

### ***Background Information:***

1. Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. What is your role in Pelican Narrows government?
3. How long have you been in the community?
4. What were your experiences of the evacuation last summer?

### ***The Evacuation:***

1. Are you involved in the execution of wildfire evacuations in Pelican Narrows?
  - a. In what capacity?
2. What was your role in the wildfire evacuation last summer?
3. Can you provide me with information about the protocols for wildfire evacuations from Pelican Narrows?
4. Have you heard any complaints or compliments about the process of the evacuation?
  - a. What were they?
5. Did you have any complaints or compliments about the evacuation process?
6. Were you worried about any particular group or the community at large during the evacuation? What made you worried?
7. Were there any positive outcomes from the fire and/or evacuation?
  - a. What were they? Who did they affect?
  - b. How would you suggest we make the experiences more positive for yourself or others?
8. Were there any negative outcomes from the fire and/or evacuation?
  - a. What were they? Who did they affect?
  - b. How do you think this could have been improved?

### ***Elders and the Elderly:***

1. Do you have senior family members in the community?
  - a. Were you concerned about them during the evacuation?
  - b. Did you stay with them during the evacuation? Why/Why not?
2. Did any elderly people stay in the community during the evacuation?
  - a. How many?
  - b. How were they supported during the evacuation?
3. How were the understandings of ‘vulnerability’ and ‘at risk’ applied to elderly people in Pelican Narrows during the evacuation?
4. Do you see elderly community members as vulnerable?
5. What do you feel are the needs of older Indigenous people who are evacuated from the community due to wildfire?
6. What do you feel are the needs of the community who are evacuated from due to wildfire?



7. To what extent are these needs being met during the fire, evacuation, and return?
8. What do you think are the positive or negative effects caused by separating elderly people from the rest of the community?
9. Did you or your family experience any negative effects caused by being separated from family or community members?
10. Is there a way to prevent the separation of elderly people from other community members?
  - a. How? Why not?

***Closing Questions: (let the participant know we are nearing the end of the interview)***

1. Do you think evacuating was necessary?
2. If there was an evacuation in the future, what would you do differently?
3. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix D: Band Council Resolution



Indian and Northern  
Affairs Canada

Affaires indiennes  
et du Nord Canada

Chronological no.

PROJ 2017-2018-106.

File reference no.

### BAND COUNCIL RESOLUTION

**NOTE:**

The words "from our Band Funds" "capital" or "revenue", whichever is the case, must appear in all resolutions requesting expenditures from Band Funds.

		Cash free balance	
The council of the <b>Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation</b>		Capital account	\$ _____
Date of duly convened meeting	Province	Revenue account	\$ _____
D   M   Y 2   0   1   2   1   7	<b>Saskatchewan</b>		

**DO HEREBY RESOLVE:**

WHEREAS the Chief and Council of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation act as Trustees for the membership of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation; and

WHEREAS the Chief and Council of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation may pass resolutions for the health, safety and welfare of the members, and the protection of people and property, and for services provided by or on behalf of the Band; and

WHEREAS the Wildfires in 2017 significantly impacted the land and community members of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, particularly the communities of Pelican Narrows and Birch Portage; and

WHEREAS the Chief and Council of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation wishes to have a documented account of the impacts of the wildfires on the people and the land; and

WHEREAS James Waldram with the University of Saskatchewan – Department of Archaeology and Anthropology wishes to prepare a research report on the experiences of the community people impacted by the wildfires.

NOW THEREFORE it hereby be resolved that the Chief and Council of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, hereby approves to participate in the wildfire research project entitled "Effects of Wildfires' Impact on Communities" with James Waldram and the University of Saskatchewan.

## Appendix E: Ethics Certification



UNIVERSITY OF  
SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics Board

### *Certificate of Approval*

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR  
James Waldram

DEPARTMENT  
Psychology

BEH#  
18-05

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED  
Pelican Narrows

STUDENT RESEARCHER(S)  
Megan Poole

FUNDER(S)  
UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN - PRESIDENT'S SSHRC RESEARCH FUND

TITLE  
Indigenous Elders and Community Evacuation in Northern Saskatchewan

ORIGINAL REVIEW DATE  
23-Jan-2018

APPROVAL ON  
05-Feb-2018

APPROVAL OF:  
Application for Behavioural Research Ethics Review  
Recruitment Poster  
Consent Form  
Sample Interview Questions  
Acknowledgement of:  
Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation Band Council Resolution

EXPIRY DATE  
04-Feb-2019

Full Board Meeting

Date of Full Board Meeting:

Delegated Review

**CERTIFICATION:** The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2 2014). The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

**ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS:** In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: <http://research.usask.ca/for-researchers/ethics/index.php>

Behavioural Research Ethics Board  
University of Saskatchewan

Please send all correspondence to:

Research Services and Ethics Office  
University of Saskatchewan  
Room 223 Thorvaldson Building  
110 Science Place  
Saskatoon, SK Canada S7N 5C9