

Researching Wise Practices for Wildfire Management with Remote First Nations

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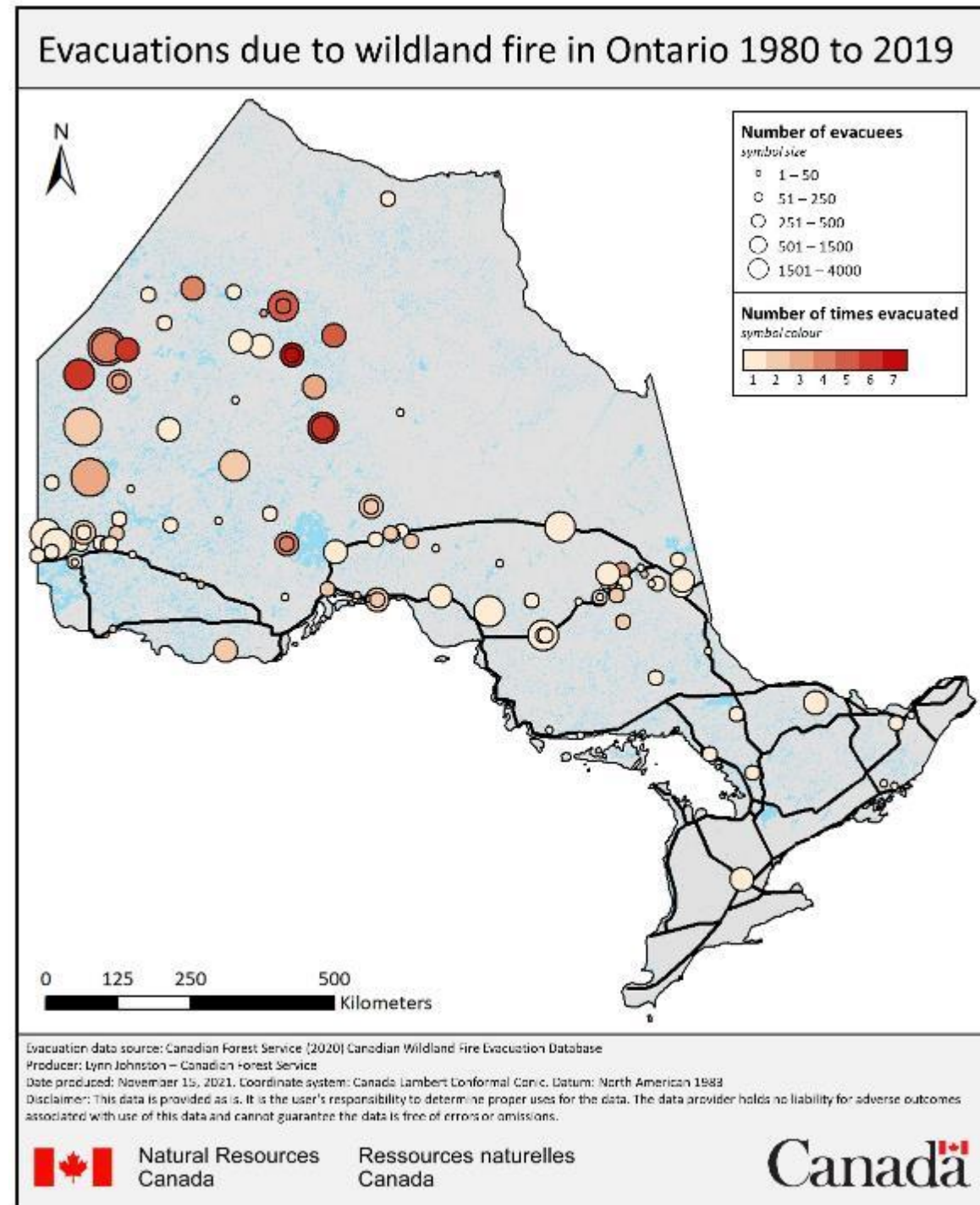


The Wildland Fire Context

- The impact of climate change on wildland fire is now being felt
- In boreal forests in Canada, the total area burned each year is growing.
- In 2023, 15 million hectares burned across Canada — more than twice the previous record (1989). In Ontario, 441,500 hectares burned.
- Warmer, drier conditions are expected to increase fire season length, annual area burned, and the number of large fires.
- In 2025, “Red Lake 12” became Ontario’s largest ever wildfire.

First Nations and Wildland Fire

- First Nations are on the front lines of these effects
- First Nations people living on reserve make up ~2% of the Canadian population, yet ~40% of fire-related evacuations involve First Nations
- Recent research across Canada has highlighted problematic aspects of how evacuations have been managed
- First Nations in northwestern Ontario are similarly affected
- The relationship between First Nations and provincial firefighting systems also affected by:
 - the legacy of the prohibitions on cultural burning practices, and
 - changes beginning in the mid-'70s in how firefighting is organized

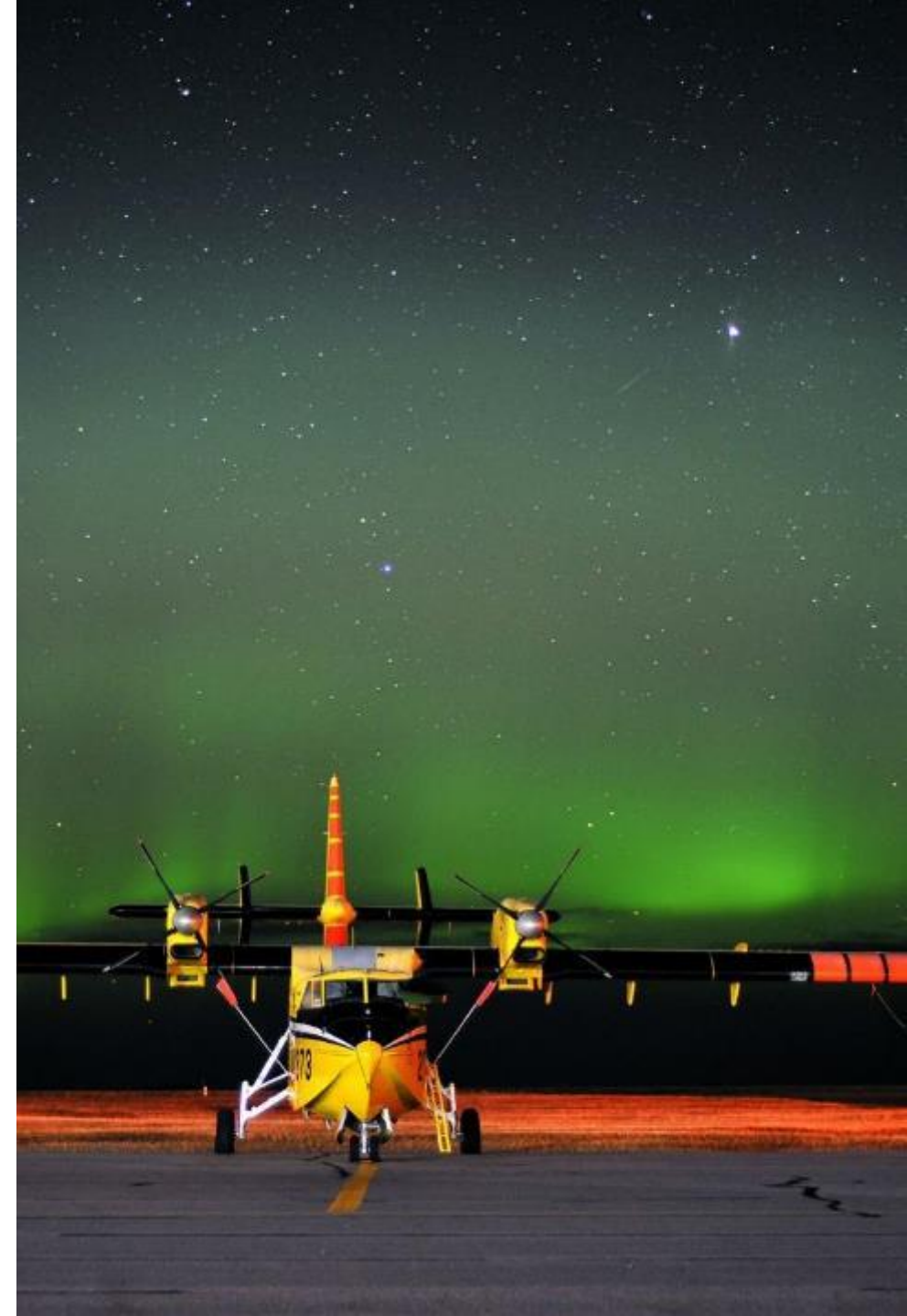


The Project

Learning from Indigenous Perspectives for Wildland Fire Management from Treaty 5 and 9 Remote First Nations

A collaboration amongst:

- Keewaytinook Okimakanak Tribal Council
- Lakehead University
- Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
 - Aviation, Forest Fires, and Emergency Services (AFFES)
 - Centre for Northern Forest Ecosystem Research (CNFER)



Objectives

Developed after an initial community-engagement and relationship-building phase of the project.

Documenting and sharing stories of community-led wildfire management and wildfire-related evacuations

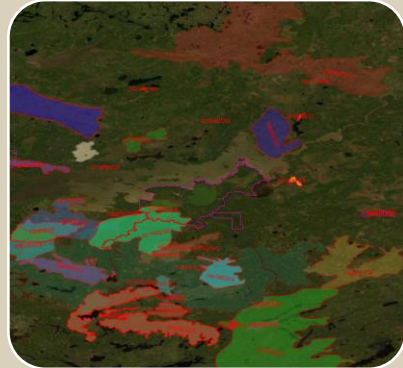
Identifying barriers, challenges, and opportunities for Indigenous participation in wildfire management

Identifying how to best support fire management capabilities

Understand the holistic impacts of fire-related evacuations on remote First Nation communities

Developing and sharing methodologies and processes used to gather perspectives on wildfire and fire management with remote First Nation communities

Keewaytinook Okimakanak First Nations Participating in the Project



Deer Lake First Nation

- Anisininew
- On-reserve pop.: 1087
- Last fire-related evacuations: 2025, 2021

Keewaywin First Nation

- Anisininew
- On-reserve pop.: 409
- Last fire-related evacuations: 2025, 2019

McDowell Lake First Nation

- Anisininew
- On-reserve pop.: 56*
- Last fire-related evacuations: 2025, 2019 (both self-evacuations)

North Spirit Lake First Nation

- Anisininew
- On-reserve pop.: 265
- Last fire-related evacuations: 2025, 2021

Poplar Hill First Nation

- Anishinaabe
- On-reserve pop.: 663
- Last fire-related evacuation: 2021

Methods

Timeline of Research Activities

2022
–
2023

Phase 1. Relationship-building, community engagement, and background knowledge synthesis

- Community-engagement visits and workshops
- Scoping review of existing literature on wildfire management and evacuation in North America
- Scan of the institutional landscape identifying challenges, gaps, and opportunities in wildfire management

2023
–
2024

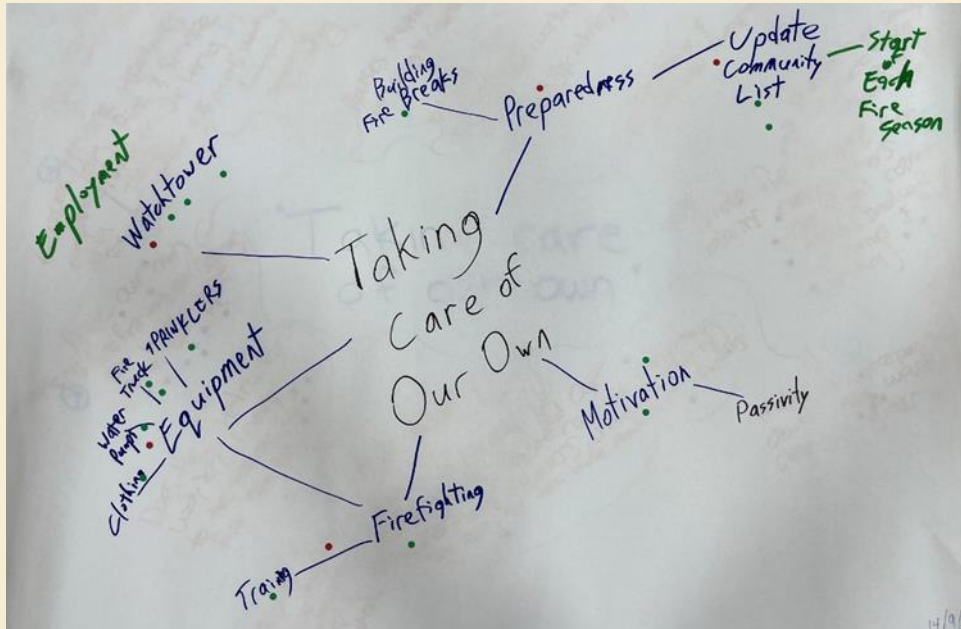
Phase 2. Identifying priorities

- Identifying community priorities for the research
- Booth at Keewaytinook Okimakanak Tribal Council's general meeting
- Community visits, seeking feedback on community member priorities

2024
–
2025

Phase 3. Learning together, sharing insights

- Learning Together workshop with land-based and learning-by-doing activities
- Interviews and focus groups with KOTC community members with experience and knowledge of wildfire mitigation & evacuation
- Analysis
- Publications of papers and reports
- Conference presentations
- Creation of infographics
- Development of scorecard tool for communities and their partners



Methods

Approaches to data gathering

- Storytelling and ethical space of engagement approaches central to this work
- Learning Together Workshop
 - Wildfire evacuation scenario: participatory, learning-by-doing
 - Land-based learning
- Semi-structured research interviews
 - 20 interviews and 1 focus group with community members
 - 10 interviews with professionals involved in fire management in First Nations
- Other community meetings and workshops



Strengths and Limitations of the Research

Limitations

- Researched focused on five First Nations in the same region of Treaty 5 and 9 territories – caution needed when extrapolating findings beyond this region
- Each of these five First Nations is unique. We did not explore these differences in depth.

Strengths

- Qualitative approaches encouraged “thick” descriptions of participants’ life experiences, worries, aspirations
- Focus was on depth of description and on speaking with community members with diverse and rich experiences of wildland firefighting, fire mitigation, and evacuations

What are Wise Practices?

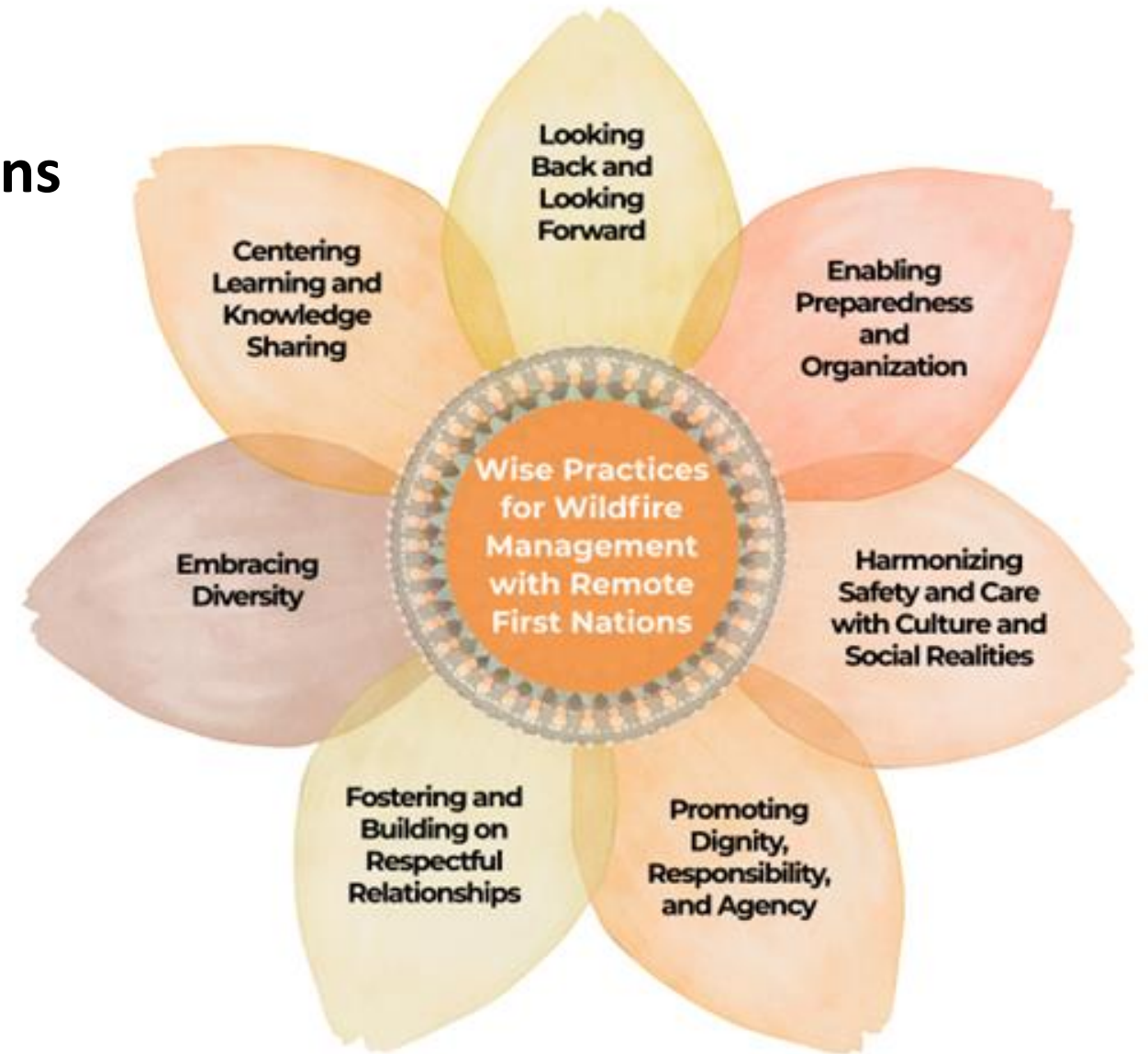
- *Wise practices* are **actions, tools,** and **principles** that centre the unique **knowledges, experiences, stories,** and **strengths** of Indigenous communities.
- Unlike *best practices* approaches (which offer specific procedures and steps → universally-desired outcome), *wise practices* emphasize **context, adaptability, reflection,** and **knowledge-sharing**



Ref: Manitowabi 2022; Wesley-Esquimaux and Calliou 2010.

Seven Wise Practices for Wildfire Management with Remote First Nations

- Based primarily on what community members shared about their experiences and aspirations
- **Actionable, flexible, and adaptable practices** for informing and guiding the approaches, activities, and priorities of external agencies partnering with remote First Nations



Looking Back, Looking Forward

- **Looking Back:**
 - Honouring and learning from past fire experiences and knowledge
 - For external agencies: taking responsibility for past actions and decisions
- **Looking Forward:**
 - Engaging with and preparing for future risks and community needs
 - Considering future implications of present-day decision-making and action
- Rekindling cultural fire stewardship practices
- Prioritizing **reflection, feedback, and planning.**

“If we had Elders there that were firefighters and shared their stories ... that would generate enough interest from youth to say like, ‘Wow, I’m going to be doing exactly what my grandfather did or my uncle did, or my grandmother did. Now it can be my turn to live through this, to be ready for this.’”



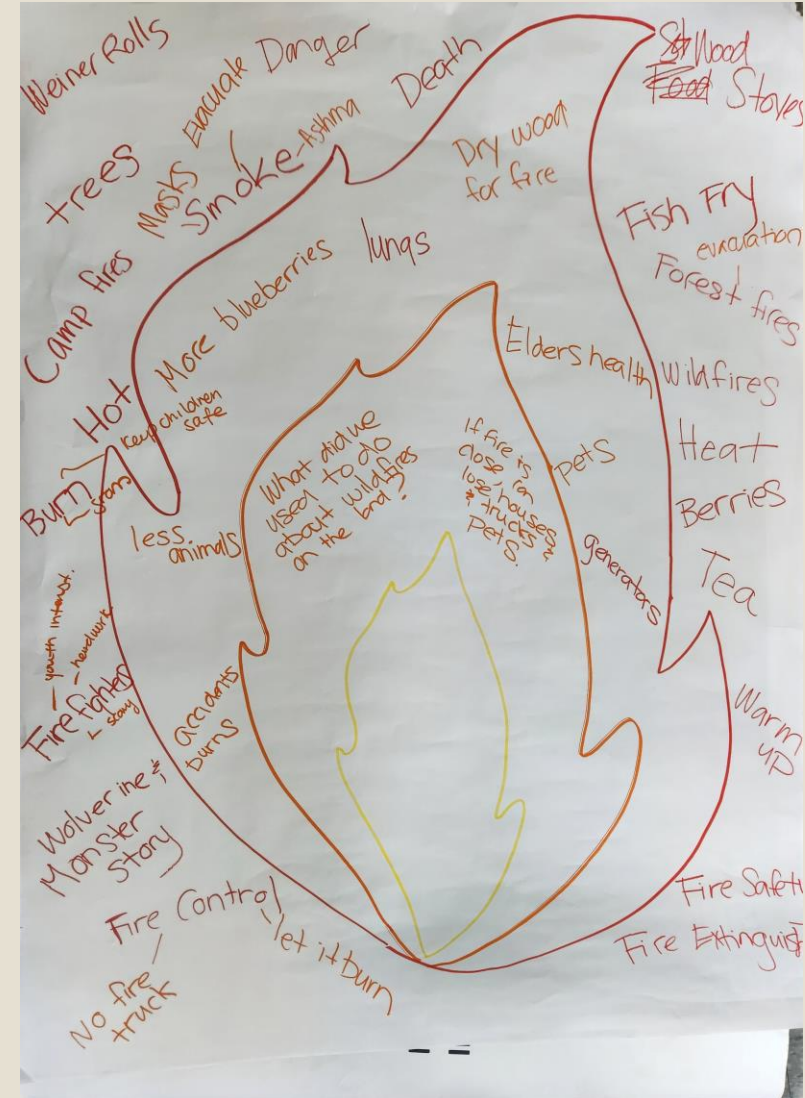


Enabling Preparedness and Organization

- Participants emphasized the importance of **preparedness and organization** in all dimensions of wildfire management
- Obtaining the right equipment, keeping it **accessible, well-organized,** and **well-maintained**
- Organizing training opportunities to build firefighting and mitigation **capacity** in communities
- Evacuations: preparedness at the individual, family, and community level. Importance of **early collaboration** and **taking care of people's basic needs**

Harmonizing Safety and Care with Culture and Social Realities

- Providing safety and care in a way that considers **culture and social realities** and **prioritizes community values**
 - E.g. access to culturally familiar foods and land-based activities, like fishing derbies, during an evacuation
- Adapting training and mitigation activities to **local contexts and environments**
- Appreciating social challenges, employing **culturally-informed approaches** to support



Promoting Dignity, Responsibility, and Agency

“Yeah, I think everyone has a responsibility for fire safety and management. Sometimes, it's our own responsibility to share whatever knowledge we have for the safety of our community and everyone around, everyone that's here.”



- **Personal and communal responsibility** were important dimensions of wildfire management to participants
 - Benefits: self-esteem, sense of agency, “taking care of our own”
- Crucial for people to **feel dignified and independent** throughout an evacuation, particularly at the host community
 - E.g. maintaining freedom of mobility, opportunities for jobs/roles during an evacuation
- Strong **desire for active agency** in the wildfire management space

Fostering and Building on Respectful Relationships

- Key aspect of successful wildfire management with remote First Nations is **recognizing and fostering strong relationships**:
 - within families
 - within and between communities
 - between communities and external partners
- External partners: **building trust and collaborative relationships**
- Providing pathways to wildfire management that align with the **social importance of family** and support networks
- **Keeping families together** during evacuations

“The best part of [being a firefighter] is just you got to interact with other people, make some friends. Even like with some of the MNR personnel, I met some good people ... We created some friendship, long-lasting friendship”. ~ Elder, past firefighter

“Being away from home, being away from family. That's a huge problem for anyone from any native community. 'Cause like, you know, you grow up in a small community ... you're surrounded by literal family all the time—cousins, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters. You know, to go to leave that kind of setting to go to a different place for training or, it's you don't know anyone. You feel isolated. It's, the social shock is too big for most people.”

Embracing Diversity

- Each community has diverse histories, cultural protocols, values, challenges, strengths, needs, past fire experiences and future priorities
- Partners: responsibility to **acknowledge and embrace this diversity**
- Avoid cookie-cutter approaches
- **Engaging diverse community members** – youth, Elders, healthcare professionals, community leaders – in wildfire management

“The government thinks differently than us when it comes to the land and fire.”

Centering Learning and Knowledge Sharing

*“I really, my spirit was just like ... (pauses) I'm really eager. I was so eager to learn. I really was fed by them, as if I was fed by mouth. That's how it impacted in my heart, to learn.”
~ Elder, on learning about wildfire management and safety from her Elders*

- Proactively developing appropriate skills and knowledge within communities has capacity benefits
- We heard a deep desire for **holistic and cross-cutting knowledge** on all aspects of fire and fire management in connection to the land and culture
- Land-based learning and **learning-by-doing**
- **Intergenerational** and **Nation-to-Nation** knowledge-sharing
- Post-evacuation **community debriefs and reflections** as learning opportunities



Opportunities, Implications, Recommendations

Holistic, silo-breaking approaches.

Robust communication
on fire response decision-making.

After Action Review (AAR) conversations could help strengthen communication and build trust.

Opportunities, Implications, Recommendations

Funding and programming support should be **flexible**, with the ability to combine multiple objectives and types of work and adapt to community realities.

Strength-based approaches are vital in wildfire management.

A strong interest in **holistic, land-based capacity development**.

Other Outcomes of the Collaboration



- Community conversations, strategizing and motivating action in collaboration
- The scenario role play method applied by the tribal council in other initiatives
- Strengthening of relationships: leading to new projects
- Rapid response research after evacuations in summer of 2025 informed by the wise practices

Thank you

References

- Manitowabi D. 2022. Weweni zhichge: wise practices in urban Indigenous education in Northern Ontario. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 18(1): 114-121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801221088863>.
- Wesley-Esquimaux C and Calliou B. 2010. *Best practices in Aboriginal community development: A literature review and wise practices approach*. The Banff Centre. 38 p.