

# CULTURAL INCOMMENSURABILITY IN JASPER NATIONAL PARK

Jason W. Johnston and Courtney W. Mason start by noting that economic motives spurred the establishment of Canada's first national parks, including Jasper National Park (JNP), "designed specifically to protect land, not for conservation, but for tourism development and resource-extraction activities."<sup>1</sup> Promoting the concept of "pristine wilderness" so that tourists could experience these "untouched landscapes, Indigenous Peoples were forcibly removed from their traditional territories in the newly established park boundaries and their subsistence practices became unacceptable, and eventually illegal."<sup>2</sup> Promoting "parks as 'natural' wilderness promulgated the illusion that these are places where human beings do not live, erasing the fact that First Peoples had been living there, in some cases for millennia."<sup>3</sup>

"Guided by Indigenous methodologies," Johnston and Mason ask the following questions: (1) What are the traditional ties between "diverse Indigenous communities" and the "lands redefined as Jasper National Park?", (2) "Why are the current consultation processes problematic between Park management and Jasper Indigenous Forum (JIF) members?", and (3) "What are the barriers and opportunities to achieve respectful representations of Indigenous cultures, to improve consultation processes, and to support reconciliation efforts in Jasper?"<sup>4</sup>

In November 2017, Johnston and Mason consulted Raymond Cardinal, the JIF member representing both the Sucker Creek and Paul First Nation, concerning the "rich histories of the diverse peoples who lived, traded, migrated through, and hunted in this place [and who] are all but ignored in the park when it comes to signage and programming."<sup>5</sup> Established in 1907 as Jasper Forest Park and covering 13,000km, the JNP was named after a North West Company trading post clerk, Jasper Hawes. It officially became a national park in 1930 and, like "most" national parks in Canada, JNP was established "without consultation with or consideration for the Indigenous Peoples who called these lands home," that according to Loretta Belcourt, a Métis JIF representative from Lac Ste. Anne.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, First Peoples were forcibly removed from their traditional lands "as a direct result of the creation of the national park system."<sup>7</sup> Indigenous Peoples living in the Park clashed with the Park managers' promotion of a "notion of an unspoiled wilderness."<sup>8</sup>

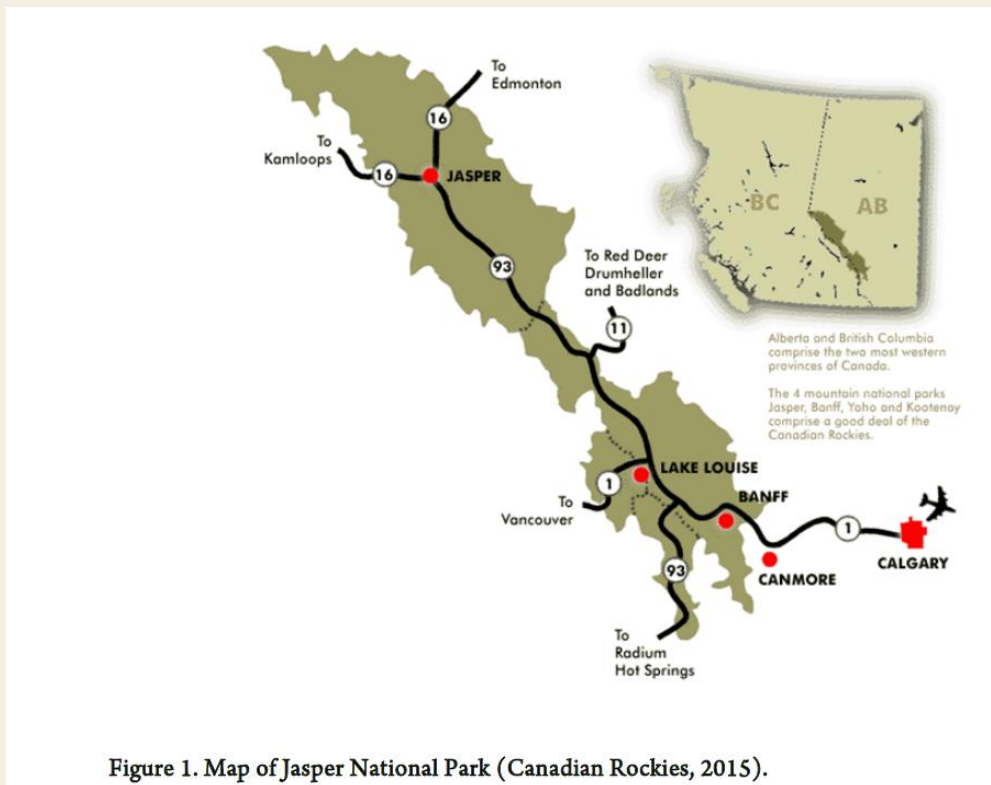


Figure 1. Map of Jasper National Park (Canadian Rockies, 2015).

Since the 1970s acknowledgement by Canada's Supreme Court that Aboriginal title exists, First Peoples have been attempting to reclaim "control over their traditional lands in Jasper and working to incorporate their cultures back into the landscapes from which they were forced out."<sup>9</sup> However, the Canadian government's unwillingness to relinquish or even "share control can be seen through the lack of representation of Indigenous Peoples in places like Jasper National Park," an allegation made by Raymond Cardinal during that 2017 interview.<sup>10</sup> Traveling through Jasper townsite and park, the only Indigenous content one can observe is "the Haida Totem Pole in the center of town," and that "display does not have significance to any Indigenous Peoples that have traditional connections to the lands in Jasper."<sup>11</sup> As of 2019, there were 48 national parks and national park reserves in Canada; "even where there is a co-management agreement in place, Parks Canada retains final management-decision authority even for Indigenous concerns and ultimately, within the parks, rights are highlighted but not always incorporated or respected."<sup>12</sup> Jasper park management allows "interest-based participation," meaning that "management will only engage with Indigenous groups who show an overt interest in a development proposal."<sup>13</sup>

Next Johnston and Mason move to "methodological approaches and methods," alerting readers that "this research used Indigenous methodologies (IM)," although I wonder if the use of acronyms reflects Indigenous methods. Certainly interviewing Indigenous informants enacts consultation, but interviewing is by no means exclusively an Indigenous "methodology."<sup>14</sup> And like social science research generally, the Indigenous research paradigm is also structured by "trust, respect, reciprocity, and

inclusion,” and it “highlight(s) unequal power relationships between, for example, a powerful Euro-Canadian federal government agency like Parks Canada and local Indigenous communities that have been displaced from and denied access to the region.”<sup>15</sup> Johnston and Mason conducted “semi-structured, open-ended question interviews” – they call this “data collection,” another not exactly Indigenous concept – “with representatives from several Indigenous nations and communities with connections to the land in JNP,”<sup>16</sup> but apparently none with JNP officials. So much for “inclusion.”

Collecting “data” via “interviews respects Indigenous oral traditions,”<sup>17</sup> Johnston and Mason insist, although again it must be acknowledged that “interviews” are a common research method regardless of topic or tradition. They continue: “The data were analyzed to denote commonalities and divergent patterns,” adding “the analysis of the data was guided by content analysis.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, “although supported by the larger IM frameworks that we describe above, this project was also sensitive to OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) principles, which are a set of standards that establish how Indigenous data should be collected, protected, used, and shared.”<sup>19</sup> Finally, “Tri-Council policies for ethical research with Indigenous communities also informed our approach on the standards for how to conduct research with Indigenous peoples and communities.”<sup>20</sup> Are Johnston and Mason offering rationale or installing self-insurance?

Johnston and Mason focus first on the Jasper Indigenous Forum (JIF), noting that “JNP management presented itself to interested groups as having an open-door policy” that provided ‘potential for Indigenous nations to work towards re-establishing a connection between their people and the land,’ but which also “invite[d] inconsistency in the JIF dynamics.”<sup>21</sup> With “Indigenous groups freely joining, leaving, and sending new representatives to the JIF meetings,” it was a challenge “to remain focused on one objective and see it through to the end,” as “every Indigenous community” had “different objectives based on the priorities of their community members and leadership,” objectives that can “change over time, which can lead to communities opting to either join or leave the JIF as they see fit.”<sup>22</sup>

“Several Indigenous communities have been forum members since the JIF formed,” Johnston and Mason report, and they “have strived to remain consistent in their participation and in who represents them at the meetings.”<sup>23</sup> It’s also true that “others have been less consistent,” that according to Laurian Gladue, the JIF representative from Kelly Lake Cree Nation, who spoke with the authors in an interview on November 16, 2017.<sup>24</sup> Varying degrees of consistency caused “friction within the JIF,” even eroding “some of the power that a unified JIF would have [had] towards accomplishing shared objectives.”<sup>25</sup> Johnston and Mason learned that “friction” occurred when a “community join[ed], or rejoin[ed] after an absence,” then demanding “to discuss an issue that the other JIF members have already agreed on and moved on from.”<sup>26</sup>

Next Johnston and Mason turn to Indigenous peoples' "traditional connections" with the lands now designated as Jasper National Park, reporting – from an interview with C. Gall held on November 15, 2017 – that (despite the friction and erosion of its power) the "JIF has been a way for Indigenous Peoples to come together and express their connection to Jasper through their cultural or historic ties and spiritual practices," as "each JIF community has a connection to Jasper."<sup>27</sup> Also in an interview – this one with Elder Charlie Abraham held on October 17, 2017 - Johnston and Mason heard that (quoting the Elder) "You can't hunt. Everything had changed."<sup>28</sup> Johnston and Mason conclude: "Forced removals after the establishment of the park had and continue to have tremendous impacts on Indigenous communities."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, "no consideration by park management was given to the material, cultural, and livelihood losses felt by Indigenous Peoples," nor was "assistance" provided to find alternatives to what had been available on their traditional lands.<sup>30</sup>

Other interviews confirmed Johnston and Mason's conclusion, namely that the "impacts" were "tremendous," especially restrictions of "hunting and gathering" that were imposed "shortly after the parks were created."<sup>31</sup> Living on land was no longer possible either, impacts of which contemporary JNP management is unaware.<sup>32</sup> Management has also been unaware that "despite being forcibly removed from Jasper and having their cultural practices banned, many Indigenous groups continued to utilize their traditional lands in secret," a "demonstration of resistance" but also an effort to "maintain a connection to their traditional territories."<sup>33</sup>

In the Park today "there are numerous signs directing visitors to sites of interest," but there remains a "lack of Indigenous content and limited understanding of Indigenous histories," as "most of this content is presented from a Eurocentric perspective."<sup>34</sup> Moreover, "many representations of Indigenous histories and cultures in the parks are temporalized, or presented as something from the distant past, without recognizing contemporary Indigenous lives."<sup>35</sup> That is, Indigenous cultures are cast as artifacts that are "frozen in time," artifacts "that should be left in the past or in an apolitical present."<sup>36</sup> The very concept of "reconciliation" must include (1) "strengthening Indigenous connections with traditionally used lands and waters," (2) "expanding and ensuring presentation and commemoration of Indigenous histories and cultures," and (3) "increasing economic opportunities related to Indigenous tourism."<sup>37</sup>

"General statements about Indigenous use of the lands will not suffice," Johnson and Marsh continue, as "it is necessary to have specific acknowledgements of the Indigenous communities who lived on these lands before they were forcibly removed."<sup>38</sup> Moreover, "park management "faces many challenges in adding Indigenous content to programs and signage," including the "inclusion of many different Indigenous communities wanting their histories shared," a consequence of "past government policies that partitioned Indigenous Peoples into smaller groups."<sup>39</sup> We are told that even this challenge can be overcome, or at least "partly addressed

through allowing Indigenous communities to share their own histories and cultures in the park in a meaningful way,” including “consulting directly with Indigenous Peoples during the development of Indigenous-based content, incorporating Indigenous languages into signage, and developing cultural awareness training for all JNP staff.”<sup>40</sup>

“Due to the lack of Indigenous content in signage and programming,” Johnston and Mason suggest that placing a sign at the entrances of JNP acknowledging that it is the traditional territory of several Indigenous groups – and then listing the Indigenous group names - would be the “only indication that most visitors to Jasper have to understand that these are Indigenous lands and that the park’s history is more than the stories of European fur traders, railway workers, and local wildlife.”<sup>41</sup> Johnston and Mason also suggest that “broader power structures place heavy constraints on JNP management and the amount of progress that can be pursued on certain issues.”<sup>42</sup> They conclude that “there are not necessarily the policies, tools, or resources in place to make progress quick enough for many JIF members,” the consequence of which is that “the focus remains on improving access and smaller incremental changes to programming as opposed to addressing wider colonial decision-making processes that lack significant methods of consultation.”<sup>43</sup>

Certainly there was ongoing frustration expressed by those Indigenous persons Johnston and Mason consulted. In an interview with G. Lampreau held on November 18, 2017, the authors heard: “One of the functions of national parks is to present histories for the world to see, and Indigenous Peoples are a part of that history.”<sup>44</sup> In an interview with R. Ouellet held on December 3, 2017, the authors heard: “Indigenous Peoples have significantly contributed to Canada and their histories predate Canada, but those histories are often unrecognized and at times devalued.”<sup>45</sup> In that interview with G. Gall held on November 15, 2017, the authors learned that: “There are JIF members that believe JNP management is not willing to address some of their concerns because management is worried that they will lose some of their authority.”<sup>46</sup> From that interview of R. Ouellet held on December 3, 2017, the authors heard (again) that: “As in other protected areas across Canada, Jasper’s Indigenous histories are intertwined with Indigenous rights. If park management acknowledges those histories, they must also recognize Indigenous rights.”<sup>47</sup> From that same December 3, 2017 interview with R. Ouellet the authors heard that: “They [JNP management] are still not at a point where it is a friendly and open place for Indigenous people, even though they want to have an Indigenous story told, but the reason they want to have an Indigenous story told is because visitors are demanding it,” adding: “So, the whole thing that is built off of this . . . how does this serve us?”<sup>48</sup>

In another interview, the one held on August 24, 2017 with Greg Deagle, Johnston and Mason learned that “Incorporating Indigenous histories into park programming and signage may be a challenge for management due in part to a lack of research to draw on.”<sup>49</sup> Turns out that “research in the park is incredibly expensive and time consuming,” and “Jasper has only funded two Traditional Land Use Studies due

to the expense.”<sup>50</sup> At present, JNP is “working on an Indigenous territories map, which extends beyond the borders of the park, to include adjacent areas in the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia.”<sup>51</sup> From a November 15, 2017 interview with Christopher Gall, Johnston and Mason learned that “the lack of progress is not always intentional as government employees can be bound by policies and resources that limit what they can accomplish.”<sup>52</sup> Gall explained that “Jasper has put a lot of financial resources and staff time into building the forum and the relationships with the communities,” adding that: I don’t for a minute want to say that [Parks Canada] is perfect and they’ve done everything right,” but “I think that there are staff trying to do the best they can with limited resources and within the bureaucracy of [Parks Canada].”<sup>53</sup> But if park management is committed to respecting Indigenous cultures, then “they must understand cultural differences, which can include how timelines can be perceived by JIF members.” In the past park management has dictated “how they want JIF members to make decisions, although they are slowly changing that style of thinking.”<sup>54</sup>

Other issues include “different approaches to information sharing [that] can cause conflict between JIF communities and JNP management.”<sup>55</sup> For example, “JIF communities are varied and unique and have different protocols for sharing information with those outside their cultures,” so “there can be an unwillingness to share information, for example about sacred sites, with park management because it may be used in the future to assert Indigenous rights with the government.”<sup>56</sup> The very degree of “JIF participation,” Johnston and Marsh learn in a September 22, 2017 interview with A. Fehr, “can also depend on the priorities articulated at the Indigenous community level and the interest of community political leadership,” so that “gathering a variety of information from various Indigenous nations makes incorporating it into programming and signage content very difficult in Jasper.”<sup>57</sup> From that November 14, 2017 interview with R. Cardinal, Johnston and Marsh learn that “one of the biggest issues with having so many members is that no group is able to fully raise their comments or concerns at the bi-annual JIF meetings because there are so many who wish to have their voices heard in the short amount of time available.”<sup>58</sup> So, “in addition to more meetings, park management should meet with each Indigenous community or treaty group separately,” constructing a “tiered process” that can accord “communities more time to discuss the topics together to build a consensus and ... lead to more successful and productive meetings.”<sup>59</sup>

Despite these complexities, Johnston and Marsh pin the blame solely on “Eurocentric perspectives [that] serve to trivialize many significant aspects of Indigenous histories and continue to perpetuate damaging stereotypes of Indigenous people,” homogenizing histories “into one easy to disseminate pan-Indigenous experience.”<sup>60</sup> They allege that park management is more interested in catering to park visitor expectations and desires than sharing Indigenous histories from Indigenous perspectives,” an interest that “ignores” First Nations’ dispossession from their

lands.<sup>61</sup> “Park management must balance,” Johnston and Marsh continue, “meeting the park’s mandate to work with Indigenous Peoples while retaining authority over park lands and catering to visitor expectations.”<sup>62</sup> But “erecting traditional territory acknowledgement signs at the entrances of the park or conferring upon the JIF the status of an official advisory or partner group could encourage Indigenous groups to contest park management’s legal authority over park lands.”<sup>63</sup> Johnston and Marsh recommend that “ongoing research should compare Indigenous consultation and representation in JNP to other national parks and protected areas in Canada to determine how JNP differs from other parks working with Indigenous nations.”<sup>64</sup>

Johnston and Marsh suggest that “through working more closely with local Indigenous Peoples, JNP management will be able to address some of the issues that arise from the misrepresentation of Indigenous histories,” including “taking responsibility for the role park management has played in marginalizing Indigenous Peoples and perpetuating stereotypes of their cultures.”<sup>65</sup> “By incorporating diverse Indigenous voices into park consultation processes and management decisions,” by acknowledging the historical land rights and contemporary presences of local Indigenous communities,” and by building “the necessary bridges ... policy revision and reconciliation [are] possible.”<sup>66</sup> The authors think that Park management is “hesitant to make changes that could lessen their comprehensive authority over park management decisions,” as the JIF demands “access to the resources on the land that were taken from them, as well as the support to present their own histories in their own voices.”<sup>67</sup> I wonder who determines the “balance” that Johnston and Marsh recommend? While progress has apparently been made, I’m unclear why Johnston and Marsh consider reconciliation is “possible,” as they suggest above.

These conflicts concerning consultation and representation reveal the cultural incommensurability undermining efforts at reconciliation. Parks Canada must make Jasper National Park as perfect a tourist destination as possible, requiring management to emphasize not its unsavory history and present as yet another site of dislocation and exploitation but almost its contrary - its natural beauty (“pristine wilderness,” as Johnson and Marsh put it). While apparently committed to consultation, primarily (or even exclusively) over representation (specifically signage), Jasper Park management and/or their governmental supervisors are unlikely to restore “ownership” to those Indigenous peoples who are the descendants of those removed from the lands they had inhabited for millennia. Nor is management likely to restore easy access – let alone hunting and other extraction of “resources” – as that might mar tourists’ experience of natural beauty. While laudatory for its sensitivity to the consultation issue, the method of this study – interviewing – cannot produce the shifts in park policy that those interviewed desire. That’s no reason not to conduct research of course, but it does undermine any claims that this – or any – research, even research “guided by Indigenous methodologies,” furthers reconciliation. The Johnson-Marsh study

provides understanding and that, I maintain, is the best we scholars and researchers<sup>68</sup> can do.

## REFERENCES

Johnston, J. W., & Mason, C. (2020). The paths to realizing reconciliation: Indigenous consultation in Jasper national park. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 11(4), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2020.11.4.9348>

Pinar, William F. 2019. *Moving Images of Eternity: George Grant's Critique of Time, Teaching, and Technology*. University of Ottawa Press.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> 2020, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> 2020, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> 2020, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> 2020, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43586-022-00150-6>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> 2020, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> 2020, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in 2020, 9.



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<sup>29</sup> 2020, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> 2020, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in 2020, 10.

<sup>37</sup> 2020, 10.

<sup>38</sup> 2020, 11.

<sup>39</sup> 2020, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> 2020, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> 2020, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in 2020, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in 2020, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> 2020, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> 2020, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> 2020, 19.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> 2020, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> 2020, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> 2020, 24.

<sup>68</sup> George Grant drew a sharp distinction between the two: see, for example, Pinar 2019, 57.