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How Can Urban Parks Support Urban Indigenous Peoples? Exploratory Cases from Saskatoon and Portland

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Abstract: *In Anglo settler states, parks and Indigenous peoples interact in myriad ways, given the tight connection between Indigenous peoples and land and that parks are manifestations of settler control of land and heritage. Current park–Indigenous research is limited by a focus on rural locales, despite that more than half of Indigenous peoples live in urban areas. This exploratory paper draws connections between literature rooted in urban Indigenous studies and park management. I argue the literature’s current emphasis on rural locales neglects to consider how urban parks, might contribute to reconciliation if they affirmatively support urban Indigenous identities and cultural activities. I use two mini case studies—the Meewasin Valley Authority (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan) and Fort Vancouver National Historic Site (Portland, Oregon)—to highlight some of the ways in which urban parks can support urban Indigenous peoples’ responses to persistent urban settler-colonialism.*

Introduction

Public spaces, including parks, can be inclusionary or exclusionary (Nejad and Walker 2018; Oakes 1997; Sibley 1995). This article considers the implications of urban Indigeneity for urban park managers. I am concerned here with large urban protected areas like the Rouge National Urban Park and Gatineau Park—not small, neighbourhood parks used for sports (e.g., baseball diamonds or soccer fields)—and I will use “park” and “protected area” interchangeably. As Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry have highlighted, everyone in the public service has a role to play in Indigenous relations. This includes urban parks and their staff. In this paper, I will first synthesize the existing literature on urban Indigenous People and their concerns. My goal here is to help urban park managers better understand a community with which they may be generally unfamiliar.

Second, I will present two brief mini case studies: Fort Vancouver National Historic Site (Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area) and the Meewasin Valley Authority (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan). Of metro areas in the United States with a population over 1,000,000, Portland, Oregon is the seventh most-Indigenous (i.e., Indigenous population as a percentage of total population; U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Meanwhile, Saskatoon is the third most-Indigenous census metropolitan area in Canada (Statistics Canada 2017a). Fort Vancouver and Meewasin are responding to settler-colonial pressures in their cities in different ways; both cases are instructive when considering how urban parks can support urban Indigenous People. Fort Vancouver has re-imagined its visitor centre to highlight Indigenous, rather than settler, heritage. Meanwhile, Meewasin is working to provide

“contemplative spaces” within its parks for urban Indigenous People in Saskatoon. This article is an initial step in imagining how urban parks may be able to affirmatively respond to the concerns of urban Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas

“Place and space can never be neutral,” observes Aboriginal scholar Bronwyn Fredericks (2013, 5). While Fredericks is writing about cities in particular, the same comment could be made about protected areas. Parks and Indigenous peoples are deeply intertwined the world over, from issues of sacred site management at Uluru-Kata Tjuta, to forced evictions on the Maasai Mara, to the development of cooperative management regimes on Haida Gwaii (Disko and Tugendhat 2014; Jones, Rigg, and Lee 2010). Scholars have developed a robust catalogue of literature about park–Indigenous interactions, drawing on fields as diverse as history (Spence 1999), heritage interpretation (Foxlee 2007), anthropology (Daehnke 2017), Indigenous studies (Nadasdy 1999), political science (White 2020), and park management (Stevens 2014). The scholarship has drawn clear connections between protected area management and processes of settler colonialism (Brockington and Igoe 2006; Colchester 2014; Kelly 2011; Sandlos 2007), both of which are concerned with extending the state’s authority over land (Coulthard 2014; Mackey 2016; Simpson 2011). As historian Tracey Banivanua Mar (2010) writes, “National parks, and their enclosure of bounded wilderness... [are] distinctive to settler colonialism, which manifested converging doctrines of dispossession and notions of wilderness” (76).

Settler colonialism is a genocidal (Short 2016; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019) ongoing process (Veracini 2015) whereby settlers seize the territory of and attempt to erase Indigenous peoples through assimilation and outright violence. Settler colonialism “is acquisitive...it is not labour, but territory that it seeks,” notes Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2014, 19). In both Canada and the United States, protected areas have severed Indigenous kinship ties to land and Creation (Catton 1997; Cruikshank 2010; Mar 2010; Sandlos 2008; Spence 1999) while threatening Indigenous sacred sites (Neufeld 2007; Tsosie 2003). Through this process, protected areas have routinely been used to dispossess Indigenous peoples and to advance broader settler goals of assimilation and control over Indigenous territory.

As an example of these assimilatory pressures, US national parks have their roots in monumentalism—or efforts to highlight how the American settler state is distinct from Europe (Runte 1997). This reflects settler states’ efforts to separate themselves from the imperial homeland. In both Canada and the United States, there are clear links between the settler-colonial effort to obscure Indigenous heritage on the one hand and the use of parks to emphasize heroic stories of settler nation-building on the other (Finegan 2019; Rosenkranz 2020; Savage 2012). Neufeld (2007) observes that parks in “Canada and, by association, those developed and supported by the West around the world, are culturally entrenched tools of state power. They are designed to strengthen the state through fostering citizen identity with the State and to gain citizen acknowledgement of the state’s

responsibility to represent them in the world” (182). Parks are thus invested in settler-colonial efforts to not only seize Indigenous territory but to erase Indigenous peoples from the heritage of North America.

Park managers, particularly in Canada and Australia, are beginning to recognize and question their involvement in settler colonialism. In doing so, they are moving towards improved settler–Indigenous relationships. Two examples of this are the creation of Indigenous protected and conserved areas (IPCAs) and Indigenous guardian programs. Canada’s federal government recently convened an Indigenous Circle of Experts (Indigenous Circle of Experts 2018) to advise it on IPCAs. Canada expects to create over two dozen IPCAs through the Canada Nature Fund’s Target 1 Challenge in the near future (Environment and Climate Change Canada 2020b).

Justin Trudeau’s first government committed \$25 million over four years to support Indigenous guardian programs across the country (Environment and Climate Change Canada 2020a). These programs employ Indigenous peoples on their own territory to educate visitors, conduct natural resources management activities, and protect sacred sites. Indigenous guardian programs are a means for Indigenous peoples to “reassert jurisdiction over their ancestral territories” via a “strategic reversibility of power...that exemplif[ies] how indigenous resistance can reconstitute power relationships” (Reed et al. 2020, 2). Additionally, Indigenous guardians interpret Indigenous heritage for visitors. For example, at Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site, Haida Watchmen (guardians) provide direct interpretation of Haida heritage for visitors. Indigenous guardian programs are thus “a prime example of the inclusion of TEK [i.e., Indigenous knowledge] into the daily park operations” (Thomlinson and Crouch 2012, 81), including visitor education. Notably, Indigenous guardians have reported that their skills in “speaking to visitors about their land and culture” have improved because of their work (Decho First Nations et al. 2016, 16).

In Australia, IPCAs now encompass just under half of that country’s conservation estate (Gould et al. 2021; Zurba et al. 2019). As Gould et al. (2021) observe, the rise of IPCAs “means the interwoven nature of TOs’ [Traditional Owners; i.e., Indigenous peoples] natural-cultural values can be duly respected, as are kinship and ceremonial relationships which underpin proper decision-making and the relationships between people and Country” (5). Indigenous guardian programs are operating in Australia as well, where the government is spending \$102 million from 2021 to 2028 to support guardians (Reed et al. 2020).

While such efforts are not without their criticisms and shortcomings (Fache 2014; Reed et al. 2020; Tran, Ban, and Bhattacharyya 2020), recent articles by Indigenous co-authors indicate support within Indigenous communities for IPCAs and guardian programs (Gould et al. 2021; Tran et al. 2020). IPCAs and guardian programs are direct threats to the settler-colonial “dream...of Indigenous pacification, containment, and demobilization” (Simpson 2014, 142). IPCA and guardian programs respond to the fact that land is at the heart of efforts to “decolonize” (Alfred 2009; Coulthard 2014; Whyte 2018). By emphasizing Indigenous, rather than settler, heritage, they challenge the idea of parks as monuments to settler culture (Runte 1997). In short, they threaten two of Lowman

and Barker's (2015, 31) three "structures of [settler] invasion": spaces and stories (the third is systems). IPCAs and guardian programs point towards two aspects of improved settler–Indigenous relationships within parks that are particularly salient within an urban context: support for Indigenous ties to land and an emphasis on Indigenous, rather than strictly settler, heritage within parks. The mini cases examined in this article show us two examples of these steps towards improved relations.

Urban Indigeneity and Settler Urbanism

Over half the Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States live in urban areas. Yet, as a perusal of the literature and/or a database search for the string "'urban park" and "Indigenous"' will readily reveal, research about park–Indigenous interactions is nearly exclusively about rural locales. It appears the literature is guilty of what Porter and Barry (2015) term "bounded recognition"—that is, "limit[ing] the recognition of Indigenous presence and action to Crown lands, reserved lands, or defined cultural sites and artifacts" (24).

The lack of literature focused on urban park–Indigenous interactions is problematic, given the large, vibrant urban Indigenous communities in Canada and the United States. About 60% of Indigenous People in Canada live in cities (Statistics Canada 2017b). Between the 2006 and 2016 censuses, the Indigenous population in Canada grew at quadruple the rate of the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada 2017a). Meanwhile, in the United States, around 78% of Indigenous People live in urban areas (Quirke 2017). Given this, urban Indigenous issues should be a pressing concern for government actors interested in Indigenous relations.

Beyond such demographic statistics, urban Indigenous issues command attention for other reasons as well. Urban planning and the physical construction of cities have been "a weapon brandished to erase/eradicate Indigenous peoples or at least contain them" (Matunga 2013, 7). Scholars such as Barman (2007), Stanger-Ross (2008), Mar and Edmonds (2010), Porter (2010), Jojola et al. (2013), Gombay and Palomino-Schalscha (2018b), and Nejad et al. (2020) have written extensively about the role of urban planning and place-making in settler colonialism.

Settler colonialism creates a distinct rural/urban divide. In places like Canada and the United States, cities are constructed as specifically settler spaces and are, as Blatman-Thomas and Porter (2019) write, "the pinnacle of civilization...[and] key sites [of assimilation]" (33). Meanwhile, rural places are presumed to be where Indigenous peoples "belong." I refer to this phenomenon as "settler urbanism."

The settler impulse to force Indigenous peoples to choose between "urban and assimilated" or "reserve and Indigenous" exists even in generally well-meaning institutions, like Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Andersen and Denis (2003) describe this, noting that RCAP is so "firmly planted in the idea that Aboriginal nations are located in 'traditional' home communities, that urban communities themselves are not presented as legitimate" (387). More recently, Belanger (2013) has written that federal and provincial governments portray urban Indigenous peoples as a "cultural jumble of reserve

ex-patriots who had willingly abandoned” (70) their community and culture. To be very clear, such a portrayal is both false and racist. Moving to an urban hub hardly means that an Indigenous person has forsaken their Indigeneity.

Settler society is not content to merely enforce this “urban equals not-Indigenous” falsehood on individual people. It also does so to Indigenous peoples at the community level. For example, while municipalities engage in government-to-government consultations with nearby First Nations (Fraser and Viswanathan 2013), they do not necessarily do so with Native friendship centres or other urban Indigenous community organizations within the bounds of those municipalities.¹ As Walker et al. (2017) write, “in discrete reserve communities within the regional orbit of the city, Indigenous peoples may be seen as bona fide political agents that share regional interests, while Indigenous peoples residing in the city are out-of-place politically and civically” (220). This unwillingness to engage with urban Indigenous organizations is one way that settler urbanism “works creatively to sustain” itself (Blatman-Thomas and Porter 2019).

The Canadian government has long sought to confine Indigenous People to reserves. This was true as late as 1967, when Arthur Laing, then-minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, observed that “reserves will have to continue to be centers of Indian Community life for many years to come” (quoted in Peters 2002, 81). Geographer Evelyn Peters (2002) writes that, “the main reason individuals and families moved to urban areas [during the mid-twentieth century] was to find employment, effectively escaping the economic limitations inherent in the reserve system” (79). Peters positions Indigenous urbanization during this time as largely voluntary, although she does note that the Indian Affairs Branch developed a specific, overtly assimilationist program from the early 1960s to 1975, in which settler bureaucrats relocated certain individuals from reserves to urban centres.

Meanwhile, the US government renewed its attempts at Indigenous genocide in two primary ways starting in the 1950s: urban relocation and tribal termination. In the 1950s and 1960s, the American government relocated tens of thousands of Indigenous People from reservations to urban centres; Portland, Oregon, was one target for the program (Curry-Stevens, Cross-Hemmer, and Coalition of Communities of Color 2011; Ramirez 2007; Weaver 2012). The Bureau of Indian Affairs told program participants that they would receive job training, housing assistance, and other services in their new city. This was untrue; funding was very limited. Moreover, as Burt (1986) writes

The Bureau tried to discourage returns by moving Indians to cities furthest from their homes. It also sometimes refused to give out names and addresses of Native Americans in the same vicinity to one another since association would encourage Indian cultural contacts and identification rather than the desired assimilation. (91)

¹Edmonton is an outlier in this regard. Its 2005 “Strengthening Relationships between the City of Edmonton and Urban Aboriginal People” and the “Edmonton Aboriginal Accord” call on the city to consult with urban Indigenous leaders. Walker and Belanger (2013) hold this up as an example for others to follow.

Make no mistake: the urban relocation program of the mid-twentieth century was an assimilatory effort. It was an attempt to tear Indigenous society apart under the guise of “help.”

Simultaneously, the US government pursued a policy of tribal termination—that is, unilaterally declaring certain Tribes to simply no longer exist. In 1954, the Bureau of Indian Affairs began dissolving Tribes across the country (Ramirez 2007). No state had more Tribes terminated (as a percentage) than Oregon (Curry-Stevens, Cross-Hemmer, and Coalition of Communities of Color 2011). Terminated Tribes lost their reservations, their tribal governments, and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Like relocation, this caused an influx of Indigenous peoples to Portland. Over 4,000 Indigenous People in Oregon were affected by termination; many of them moved to Portland (Curry-Stevens, Cross-Hemmer, and Coalition of Communities of Color 2011).

The challenges settler urbanism presents to urban Indigenous People are well-documented in the literature (Belanger et al. 2003; Goodman et al. 2019; Peters and Lafond 2013; Wilson and Peters 2005). While urban Indigenous People generally have a strong desire to maintain their Indigenous identity (Environics Institute 2010), it is difficult to do so in urban areas. As the Urban Aboriginal Peoples study notes (Environics Institute 2010), “If there is a single urban Aboriginal experience, it is the shared perception among First Nations peoples, Métis, and Inuit, across cities, that they are stereotyped negatively. Indeed, most report that they have personally experienced negative behaviour or unfair treatment because of who they are” (4). Racism and stereotyping are the punishment settlers mete out when Indigenous peoples leave the place—the reserve—settlers believe they have set aside for them.

This racism manifests itself in many ways. For example, roughly half of respondents in Peters and Lafond (2013) indicated that they struggled to find “adequate or appropriate” space in urban areas for them to conduct ceremony: “In the city, these activities would get noticed...this lack of understanding or acceptance also means that it is difficult to keep sacred objects and traditions safe” (93–94)

In informal, background conversations I had with a local urban Indigenous leader in the Toronto area, he identified this lack of space as one of the biggest problems his community faces. Another urban Indigenous leader has told me on background about how community members engaged in ceremony are harassed by park staff and members of the public. Some of this harassment is unwelcome, but benignly intended, interruption (i.e., curiosity) while, at other times, it has been a racist intervention to stop the ceremony. These problems are echoed in Wilson and Peters (2005), where, as an example, one participant said she cannot smudge safely in her home:

He [the landlord] came to the door one day because he could smell it. He told me drugs weren't allowed in the building. I tried to explain but he wouldn't listen. I don't have anywhere else to go so now I really don't smudge. It hurts. I need to do it but I can't even in the comfort of my own home. (404)

To reiterate, a central, overriding theme of urban Indigenous research is that urban Indigenous People generally seek to maintain their identities and ties to territory, to community, and to Indigenous culture.

However, settler urbanism presents urban Indigenous People with a “toxic mix of exclusion, assimilation, co-option” that makes this exceedingly difficult to do by “delegitimizing” and “squeezing” Indigeneity (Blatman-Thomas and Porter 2019, 32, 41). If, as Grande et al. (2015) write, Indigenous identity is “something people do, rather than a set of characteristics one embodies” (119), then settler urbanism’s demand that Indigenous People give up cultural practices and ceremony is nothing short of a demand that they give up their identity as Indigenous people. In some ways, settler urbanism presents a “double bind” (Cattelino 2010) to urban Indigenous People—that is, a paradox whereby challenging settler colonialism (e.g., engaging in smudging or ceremony) can reinforce it (through shame and harm inflicted by settlers witnessing the activity).

The urban Indigenous literature enumerates the supports that can facilitate urban Indigenous identities and cultural practices (beyond the obvious anti-racist work that must occur). In Belanger et al. (2003), Indigenous youth in Winnipeg flagged a lack of culturally appropriate programs as a barrier to developing “a positive sense of self” (23). In Ontario, the 2007 Urban Indigenous Task Force named fellowship with other urban Indigenous people, cultural events, ceremonies, and relationships with Elders as some of the factors that support urban Indigenous identities (McCaskill et al. 2007). More recently, around half of Peters and Lafond’s (2013) participants named Indigenous-led events as supporting their identities. Even as late as 2019, urban Indigenous youth were telling researchers that appropriate space for cultural events big and small and relationships with other urban Indigenous people improved their (respondents’) mental health and ties to their Indigenous identity (Goodman et al. 2019). For at least 20 years, urban Indigenous people have been clear in saying that they need safe, appropriate spaces for cultural activities. They have also been consistent in their assertion that programs and relationships with other urban Indigenous people are key supports.

Despite all of this, it would be misleading to suggest that settler urbanism has completely erased Indigenous Peoples’ ties to the territory now occupied by cities. This is well-described by Jacobs (1996), who writes that “the relations of power and differences established through...imperialism linger on and are frequently reactivated...yet in these cities, there are also various challenges made to imperialism” (20). Applied research such as Hatala et al. (2019), Nejad et al. (2019), Hatala et al. (2020), and Njeze et al. (2020) points us towards examples of this.

Aboriginal scholar Bronwyn Fredericks (2013) additionally draws our attention to the continuities of Indigenous ties to territory underlying cities, writing that “the realities of Indigenous place and Indigenous ownership of place remain unchanged...in urban localities, as in other geographic localities, Aboriginal peoples still have Indigenous belonging and Indigenous ownership of place. This exists regardless of whether multi-story buildings, freeways, sports grounds, houses and places of worship have been built within

that geographic locality” (4–5). The land on which Saskatoon sits, for example, is no less Métis or Nêhiyaw because of Saskatoon’s existence; Indigenous Peoples are not marginalized within settler cities “because the land is not Indigenous,” nor “because this is the way it has always been.” Rather, it is that within cities, settler-colonial attempts to erase Indigenous ties to territory reach their zenith. Nevertheless, Indigenous ties to territory endure.

As urban planners Sarem Nejad and Ryan Walker (2018) observe in their work on Indigenous urban placemaking, cities (and, more generally, places) are dynamic and “defined by a particular mix of social relations” (224). Andersen (2014) takes this a step further, suggesting that research should focus on “positioning them [urban Indigenous landscapes and social relations] in light of the distinctive forms of logic and power distinctive to that social space” (166). Settler urbanism seeks the elimination of Indigenous Peoples, but resilient urban Indigenous communities remain and contribute to the vibrancy of contemporary urban areas. While cities are the loci for settler urbanism, they are also places of Indigenous dynamism (Andersen 2014; Lucero 2013; Wilson and Peters 2005) and “important sites for negotiating Indigenous rights, presence, and self-determination” (Gombay and Palomino-Schalscha 2018a, 9). This article explores how two parks are supporting, rather than working against, the urban Indigenous presence in their respective cities.

Methods

This research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. This project was originally conceived as a comparison of approaches to urban Indigenous relations among MetroVancouver Parks, the Meewasin Valley Authority (Saskatoon), and Parks Canada (Rouge National Urban Park, Toronto). These three cases are large urban parks (as defined above) in cities with large urban Indigenous populations (Statistics Canada 2017a). Only the Meewasin Valley Authority interview (March 4, 2020) was completed before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews at the other two sites were cancelled because of the crisis.

One case study does not make for a compelling or robust article. Consequently, I have drawn on existing data from interviews I completed as part of a separate project in May 2018 at Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, an urban park in the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area. I have developed a cross-border, comparative article. I selected Fort Vancouver not out of mere expedience, but because its response to settler urbanism differs from Meewasin’s, offering a point of contrast.

For both cases, I conducted semi-structured interviews with key park staff about their work with Indigenous peoples. I then transcribed the interviews and, through close reading of the transcripts, identified key themes relating to the parks’ responses to settler urbanism. I operationalized this by asking “What is this park doing to respond to contemporary expressions of settler urbanism, as defined by my literature review?” and “What is this park doing to support urban Indigenous peoples as they challenge settler urbanism?” Below, after providing background on each case, I present the portions of the interviews most relevant to those questions. All participants have reviewed and approved their quotations.

Meewasin Valley Authority Background

The Meewasin Valley Authority (Meewasin) is a provincially legislated (1979) conservation authority that manages the cultural and natural heritage of the South Saskatchewan River in Saskatoon, on Treaty 6 territory and the traditional homeland of the Métis. Meewasin is a partnership supported by the province of Saskatchewan, the University of Saskatchewan, and the city of Saskatoon. Generally, Meewasin conserves 6,700 hectares of land immediately along the South Saskatchewan River for about 67 square kilometres on a southwest-northeast diagonal through Saskatoon and the rural municipality of Corman Park (Tomlinson, Grilz, and Braun 2017). The agency manages 24 “Meewasin and associated” tracts throughout the river valley. Meewasin is guided by a 100-year plan, written primarily by architect Raymond Moriyama (1979). Meewasin’s vision is to be the region’s “premier conservation agency” (Tomlinson, Grilz, and Braun 2017, v). Alongside this, Meewasin seeks to provide spaces for outdoor recreation and “increased opportunities for the citizens and visitors...to connect with nature.” Meewasin has also helped to create parks that have since been divested from it, such as the Wanuskewin Heritage Park and National Historic Site.

Meewasin occupies Treaty 6 (kistêsinaw-tipahamâtowin, the Elder Brother Treaty) territory in what is now known as “Saskatoon,” Saskatchewan, Canada. Saskatoon is the largest city in Saskatchewan, with a 2019 population of around 330,000 (Statistics Canada 2020). The city is on the traditional territory of Cree, Assiniboine, Métis, and Dakota peoples. The first permanent European occupation of the region began in 1883, when a group of Methodists started a temperance colony along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River.

Today, Saskatoon has the third-highest population (10.9% of total) of Indigenous peoples of any Canadian city (Statistics Canada 2017a). Indigenous residents of Saskatoon are split roughly evenly between First Nations and Métis people. Officials anticipate that, by 2031, it will be the most Indigenous (again, as a percentage) Canadian city (Heritz 2018). Saskatoon is home to three urban First Nations reserves—Muskeg Lake Cree (the first urban reserve in Canada), Ore Arrow, and Yellow Quill (Canadian Institute of Planners 2015). Three other First Nations have land in or adjacent to the city.

Saskatoon is clearly an important urban centre for Indigenous peoples in Canada, yet the broad principles sketched out above—that is, settler urbanism’s desire to assimilate or remove Indigenous peoples who are in the city—are present in Saskatoon. Atkinson et al. (2012) found widespread hostility towards government programs designed to support Indigenous peoples in Saskatoon. The rate of non-Indigenous People in Saskatoon who believe the presence of Indigenous People is negative is higher than the average rate across Canada (Environics Institute 2011).

More than Indigenous People in any other city in the Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (Environics Institute 2011), those in Saskatoon believe they are not accepted by non-Indigenous residents, and a larger minority than anywhere else believes race relations are getting worse. Alongside this, Indigenous People in Saskatoon tend to be proud of their Indigenous heritage and know their ancestry well. Concern over retaining their

Indigenous identity is felt more widely and strongly there than in any other Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study city.

Fort Vancouver National Historic Site Background

Situated on the traditional territory of Cowlitz and Lower Chinookan peoples just upstream from the mouth of the Willamette near today's Portland, Oregon, Fort Vancouver National Historic Site commemorates a range of interactions between and among Europeans, Americans, and Indigenous peoples beginning with Fort Vancouver's establishment as a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) fur trading post in 1825. Fort Vancouver was the "foremost center of linguistic and ethnic diversity" in the Pacific Northwest during the HBC era, home to people from dozens of Indigenous nations (Deur 2012, 47). The Oregon Treaty of 1849 assured American control over the region; the US Army swiftly established the Vancouver Barracks adjacent to the fort that year. The Barracks played a key role during the Pacific Northwest Indian Wars (1848–1870; Deur 2012). "Unique in scale, scope, and capacity to bring people together from across the corners of the Oregon Territory," (Deur 2012, 123), Fort Vancouver and the Vancouver Barracks encapsulate the history of European–Indigenous interactions across North America. As happened elsewhere, peace and friendship gave way to violent settler colonialism until Indigenous People were firmly relegated to out-of-the-way, rural reservations.

First legislated in 1948 as a national monument, Fort Vancouver National Historic Site preserves the HBC and military heritage of the site. The park (about 200 acres, U.S. National Park Service 2016) preserves a reconstruction of the HBC stockade, a partially-rebuilt Indigenous labourers' village and the Vancouver Barracks, among other facilities. Over 30 contemporary Indigenous communities are affiliated with Fort Vancouver National Historic Site; this includes peoples from the Iroquois in the east to Native Hawai'ians in the west. Fort Vancouver remains a gathering place for Indigenous peoples, where communities remember the past and engage in cultural practices.

Fort Vancouver is on the north bank of the Columbia River, directly across from the Portland airport. The urban Indigenous community in Portland can trace its roots to several factors. During both World Wars, Indigenous Peoples across the United States moved to urban areas to pursue employment in the defence industry (Curry-Stevens, Cross-Hemmer, and Coalition of Communities of Color 2011). Portland's urban Indigenous community grew after the war, through both termination and relocation. As with Indigenous Peoples in Canada, the Indigenous community in Portland is swiftly expanding. During the most recent census period (2000–2010), this growth (16%) outpaced the growth rate for the metropolitan area generally (Native American Youth and Family Center 2017).

Case Study 1: The Meewasin Valley Authority

Indigenous food sovereignty is one area in which the Meewasin Valley Authority is active. As Whyte (2016) notes, Indigenous food sovereignty is much more than a concern over nutrition. Instead, it is directly linked to relationships between Indigenous peoples and land.

Connection to land is a critical component of Indigenous identities (Hubbard 2016); it can be disrupted by relocation to areas distant from one's home territory. In Wilson and Peters (2005, 405–6), participants suggested that “the struggle to maintain relationships with the land often leads them back home...returning home provides Anishinabek with a physical connection to the land that they cannot always experience in cities.” Supporting traditional food and harvesting practices can support ties to land, even in urban areas.

We can see this desire to maintain connections to land in Saskatoon, where Meewasin is partnering with Dakota Cree poet Kevin Wesaquate, AKA-Artist-Run, and CHEP Good Food to plant over 500 misaskwatomina bushes along the South Saskatchewan River. Wesaquate (n.d.) has written about the project, saying:

The project began for me as a child growing up on Piapot First Nation. It really began as I picked misaskwatomina (Saskatoon berries) with my Kokom and Mosom. Finding shade in the Qu'Appelle Valley underneath trees as we picked berries. These memories are precious and are moments that bind families together. These are memories that many Indigenous families as we harvested this food from the land...all we need is some shovels and misaskwatomina plants to make our space for future generations to come.

Meewasin has been an enthusiastic partner in this and similar efforts. “A lot of our programming...is starting to take that shift, and focus around traditional plants and harvesting...having access to saskatoon berries and chokecherries, those types of things,” Meewasin CEO Andrea Lafond told me. “We're proud to boast one of the largest greenhouses in Saskatchewan that has native plants...we're very much...[focusing our work] around site design, contemplative spaces, encouraging those species within the landscape...that's a big piece” (interview, March 4, 2020).

Planting traditional foods will not fully attend to the pressures of settler urbanism, but Meewasin's support of Wesaquate (and its traditional foods programming more generally) does address one way that cities squeeze Indigenous peoples' identities and cultural practices. It is an affirmative response to the need to reinforce connections between urban Indigenous People and the land. As Powys Whyte notes (2016), “food sovereignty is a practical response to a particular structure of oppression that seeks to erase the ecologies that constitute Indigenous homelands” (20). Meewasin's focus on traditional foods should be emulated in urban parks.

Beyond this, and throughout the valley, many entities (including Meewasin) partner with the Indigenous community, Elders, and knowledge-keepers to recognize Indigenous Peoples' relationships to land (both historic and present) within the Meewasin valley. These partnerships include supporting opportunities to include contemplative spaces where deemed appropriate through Elder advice. Lafond described this process to me, saying that “in site planning, Meewasin is inclusive of all partners to ensure each site represents the needs and desires of our diverse community, while honoring the cultural histories of the sites through to planning interpretive nodes, ceremony, and contemplation sites” (interview, March 4, 2020).

Meewasin staff have asked that I withhold additional detail about these sensitive spaces from a publicly available article. Indigenous People in Saskatoon have expressed a desire to Meewasin staff for a safe, private, appropriate space to conduct ceremony. Meewasin's inclusion of this in site planning and design supports the creation of safe contemplative spaces. Meewasin is thus facilitating continued connection to heritage and identity for urban Indigenous People in Saskatoon.

Case Study 2: Fort Vancouver National Historic Site

In 2014, Tracy Fortmann (Fort Vancouver Superintendent) and her staff began planning for a refresh of the park's visitor centre (Theresa Langford, interview, May 7, 2018). This planning relied on archaeology from as early as 2005, when park staff first began mulling changes to the centre (Doug Wilson, interview, May 3, 2018). Since its construction in 1962, the visitor centre, a 5,650 square-foot space, has focused heavily on presenting the HBC and military history of the site. The centre's exhibits also highlighted the role of the site in the American seizure and colonization of the Oregon Territory.

An opportunity to remedy this presented itself in 2014, when the NPS obtained funding for a renovation of the visitor centre. Meagan Huff, now the museum curator at the park, led the renovation project. When the visitor centre re-opened in 2015, the exhibits were noticeably different. Immediately upon entering the new facility, visitors are greeted with a large, 10-foot-tall cedar and glass sculpture resembling two dugout canoes stood on their ends, created by Yakama artist Toma Villa. Stepping past the sculpture, the visitor is greeted with two primary exhibit areas in front of a wall of windows.

One of those two exhibit areas is the "expressions gallery," an art gallery given over to contemporary Indigenous artisans from affiliated Tribes. One artist at a time is featured in the gallery, with the changes occurring every nine to 12 months. The NPS chooses artists from a group that includes those who directly approach the NPS with their interest and others who are nominated by Tribal leadership (Theresa Langford, interview, May 7, 2018).

Compared to the old facility, this is a transformation of the space. As Doug Wilson (a Park Service archaeologist assigned to Fort Vancouver) remarked, the new visitor centre "epitomizes this shift [to a] viewpoint where different voices are being emphasized in the place where the visitor first enters. [That] really allows them to better understand that it's not just tied to this one, all nationalist story...there are these other stakeholders who have close connections [to the site] and that are still here today" (Doug Wilson, interview, May 3, 2018). Theresa Langford, Fort Vancouver's museum curator, described the new visitor centre as a place where "we wanted to be upfront and surprise people...[by presenting Indigenous heritage, which is] probably not what people expected to see front and center when they walk in" (Theresa Langford, interview, May 7, 2018).

Consider the role of public space in civic identity formation. As Nejad and Ryan (2018) write, "the invisibility of Indigenous communities in the public domain...label Indigenous peoples as...out of place in the city" (231). Public space's import is located not just in who may conduct what activity within the space, but also in who is represented in it. "Spaces

and places,” writes Fredericks (2013), “can actively operate to make Aboriginal people ‘non-locals’ or ‘strangers’ on Aboriginal land” (6). Giving over half of a major urban park visitor centre to contemporary Indigenous artists is a repudiation of settler urbanism’s attempts to erase Indigenous peoples from the city. It forces park visitors to confront the contemporary dynamism of Indigenous People and opens space for conversations with visitors about Indigenous heritage, both past and present.

Settler urbanism constricts Indigenous peoples and demands their assimilation. The new Fort Vancouver visitor centre pushes back against the idea that the birthplace of Pacific Northwest Euro-American society is a place solely of settler heritage. By showing Indigenous People in the past, present, and future of the Portland metropolitan area, the facility affirms, rather than militates against, urban Indigeneity.

Implications and Significance

The mini cases of Fort Vancouver National Historic Site and the Meewasin Valley Authority suggest several considerations for urban protected area management. First, Meewasin and Fort Vancouver present two different ways of supporting urban Indigenous People. Just as the IPCA and Indigenous guardian literature emphasizes the importance of renewing Indigenous ties to land and educating visitors about Indigenous heritage as steps towards improved park-Indigenous relationships, so too do these cases. Meewasin’s contemplative spaces and focus on Indigenous food sovereignty support Indigenous/Creation relationships. Fort Vancouver, meanwhile, is de-centring settler heritage in favour of the broader Indigenous stories of the site. In doing so, it is responding to the need for greater Indigenous representation in public spaces.

Second, the literature about park-Indigenous engagement has tended to focus on actions undertaken at the management table—for example, how to structure co-management agreements (King 2007; Nadasdy 2005), the ethics of Indigenous knowledge use by park managers (McGregor 2009), or the design of Indigenous protected areas (Tran et al. 2020). While such research is undoubtedly vital to improving park-Indigenous relationships, discussions that are focused broadly on management are not the totality of the path towards some semblance of improved relationships between parks and Indigenous peoples. Instead, they are but one part. Constructing Indigenous contemplative spaces and highlighting Indigenous narratives through changes to park visitor centres are not strictly “management concerns” in the same way that an Indigenous knowledge use or co-management agreement is. Instead, these are more about what parks *do* than about *by whom* they are operated.

As Nejad and Walker (2018) write, “Creating and reinforcing a sense of place among Indigenous urban communities is a powerful way of working towards spatial justice in Canadian cities” (226). The actions of parks—of sponsoring events, of creating space for Indigenous People to use for private cultural activities, of increasing Indigenous representation in public spaces—all matter, particularly in urban locales. “Places and spaces...are instruments of the political: they are embedded with power and unwritten

laws informing Aboriginal people about whether we belong or whether we do not,” observes Fredericks (2013, 15). This is particularly salient within urban contexts, where settlers’ assimilative pressures are extreme.

As I have emphasized, settler urbanism places unique, heavy burdens on urban Indigenous People. This is hardly a new observation, but it is not a conversation that has occurred regarding park and protected area management thus far. Instead, the literature and conversations amongst practitioners have focused on rural locales. An exclusive focus on the rural is wrong. Well over half of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States live in urban areas. To neglect urban Indigeneity is, at minimum, a disservice to the field, if not outright complicity with settler urbanism. It is my hope that this exploratory article, through its presentation of the Meewasin and Fort Vancouver mini cases, may help bring urban perspectives and issues to the park–Indigenous relations literature.

Limitations

First, this work would have been stronger if I had been able to meet with urban Indigenous leaders in Portland and Saskatoon to learn how they perceive the efforts of Meewasin and Fort Vancouver. Additional fieldwork was prevented by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the literature includes several decades of research documenting urban Indigeneity and urban Indigenous peoples’ perspectives on the challenges they face and how those might be overcome. I believe a reasonable starting point is to consider this pre-existing urban Indigenous literature alongside what any given urban park is doing. This is what I have done with these two mini cases.

This work’s second major limitation lies in the distinction between asking urban Indigenous leaders to react to what an urban park is doing versus asking them to describe their vision for urban park engagement. Documenting Indigenous desires for the future by asking “How should urban parks engage with urban Indigenous People, and how can urban parks best support you?” would be at least as useful, if not more so, than asking for a reaction to a current practice. A specific consideration of urban Indigenous Peoples’ perspectives on the future of urban parks would be enlightening.

Urban park–Indigenous relationships deserve specific, urgent attention. Settler colonialism (and park management) operates differently in urban than in rural areas; urban Indigenous People have told researchers about these differences. Challenging settler urbanism demands an approach towards building relationships with Indigenous peoples that is distinct from rural efforts to undermine settler colonialism. The general strategies for building strong urban park–Indigenous relationships that affirm urban Indigenous communities’ identities and visions for the future, the methods to enact these strategies, and the issues that these relationships will address all need more scholarly and practitioner attention. I hope this article has been a first step in that direction.

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