

# 'Conservation' is Colonialism

National Parks will always be  
Indigenous Land



Binding on Her Majesty

3 This Act is binding on Her Majesty or a province.

National Parks

Parks dedicated to public

4 (1) The national parks of Canada are hereby dedicated to the people of Canada for their benefit, education and enjoyment, subject to this Act and the regulations, and the parks shall be maintained and made use of so as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

# We Are Still Here: National Parks, Colonial Dispossession, and Indigenous Resilience

Poster by Nancy Kimberley Phillips  
Essay by Wacey Little Light

Many Canadians see the country's system of national parks as a point of pride and a commendable effort to conserve and protect "pristine" wilderness for the enjoyment of future generations. This poster highlights a different perspective: many Indigenous peoples experience the "conservation" of Canada's national parks as a continuation of the violent process of settler colonialism.

Beginning in the 1880s and intensifying in the early 1900s, the federal government created a national network of parks that conserved "natural" areas and commodified them to contribute to the capitalist economy and nation-building. As part of this process, many Indigenous communities were forcibly displaced within the newly-established park boundaries. Starting in 1885, my ancestors, along with other Niitsitapi and Îyâhe Nakoda peoples, were forcefully removed from our traditional territories in what is now known as Alberta to help create Banff National Park. Initially known as Banff Hot Spring Reserve and then Rocky Mountain Park, Banff was Canada's first national park. Since then, over 40 National Parks have been created across what is currently Canada, many with similar histories of colonial dispossession.

Canada's national parks system is predicated on Indigenous erasure and the myth of preserving a barren "wilderness." As the system was being established, Indigenous peoples were viewed by officials as a threat to wild game and trees, despite the fact that we have had our own systems of ecological management since time immemorial. We have been and will continue to be an integral part of the landscape. Every mountain, every river, every plant, every animal has a name in the languages birthed from these lands. This place has never been terra nullius; it has never been empty land.

Parks Canada has deployed "conservation" as justification for continued colonization in Alberta and elsewhere. "Conservation" included protection for some of our four-legged relatives, our Grandmother Trees, our Grandfather Rocks, and our Lands. "Conservation," however, did not include our buffalo, which were hunted to near extinction in an effort to clear the plains and starve our people into submission to accept colonization. "Conservation" did not include preserving our original cultures and practices on these lands, which were viewed as being "primitive" and "savage" and in need of destruction. "Conservation" did not include protecting our children, who were violently stolen and sent to residential schools at the same time that many of the parks were being created. "Conservation" did not include taking care of our women, girls, and two-spirit folks, who have been continually targeted since settler arrival.

"Conservation" only included Indigenous peoples and our cultures when it was deemed profitable and consumable for tourists. When the national park system needed entertainment for tourists arriving by the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1890s, they turned to us, the very people they displaced. The Banff Indian Days were created in 1894 (and lasted until the 1940s) to entertain a train full of tourists who were stranded in Banff. Indigenous peoples were expected to live in tipis, wear "traditional" clothes, and dance for tourists. Meanwhile, Canadians continued to advocate for us to be pushed off our lands and forcibly assimilated. We were invited to come and dance for people on their holidays, as they "toured" and enjoyed our lands as their parks.

What tourists did not know is that we used these performances to maintain connection and relation with our lands. We may have been displaced, but we have not been disconnected from our territories. To this day, we still use the places that our ancestors did. We still gather medicines; we still touch the waters; we still enact our sovereignty in our lands, your parks. We danced at Banff Indian Days to keep those connections, and we continue to dance on the Canada National Parks Act as depicted in this poster.

The background image that appears on the poster is a photograph of the Two-Young-Man lodge of the Îyâhe Nakoda Nation taken in 1925 during the Banff Indian Days and held in the Glenbow Archives. The foreground image is of Shenoa Snow fancy dancing in the Banff townsite on 22 August 2017.\* These images, although they are many years removed from one another, speak to and inform one another and highlight Indigenous resilience and resurgence. They are a reminder to everyone who enjoys Canada's national parks today: Indigenous peoples still use these lands. We have never left. We are still here. National parks will always be Indigenous land.

## Biographies

**Wacey Little Light (Stommiikiisokkou)** is a member of Siksika Nation, which is a part of the Blackfoot Confederacy in Treaty 7. He is pursuing his Bachelor's degree in Ecotourism and Outdoor Leadership at Mount Royal University in Mohkinstsis (Calgary). Wacey is committed to learning and teaching outdoor Traditional Ancestral Knowledge, and he also has a passion for creating media and art.

**Nancy Kimberley Phillips (Ihtsiiyiaakii)** is a Queer Settler Womxn from Treaty 7 (the homelands of the Niitsitapi, Îyâhe Nakoda, Tsuut'ina, and the Métis Nation). She is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Museum Anthropology at the University of British Columbia on unceded xʷməθkʷəyəm, sk̓w̓xwú7mesh, and sel̓l̓w̓it̓ulh Lands. She is also an educator, writer, and artist.

\* We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to Shenoa Snow (Mountain Sage Woman; Holy Sun Woman) of the Îyâhe Nakoda Nation for allowing us to draw her fancy dancing.

## Further Reading

Binnema, Theodore, and Melanie Niemi. "'Let the Line Be Drawn Now': Wilderness, Conservation, and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada." *Environmental History* 11, no. 4 (2006): 724–750.

Clapperton, Jonathan. "Naturalizing Race Relations: Conservation, Colonialism, and Spectacle at the Banff Indian Days." *Canadian Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (2013): 349–379.

Francis, Daniel. *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp, 1992.

Jago, Robert. "Canada's National Parks are Colonial Crime Scenes." *The Walrus* (30 June 2017). <https://thewalrus.ca/canadas-national-parks-are-colonial-crime-scenes/>.

The Secret Life of Canada. *Episode 1: The Secret Life of Banff*. Podcast, 35:20. Posted by "Passport 2017." August 31, 2017. <https://passport2017.ca/articles/episode-1-secret-life-banff>.

Snow, Chief John. *These Mountains are Our Sacred Places: The Story of the Stoney People*. Calgary, AB: Fifth House, 2005.



Illustrate • Educate • Organize

[www.graphichistorycollective.com](http://www.graphichistorycollective.com)

