

Rising from the Ashes: Community Life and Environmental Management after the Jasper Wildfire in 2024

My dissertation examines the sociocultural implications of the 2024 wildfire in the municipality of Jasper, which raged from July 22 to September 7, 2024, in Jasper National Park, Alberta, Canada. Widely regarded as the most devastating wildfire in the region in the past century, the wildfire has left a significant impact on the area due to its scale: Leading to the evacuation of approx. 25,000 residents, it caused extensive destruction of property in nearly half of the town (Government of Canada 2024). The research project aims to explore community life and resilience, environmental management and post-disaster recovery.

Research Interest and Objectives

According to various media reports and interviews, local authorities have expressed concerns that strict forest protection measures, such as controlled burns, accumulated deadwood, and reforestation with predominantly coniferous trees, contributed to the unprecedented severity of the Jasper Wildfire in 2024. They further claim that artificially managed landscapes compromise the overall effectiveness of prevention measures, as they complicate predictability in the face of increasingly severe wildfires (Byrne 2024).

Taking those testimonies into account, my research encompasses the efficiency of implemented conservation measures. Although designed to protect the environment -and humans as an integral part of nature- these measures, in conjunction with global warming, periods of drought, and the increasing frequency of wildfires, may prove to be a recurring and potentially deadly trap. Moreover, I aim to determine whether these strategies incorporate local, in-depth knowledge, or reflect a top-down approach with decision-making at the national level.

Since Jasper National Park is located on the traditional territories of several First Nations groups, and indigenous knowledge and stewardship are officially integrated into the park's resource management, my research explores to which extent Aboriginal communities were involved in the development process of conservation measures. This raises questions regarding the representation of indigenous expertise in current conservation policy and local park management.

Accumulated environmental knowledge, the associated perception of environments and (lived) experience-making through immersion in the outside world play a significant role in identifying the relationship of an individual or group with the natural surroundings. My dissertation project examines how this simultaneously provides crucial information about local crisis management and the actions, structures and organizations of a community in the face of disaster. Furthermore, the aforementioned approach contributes to a deeper understanding of collective or individual responses and coping strategies in the event of natural catastrophes such as the Jasper Wildfire.

I will conduct my field stay during wildfire season from June to September 2026. My intention is to gain a deeper understanding of the risk environment by immersing myself in the area where the Jasper Wildfire occurred. I aim to capture the everyday realities of living in a high-risk area and the continuous experience of potential recurrence. This approach will provide both practical and experiential insights into how communities cope and respond to ongoing wildfire hazards.

During my field stay, I will also visit the *Provincial Archives of Alberta* (PAA) in Edmonton. PAA is a renowned institution that holds a comprehensive collection of historical records, including scientific reports and documents on the biodiversity and natural history of Alberta.

Additionally, I will arrange structured interviews with key informants such as members of the *Canadian Red Cross* and representatives of the *Parks Canada Wildfire Managers*, *Jasper Fire Department* and the *Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta* (FRIAA). FRIAA specializes in post-wildfire recovery and operates the *Wildfire Reclamation Program*, which focuses on restoring affected natural areas. I will also meet with the *Friends of Jasper National Park Association* and *Jasper Community Team Society* (JCTS) whose goals include strengthening the resilience of communities in Jasper. Furthermore, I will visit several local community-based organizations, including food banks and animal shelters (the *Jasper Food Bank*, *Hinton and District SPCA*, and *Jasper County Humane Society*) which provide valuable information about the extent of wildfire damage in local communities and are often underrepresented in public discourse. In addition, informal conversations with affected individuals, volunteer fireworkers, journalists and local grass-roots organizations will offer detailed insight into the complexity and multilayered implications of wildfires.

Furthermore, I will contact the *Indian Association of Alberta* (IAA). Founded in 1939 as the first organization advocating for First Nations rights in Alberta, the IAA represents various First Nations groups. Interviews with IAA members provide an opportunity to learn about First Nations expertise, traditional practices and preventative measures related to wildfires. They also offer information on different perspectives and perceptions of natural landscapes, while shedding light on the culture of remembrance associated with such environmental phenomena.

Moreover, I planned expert interviews at the University of Alberta in Edmonton with specialists who focus on human-environment relations and hold extensive knowledge of the region. These interviews will contribute to a deeper understanding of the ecological and social dimensions of wildfire impacts in Alberta.

Preliminary Work

My preliminary work includes a comprehensive literature review covering international case studies focusing on communities affected by wildfires, the history of national parks in Canada, regional literature on local environmental history, endemic ecosystems and species interrelations, and the general ecological status quo in Jasper National Park. In addition, special emphasis will be placed on materials related to climate change mitigation strategies in the region as well as development structures and stakeholders or involved interest groups.

Since I will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining various qualitative research methodologies, another task involves the preparation of interviews, surveys, and scheduling of appointments. Expert interviews with key informants relevant to the study could potentially be conducted via Zoom prior to the field stay in order to provide a better overview of the current situation in Jasper.

For example, I plan to interview Liza Piper, Environmental historian and Professor at the University of Alberta, to learn about local human-environment phenomena and research practices. As Professor Piper is specialized on Alberta's resource politics, she provides valuable insights for my research interest in the commodification of regional natural assets such as Jasper National Park as an important source of economic revenue, especially in the context of ecotourism and how this reflects on policy-making in relation to preservation strategies.

This approach may also provide an opportunity to verify the relevance of my preliminary research questions and hypotheses, while also facilitating logistics on site in terms of shorter travel distances during data collection.