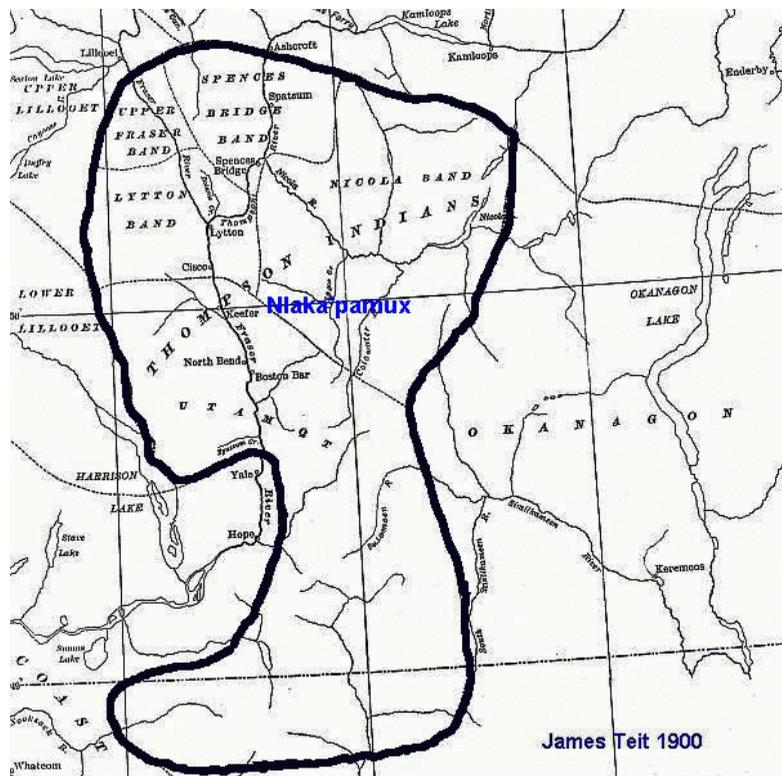


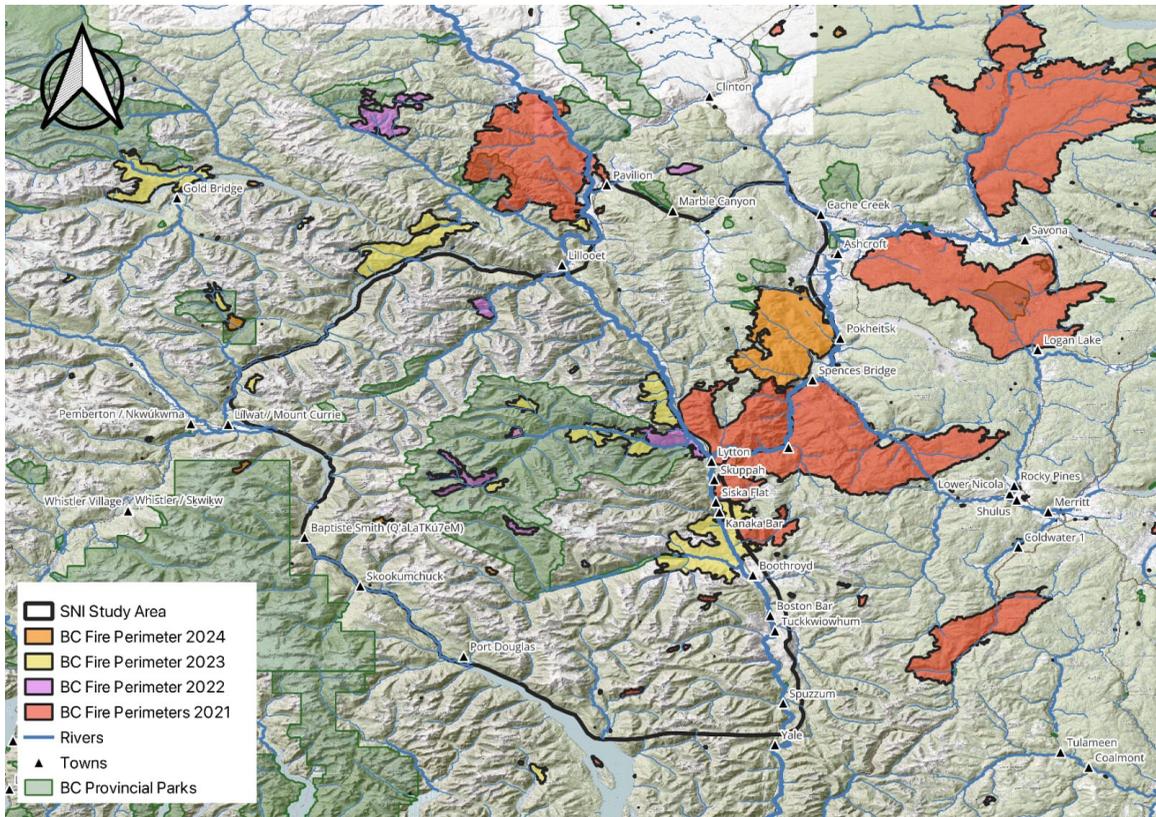
An aerial photograph of a mountain valley. A wide river flows through the center, surrounded by dense evergreen forests. The surrounding mountains are rugged and partially covered in forest. The sky is overcast. The text 'FROM OUR HEART TO YOURS' is overlaid in large white letters.

FROM OUR HEART TO YOURS

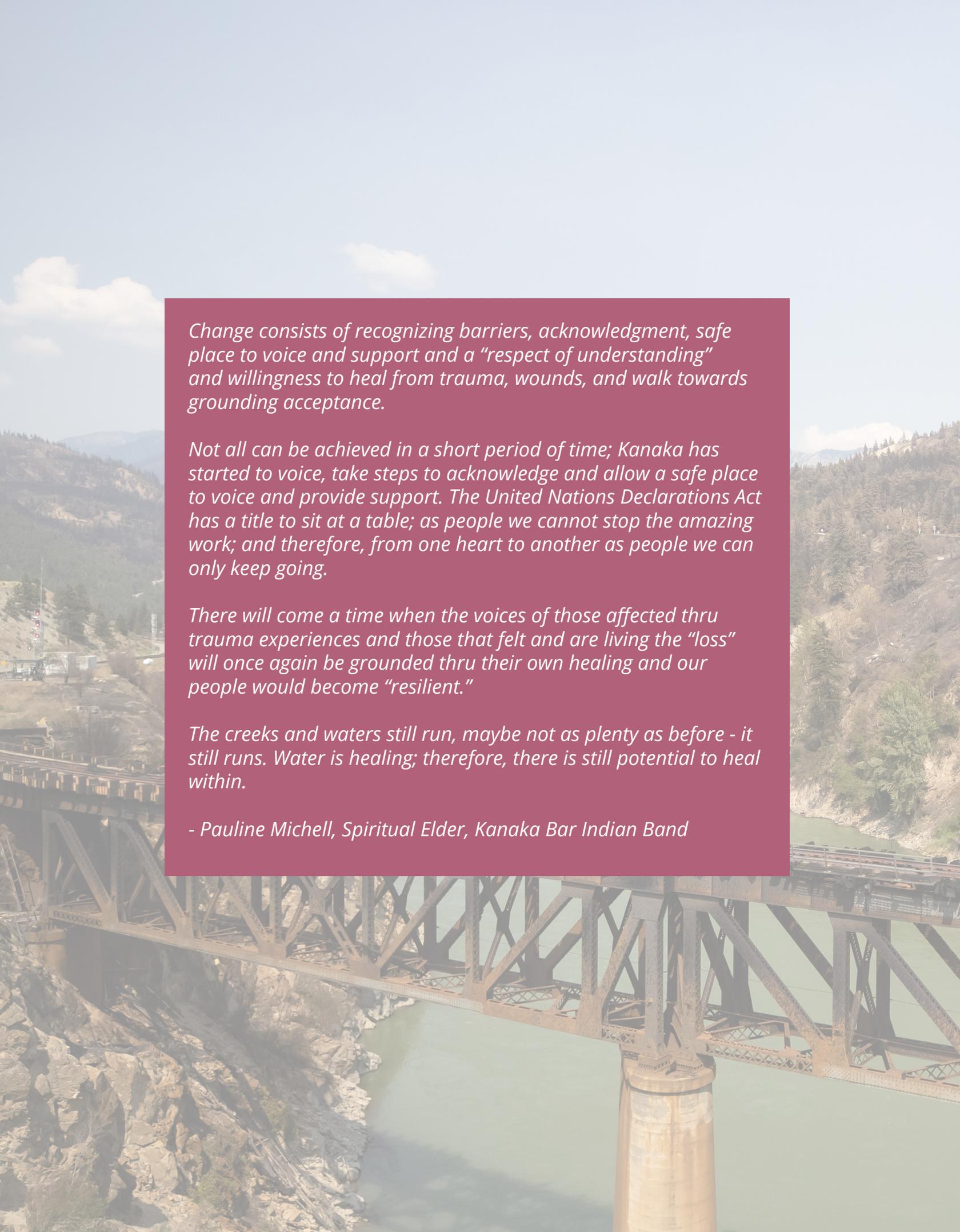
**Nlaka'pamux Stories of Disaster
Impacts in the Kumsheen (Lytton,
BC) Region 2021 to 2024**



Map of Nlaka'pamux Territory by BC Ethnographer, James Teit, in 1900



Perimeters of Fires Impacting Nlaka'pamux Territory, 2021-2024.



Change consists of recognizing barriers, acknowledgment, safe place to voice and support and a “respect of understanding” and willingness to heal from trauma, wounds, and walk towards grounding acceptance.

Not all can be achieved in a short period of time; Kanaka has started to voice, take steps to acknowledge and allow a safe place to voice and provide support. The United Nations Declaration Act has a title to sit at a table; as people we cannot stop the amazing work; and therefore, from one heart to another as people we can only keep going.

There will come a time when the voices of those affected thru trauma experiences and those that felt and are living the “loss” will once again be grounded thru their own healing and our people would become “resilient.”

The creeks and waters still run, maybe not as plenty as before - it still runs. Water is healing; therefore, there is still potential to heal within.

- Pauline Michell, Spiritual Elder, Kanaka Bar Indian Band

Sage

*The smell of my childhood:
warm sagebrush
beside the river*

*with the feeling of
bare feet
on soft sand*

*When you told me
you didn't know the smell of sage
I took you to the hillside
showed you the fragrant grey kAwquoo*
(far-from-water)
and you breathed in deeply*

*I remembered
when the whole town was burning
and we were running
for our lives*

*how the wind was carrying flames
upriver
both rivers*

*the fire was roaring
along riverbanks
up hillsides
into mountains
through homes*

*and the air was filled with the smell
of burning sage*

*"Sage." From Fandrich, M. (2023). Burning Sage: Poems from
the Lytton Fire. Caitlin Press*

**kAwquoo is the name for big sagebrush (Artemisia tridentata) in the Nlaka'pamux language*

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We are deeply grateful to the knowledge keepers, leaders, healers, emergency frontline workers, and community members in the Nlaka'pamux Nation and its neighbouring communities who shared their knowledge with us.

The Wow-Um project was guided by an advisory council of community leaders that oversaw all major decisions. We respectfully acknowledge their support:

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This report is the culmination of many expert voices contributing their experiences and ideas, often in the face of a long and painful recovery process. Drafting this report was illuminating and a deep privilege for the project team. We are humbly grateful to have been invited to support and learn through this project and hope this report can serve to adequately chronicle the disasters of 2021 that continue to deeply impact communities in the Nlaka'pamux region.

Project Co-leads: Pauline Henry and Sarah Kamal

Project Team: Clare Dwyer, Frankie Fowle, Rachel LaFortune, Chloe Raible

MESSAGE FROM CHIEF JORDAN SPINKS

Kanaka Bar is committed to using its lands and resources to maintain a self-sufficient, sustainable, and vibrant community. This vision is at the forefront of all we do. Our belief is that what we do to land, we do to ourselves.

Our climate strategy states that Kanaka will continue to actively reduce and reverse harm while incrementally preparing for the environment and economy of tomorrow. We are proactively developing strategies to stay in place, on our land, and preserve our culture and connection to our ancestors and way of life in the face of fire, drought, flooding, water shortages, degrading air quality, and the collapse or even disappearance of traditional foods like sockeye as well as medicinal plants.

The 2021 fires in Kumsheen (the land now known as Village of Lytton and Lytton First Nation) impacted us all: scattering our people, burning down homes and businesses, and bringing immense loss to families and the community. The 2021 fires were followed by mud slides, road closures, the atmospheric river in November, and another fire on the one-year anniversary of Kumsheen's devastation. Our land and our people are not the same. But we are still here.

This has been a very difficult time. To move forward, we have invited community members to tell and record their stories of disaster for community healing and to acknowledge the losses suffered by our people. We do this also to recognize the courage of our community members and partners, many of whom stepped up in our time of need and are still working hard to support our recovery. The stories that we have gathered for this report belong to us, our community members, and our future generations. They are being stored at Kanaka under our protocol for a Major

Historical Event. We share them here with the people and institutions that respond in times of crisis in the spirit of preparing for tomorrow, because we are clear that more is coming, and we must prepare and work together so we can respond and recover quicker.

Kanaka Bar Indian Band and individual Nlaka'pamux voices included in this report do not speak for others. The stories that follow do not reflect everybody's experience in our Nation, nor do they address how other Indigenous communities confront disaster across Turtle Island.

Retired Chief Kuk'pi Patrick Michell was the visionary who invited regional communities to collaborate on emergency management issues and built the foundation for this project. We thank him for his generous leadership. We also thank the United Nations Declaration Act Implementation Secretariat at Justice Canada for giving us this opportunity to share stories from our community. We hope this cooperation will support efforts to achieve lasting reconciliation and contribute lived experience from our community to the urgent ongoing conversation around disaster policymaking for all Canadians.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The summer 2021 fires in Kumsheen (Village of Lytton and Lytton First Nation) impacted the Nlaka'pamux Nation deeply. The fires were followed by mud slides, road closures, the atmospheric river in November 2021, and more forced evacuations and fire damage to homes and businesses in 2022, 2023, and 2025. Complex, compounding, and cascading disasters are challenging for any community; however, Indigenous communities face disproportionate difficulties.

Chronic under-resourcing, lack of jurisdictional clarity, isolation, historic and systemic infrastructural vulnerabilities, and lack of a long-term recovery roadmap and support system exacerbated Kumsheen's already heavy burden of disaster recovery.

The lived experience of Nlaka'pamux leaders and frontline workers demonstrate the layers of compounding catastrophe in disaster response. In the initial hours of the disaster, the destruction of communications infrastructure and disorganized leadership heightened stress, and concerned untrained volunteers felt compelled to step up to support their communities.

Immediate secondary disaster aftershocks in the community included being overwhelmed by unsolicited and inappropriate donations, being confronted with blatant discrimination when seeking shelter, and contending with the dangerous rotting of food in evacuated and electricity-less homes.

Longer term crises included the loss of Elders and youth due to stress and despair, dispersal of community members discouraged by the slow pace of rebuilding who decided not to return, and retriggered trauma via falling ash, evacuations, and visual reminders like the burned landscape.

The deep local knowledge of community members who stepped into leadership roles enabled creative solutions for difficult problems. Nlaka'pamux frontline workers converted an Indigenous post-secondary school into culturally-safe emergency housing and taught non-Indigenous kitchen staff how to cook traditional foods at a camp for the displaced.

These examples highlight the importance of ensuring that recovery initiatives are culturally safe for communities in distress. The wildfire disaster in Lytton has underscored the gap in long-term disaster policy which must be developed in consultation and cooperation with all relevant jurisdictions, in alignment with Indigenous rights, setting out effective frameworks for disaster from preparedness through to the full path to recovery.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Key concerns of the community for short-term disaster planning and response include the following:

- Need for robust communication during disaster.
- Need for community evacuation plans
- Need for emergency planning inclusive of members living off-reserve.
- Need for increased emergency management resources and capacity at all levels.
- Need for culturally appropriate emergency response.
- Need to eliminate barriers to supports.
- Need for immediate mental health and cultural/spiritual wellness resources in wake of disaster.
- Need for mental health and cultural/spiritual wellness supports for long-term volunteers and frontline responders.
- Need for support for people with disabilities and older people.
- Need for youth programming post-disaster
- Need for greater, more coordinated recovery and rebuilding.

This report highlights several critical issues related to Indigenous rights that require attention for effective recovery and future prevention, as obliged federally under the United Nations Declaration Act:

1. Delayed Emergency Response: The 14-hour delay in aid arrival during the wildfire exacerbated the destruction. Investigating the reasons behind this lag is essential to improve future response times.

2. Controlled Burns Ban: Restrictions on controlled burns under laws like the Wildfire Act are counterproductive, as they prevent

Indigenous communities from using traditional fire management techniques to mitigate risks. Revising these policies to allow and encourage controlled burns could reduce wildfire severity.

3. Infrastructure Vulnerabilities: The failure of water pumps during the Nohomin Creek fire highlights the need for upgraded infrastructure in Indigenous communities. Strengthening water systems and ensuring reliable power sources is crucial for disaster resilience.

4. Mental Health Support: Survivors face significant mental health challenges, compounded by subsequent disasters while displaced. Providing adequate mental health resources and acknowledging the community's trauma is vital for recovery.

5. Government Consultation and Cooperation: Engaging Indigenous communities in disaster management planning, preparedness, response, and recovery is crucial. Their local knowledge offers valuable insights for preventing and managing wildfires.

6. Aligned Policies: Implementing policies that recognize Indigenous rights (cultural, land, health, etc.) and contributions can lead to more effective disaster responses.

INTRODUCTION

On June 29, 2021, the Canadian national temperature record was broken for the third day in a row at multiple locations, with the highest official temperature of 49.6 °C recorded in Lytton, British Columbia. The next day, the Lytton Creek Fire raged, burning most of the town to the ground and killing two people. Fires continued to burn into August throughout the mountain ranges towards Kelowna, BC, prompting the evacuation of thousands of people.

The 2021 fires shocked the Lytton community and devastated the community physically, infrastructurally, and emotionally/spiritually. The fires were followed by debris slides, road closures, the 2021 atmospheric river floodings in BC, an extreme winter, and two subsequent difficult fire seasons that triggered evacuations in 2022 and 2023. These cascading disasters followed the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic and May 2021 discovery of unmarked children's graves in Kamloops, thus causing multiple shocks to a region already in mourning.

Fires are not new to Lyttonites. At the heart of the Nlaka'pamux territory, Kumsheen (currently known as Lytton) sits at the confluence of the Thompson and Fraser Rivers. Approximately 2,000 people lived in Lytton First Nation and 250 people lived in the neighboring Village of Lytton at the time of the 2021 fire. The Nlaka'pamux Nation's first contact with Europeans was in 1808, and their land later became a central location exploited during the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush. Wildfires have ravaged Lytton throughout its history; news reports dating back to 1931 tell the stories of destructive fires in the area.

The 2021 fires, however, were different: they were raging infernos rather than fires. The extreme drought of 2021 combined with what locals state were sparks from the wheel of a passing train car*, combined with parched grass and heavy wind, caused an unprecedented fire that traveled at speeds of 10 to 19 kilometers per hour. Within two hours, 90% of Lytton's infrastructure - 151 homes and businesses - were destroyed, 1,000 residents were evacuated, and two people lost their lives**. As the fires continued to burn, other communities were evacuated, causing re-evacuations of Lyttonites seeking refuge.

In what follows, Nlaka'plamux Elders, leaders, and frontline workers share their stories and lived experiences of the fires and the difficulties of recovering in the face of cascading disaster. We present the testimonies of Elder N'kixw'stn James and Retired Chief Patrick Michell in detail, then follow with the combined recommendations, observations, and solutions of the Elder and Retired Chief along with five frontline workers.

We present Elder N'kixw'stn's words as she told them to us, respectfully acknowledging her contribution and cherishing her deep wisdom and our happy memories with her. As Elder Pauline Michell says, "N'kiws'stn's words are important and how fortunate and an honor for Kanaka to be able to capture her story prior to her going home to our creator."

We end this section with an analysis of how these experiences reflect on Canada's federal obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

*The Transportation Safety Board of Canada, investigation R21V0143, was launched on July 9, 2021, to assess whether the train could have caused or sustained the 2021 Lytton fire. The investigation "has not identified any link between railway operations and the fire" and was closed. The investigation was criticized by local residents whose eye witness accounts suggest otherwise, and contend that rail operations should have been halted in the first place as a precautionary measure due to the known fire hazard precipitated by the heat dome.

**<https://www.vernonmorningstar.com/news/lytton-creek-fire-prompts-evacuation-for-thousands-in-lower-nicola/>

ELDER N'KIXW'STN'S STORY



Elder N'kixw'stn James at the Nahatlatch Culture Camp near Boston Bar, B.C. She is a cultural worker and artist and contributor to community cultural events, teaching participants how to make Native artifacts such as rawhide hand drums with drum sticks, rattles, and beadwork. Photo credit: Shelanne Justice

Elder N'kixw'stn* James of Lytton First Nation remembers the heat and the fire's sudden devastation. She remembers a young man bursting into her Village of Lytton home to warn her that she needed to get out.

"I asked him 'why,' and he told me 'look out the window,' and when I looked out my living room window, I saw smoke just rushing through." Elder N'kixw'stn, a 78-year-old Vietnam veteran and residential school survivor, quickly changed into her street clothes from her pajamas, handed the young man a hamper of just-washed laundry to throw in her car. She grabbed her purse and keys hanging by the front door. N'kixw'stn uses mobility aids and moved as fast as she could out of her house.

"Everything was just so fast," she recalled. "When I stepped outside...hot embers and smoke started burning my face, arms, and legs...I just kept reminding myself: 'I'm okay,

I'm okay, I'm going to be okay.'" Then she remembered seeing her cat sitting on the recliner. She regretted leaving her cat but had no choice.

As she reached her vehicle, she heard her neighbor's car exploding. "It brought me back to my combat experience in Vietnam. I recalled bombs exploding all around me. I jumped into my vehicle, reaching for the blue starter button. I remembered buttons that were pressed to explode bombshells. Just before I pressed the button, I reached my hands up praying, 'Father, if it's my time, I'm ready.' I pressed the blue button. No explosion. I quickly put my vehicle in gear. Made a U-turn. Drove as fast as I could to keep control. Everything was burning around me and I could only see and follow the yellow stripe in the middle of the road."

*Pronunciation of N'kixw'stn: Nikyoowesten

Just before I pressed the button, I reached my hands up praying, 'Father, if it's my time, I'm ready.' I pressed the blue button. No explosion. I quickly put my vehicle in gear. Made a U-turn. Drove as fast as I could to keep control. Everything was burning around me and I could only see and follow the yellow stripe in the middle of the road.



Elder N'kixw'stn is a US Army veteran who served from 1972 to 1987.

As she drove, she passed house after house on fire, some already burnt down to their frames. These were the homes of family members and people she knew. Her own home, she would later learn, also burned down. As she drove, she saw people fleeing the smoke and flames and tried to get them to evacuate with her. None of them did, however, all set on reaching other destinations amidst the chaos and sweltering heat of the rapidly approaching inferno.

Arriving at the Stein Valley Nlakapamux School in Lytton, the muster station the man who told her to evacuate had directed her to, Elder N'kixw'stn found she was one of the first to arrive. The school's administrator asked her to set up an intake table and record the names and details of those who arrived in a binder. Elder N'kixw'stn shared:

I'm usually physically weak. That day, I was able to lift two long tables. Unfolding them to standing position. Then lifted two chairs, placing them by the tables. By then the

administrator was rushing in with two binders filled with loose leaf papers with pens. She said to record all individuals entering the building: names, children's names and including their pets. As people started coming in, I quickly said, 'write your name, rank, and serial number.' The guy and I burst out laughing. He knew I was in the Army so he looks at me, asking 'what do I need to write?' Still laughing at myself, I said 'name, children or pets, with your contact number.' "

Just a short while later, however, intake was interrupted. The fire had jumped the Thompson River and everyone needed to evacuate again, further away to Lillooet. Elder N'kixw'stn helped direct people onto buses, but quickly remembered another Elder and childhood school friend with mobility difficulties.

"She was pretty crippled ... but she was moving with her two sticks, you know, as fast as she could, and I told two guys, go and help her, you know, and so we put her in [my] car." Elder



*Elder N'kixw'stn James braiding the hair of her cousin, Linda Dunstan, whose ranch was impacted by fires on the west side of Lytton in 2020 and 2022.
Photo credit: Sarah Kamal*

N'kixw'stn loaded up her vehicle with as many passengers as she could and made for Lillooet, BC. "I took off, and there was no thought of how fast I was going - I was moving," she said.

In Lillooet, Elder N'kixw'stn once again took up a coordinating role: checking people in against the register in her binder, and making sure they were directed to the food and water available, thanks to donations pouring in. Elder N'kixw'stn remembers being in Lillooet for two and a half days. In that time, she stayed awake for two days before finally finding a little corner where she could lie down to rest. But it was only about an hour and a half before she woke up to the news that everyone was evacuating again, this time to Merritt, BC. The fire had once again spread. Elder N'kixw'stn went to find her former school friend but learned she had been taken down to Chilliwack by her daughter. So she loaded up her car with more passengers and drove to Merritt.

In Merritt, the Shulus Community Arena had been designated as an evacuation point. Elder N'kixw'stn continued registering Lytton evacuees for another 4 days with very little

rest. Then her sister intervened to stop her from working because her sister knew N'kixw'stn's health condition. She took the recording binders out of N'kixw'stn's hands and handed them to another Lytton First Nations member to take over the recording of evacuees. N'kixw'stn describes, "I remember my sister grabbing the binders and pens out of my hands. She handed it to [another person] and told her take over: 'I'm taking N'kixw'stn home. She needs to rest.' She reminded me of my two minor heart attacks and the two stents inserted into my heart. I had no comment. She was right."

N'kixw'stn remembers her hot shower when she got to her sister's ranch. She could still smell smoke even after her shower. She began feeling numb and kept rocking herself as her mother rocked her in her cradle. She just couldn't believe that her home was demolished by the Lytton fire. Memories of her years of combat in Vietnam kept flashing before her vision. She had to keep reminding herself that she was okay and safe in her sister's house.

A few days later, N'kixw'stn noticed her skin was peeling whenever she showered. After her third shower her sister told her to go visit the doctor so he could give her medication to treat her skin. She was alarmed at her sister's suggestion. She went to look at herself in the mirror and saw her skin was red and peeling. She went to the local doctor. The local doctor knew N'kixw'stn's history of being in the military and suggested she go to the Veteran Medical Clinic in Mt Vernon, Washington. She made an appointment and went there accompanied by her sister. After her visit with a doctor, she was referred to Seattle Veterans Hospital where she was treated. She remembers looking at herself in the mirror and thinking she looked like the Phantom of the Opera. Her skin healed enough for her to return to BC in 6 months.

Elder N'kixw'stn jokes that "the best part" of burn recovery is that she no longer has hair on her arms and legs. But when it comes to the loss of her house there is no joking. "Before the fire I thought I was okay. Yeah, I was set, I had a four-bedroom house with a full basement... I had everything set up.... All I wanted to do is retire." Now all that is left of her home is just "flat dirt and rocks." Elder N'kixw'stn said she could not even try to salvage seeds from her carefully tended garden because of potential contamination after the fire. However, her cat Lyla was found hiding in the basement of her burned home, and now lives with her again.

29 months after the Lytton fire she is still waiting to move "home." Elder N'kixw'stn, currently living in an Independent Senior Residence in Merritt, BC, says she would like to be able to move to a bigger space to properly organize her sewing and have more freedom for her indomitable cat. With her US veteran benefits she will be able to install all the physical accessibility accommodations she needs to be able to live independently.

Unfortunately, her house was uninsured. "I stopped my insurance to save \$3,400 to fix my sewer because my sewer was backing up. Four times I had to clean out my basement," she

explained. "I contacted Lillooet Contracting and said, I got the money, two days later, no more house. And I was just like, oh God why? And now I'm stuck between a hard rock and a stone wall because no insurance, you know, and so things happen to our lives in the split second... you can't predict."

Elder N'kixw'stn is now frequently sought for her insight into surviving trauma. She gives speeches on her experiences in residential school, for example, and says people come to her afterwards asking how she has made her way through so much trauma.



Elder N'kixw'stn and her therapy cat, Lyla, are both survivors of the 2021 Lytton Creek fire. Photography credit: Elder N'kixw'stn

She says: “your brain is like a computer. The memories stay but you can overcome them. You can live for the moment of happiness.... Through my childhood experiences...I learned not to worry about things. If it happens, it happens. You just overcome it.”*

However, the loss of her home and the delays in recovery are heavy burdens. N’kixw’stn has several offerings from Kanaka Bar Indian Band and Lytton First Nation for temporary housing which may become available for renting. There have been delays in the completion of those homes because more wildfires are causing evacuations and heavy smoke that is hazardous to community members.

N’kixw’stn’s hope has depleted, and her attitude is “I’ll believe it when I see it.” She says, “It goes right back to the history of our ancestors: the only promise the government followed through with the Nlaka’pamux Nation is we’re going to move you to the rockiest part of the world, and they put us in the...mountains where we have to work hard to dig into the ground to make a garden or work hard to even dig a grave. So that’s a promise the government kept.”

“Your brain is like a computer. The memories stay but you can overcome them. You can live for the moment of happiness.... Through my childhood experiences...I learned not to worry about things. If it happens, it happens. You just overcome it.”

- Elder N’Kixw’stn



Elder N’kixw’stn, seated west of the Fraser River, across from Lytton, at her fishing spot. She wears headbands now as her hairline has changed since the fire. Photo credit: Esther Brown

*Quote from a conversation on September 29, 2023.

RETIRED CHIEF PATRICK'S STORY



Retired Chief Patrick Michell from an interview for the CBC "The Nature of Things" Documentary episode True Survivors Photo credit: CBC*

Retired Chief Patrick Michell is very familiar with government promises. Born in Lytton, BC, and having lived all his life in the Fraser Canyon, the 58-year-old former lawyer was Chief of Kanaka Bar Indian Band from 2015 until his retirement in 2022. He had years of experience navigating governmental structures when the fires hit.

June 30th, 2021, was a normal working day. Chief Patrick Michell (at the time) got a text at 4:58pm from his wife, who nudged him to go home early as the next day was a holiday and her birthday. Then, he says,

"At 5 'clock I got a text [from her]:

I just got a call, said Lytton is on fire.

At 5:02, I got a text:

I just looked out the door - out reserve's on fire.

At 5:04:

Our house is on fire

And then it went radio silent."

Patrick rushed to Lytton and made sure his wife, 8-month pregnant daughter, son-in-law, three grandchildren and the three out of the five pets they could find were transported safely south to Kanaka Bar Indian Band. Then he returned to Lytton to gain a sense of what was happening.

* <https://www.cbc.ca/documentaries/the-nature-of-things/adapt-move-or-die-how-humans-have-survived-enormous-environmental-and-climatic-change-1.6756200>

"I saw a firefighter collapse, two of his friends went running to him as he started puking. He was exhausted. They'd been fighting the George Creek fire all day, and had come off the mountain to try to save our town... A young man came swirling out of the smoke, standing on Highway 1's center line. He didn't know where he was.... He walked past me. I let him go. He was walking towards safety."

Patrick took a photo of his house burning and left.

Due to concerns that Boston Bar, to the south of Kanaka, was also battling a fire, Patrick had his family evacuate out of Kanaka Bar to Abbotsford, BC, then returned to work. A grueling period of pushing through grief while forging a path forward in the face of unprecedented fire destruction ensued.

"What happened on June 30th affected me and my family, mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and it just got progressively worse." People were different under stress, with arguments breaking out, nasty accusations and conflict embroiling evacuee registration sites – meanwhile, Kanaka leadership had to decide for the membership whether Kanaka Bar would evacuate (they did, due to smoke and as a precaution) and address truckloads of unhelpful donations (e.g., winter jackets, furniture, bags of unwanted thrift store clothing, even a truckload of bananas) from well-intentioned donors.

Even people who did not lose their homes faced ongoing problems: "families whose houses survived didn't mean the food did: elk, moose, fish, berries – gone as the power was off for a long time and freezer and fridges don't work without electricity! The stink of rotting food could be smelled a great distance, and flies and maggots were accumulating in people's houses where people had left food on their counter."



Retired Chief Patrick Michell's home before the fires, on June 26, 2021, with a newly installed solar panel on the roof. Photo credit: Patrick Michell

While he was somewhat insulated in the Kanaka Band Office, he personally experienced some of the problems he was hearing of from other evacuees:

I was en route to Kanaka Bar one morning and I stopped to take a planned phone call from the Premier's office, and I parked in the shade in Hope. So, I'm sitting in my car and some people approached me and told me: 'please leave - we don't want your kind here.' And I said 'pardon?' 'Please leave. We saw you circle the cul-de-sac, and you parked here, we don't want your kind here.'

I thought oh, neighborhood watch. But the neighborhood watch should have asked questions. They didn't say 'what's going on?' They said, 'we don't want your kind here.' I said, 'no worries' - they took a picture of me, and they took a picture of my license plate. And I said, 'please send it to the RCMP.' As I drove away, I said to myself: "because the RCMP will want to know who you are."



*Retired Chief Patrick's home the first time he and his wife Tina (foreground) were allowed to visit after the fires, on July 25, 2021.
Photo credit: Patrick Michell*

This was the first time that I saw a sort of blatant form of racism. I didn't say who I was, that I was the Chief of the Kanaka Bar Indian Band or that I lost my house in the Lytton fire - I just left it alone. So, "-isms" exist in our country, I get it. We've certainly cloaked it so it's a lot harder to see. In the past, -isms were much more blatant, like the Exclusion Act, or the residential school, or all that sort of stuff, right, women's right to vote. -isms still exist in our country. and I didn't want to escalate that, but I know a lot of people who would have gotten out of the car and got into a fight with these guys.

I asked the person on the call if they had heard that, and they said yes. I just wanted people to know that even in a crisis, that doesn't make bad things go away. I never faulted it against those individuals, but certainly anybody who's going to begrudge someone from parking in the shade to take a phone call, that blew me away.

His home was gone, his community scattered, the rebuild was taking longer than estimated, and meanwhile life was continuing. Chief Patrick Michell was informed via a thumbs up from a COVID-protocolled hospital window of his grandson's birth in Abbotsford, but that joyous moment was overshadowed by his family's pain and grief over the loss of their home. Getting together trailers and an RV, the family caravanned back. But with the 2021 floods it became too much. His daughter, her partner, and their baby moved to the partner's hometown in the US.

Retired Chief Patrick Michell observed community members, who had fought hard to move past addiction and trauma, begin to re-experience their trauma symptoms and backslide into dependency, making the post-fire period one of constant crisis. He himself began to lose his ability to multitask and focus. His wife's eroded sense of safety suffered another setback when she was robbed in May 2022 and became critically ill. A time came when he needed to choose between his family,

and helping his community. Aware that he was courting burnout too, he chose his family: "I didn't want to be the type of leader who would slip up and say the one word that you can't take back." All four Kanaka councillors retired with him.

Looking back at his experiences as Chief and his many conversations with Ministers, Mayors, Premiers, Members of the provincial and federal Parliament, Retired Chief Patrick Michell emphasizes the importance of relationship, communication, and planning of resilient infrastructure - of planning electricity hubs differently so power outages are avoided, and rebuilding homes with available technologies that could ensure disaster resiliency:

Resilience is the ability in my view to shelter in place during an extreme weather event. It's not the ability to bounce back. It's the ability to shelter in place. What happened on June 30th, saw an entire town evacuate to the north, to the south, to the east, to the west. And our journey back has not been without pain and suffering. There's been successes, but they are diminished by the fact that over time we don't seem to be any closer to rebuilding.

He points to bureaucracy, political worries about the cost of setting precedents in addressing disasters, and the inability to work together as major barriers to recovery and rebuilding: "We know what to do! Why aren't we doing it? Continue to raise awareness, continue to find and champion alternatives and options, make projects happen. Hope flows from action, not rhetoric."

Even in retirement, Patrick continues to read, meet, speak publicly, inspire, and advocate for climate action. He published a paper called "Rebuilding a community: hope flows from action." * Drawing from his difficult experiences, he argues that " We are no longer planning for future events; we are living them!" and actively encourages other communities to act now:

* <https://climateinstitute.ca/publications/hope-flows-from-action-rebuilding-with-resilient-foundations-fraser-canyon-region/>



Patrick Michell wearing his famous yellow tie of hope.

"We know what to do! Why aren't we doing it? Continue to raise awareness, continue to find and champion alternatives and options, make projects happen. Hope flows from action, not rhetoric."

- Former Chief Patrick Mitchell



A sustainability project at Kanaka Bar Indian Band, Photo credit: Kanaka Bar Lands Department

As a key figure in sustainability efforts in his community, Patrick Michell is living in a temporary home provided by LFN but has plans for building a home that would showcase disaster-resilience building materials as a proof of concept. He is continuing to work hard despite the extreme difficulties his family has been through because "our children and grandchildren are worth the investment."



Patrick Michell with his grandson Atreus who fled the fire while still in his mother's womb, one year after the fires.

RECOMMENDATIONS BY FRONTLINE WORKERS

Elder N'kixw'stn's and Retired Chief Patrick Michell's stories of the fire are not unique. For many Indigenous people living in and around Lytton, on- and off-reserve, the Lytton Creek Fire marked the beginning of a period of chaotic displacement, lack of supports, and serious impacts on health and wellbeing. Some people were not displaced themselves but bore witness to the toll of the disaster as they worked as volunteers and in official emergency response positions. Some had the double burden of caring for displaced loved ones at home while also working professionally to support others impacted by the cascading disasters, with little reprieve or mental health supports.

Everybody was affected by the less visible pragmatic consequences to losing the services and businesses (bank, medical services, grocery store, restaurants) in Lytton, which for most people added up to 4 hours of travel time to access all their required services. The community also felt the ripple out effects of compounding collective trauma. People mourned the dispersal of community members and the loss of community fixtures that were central to their childhood.

This section of the report provides an overview of perspectives shared by seven Nlaka'pamux people who were interviewed by the Wow-Um team in May and June 2023 about their experiences as frontline workers. These are the priorities for action they identified.

The smell of the seasons in the canyon, the wind, the rivers, the mountains. The sound of the coyotes howling on the west side on cold winter nights. The rhythm of the trains rumbling by. The big trucks buzzing by on the Trans-Canada Highway. I played here, learned here, loved here. My history is here, on these streets, buried in this ground.

You dig anywhere in this town and you'll find artifacts from thousands of years of Nlaka'pamux. Now this charred layer that was the Lytton of my entire life is just another layer in the geography, and the Lytton I remember a slowly fading hologram in my mind.

- Kevin Loring

From Edwards, P., and Kevin Loring. (2024). Lytton: Climate change, colonialism and life before the fire. Random House Canada, pp 317-318.

Need For Community Evacuation Plans

A lack of pre-existing community-level emergency response and evacuation plans increased confusion, anxiety, and panic during the Lytton Creek Fire, both for people evacuating and for those wondering if their loved ones would make it out alive.

"If a fire happens in the Band office you have a muster station, but there is no muster station for a town like Lytton or Ashcroft or Hope - to say if this is happening, go here, and we'll have somebody to look after you," Pauline Henry said. There needs to be preparation, she added, for people to have a sense that "if something happens in my community, something's going to kick in, and things are going to happen in a good way."

M. Michell, in Kamloops at the time of the fire, remembers calling everyone she knew in and around Lytton until the phones failed, trying to learn what was going on and where everyone was headed. The lack of certainty about how an evacuation would be managed added to her concern:

I immediately was in a panic state.... I was like, holy shit, we're going to lose everyone, can they make it out? What about the Elders? What about the hospital?... Who's there to help? What can I do? Where is my family?... We have no emergency plan set.

Pauline remembers the difficulty of trying to determine where people could regroup amidst uncertainty and no clear plan or preparation for such a scenario. Having driven to try to reach Lytton to assist her family, she encountered a roadblock where RCMP officers were preventing people from driving further toward the fire. She and her partner parked on the side of the road, greeting people as they left Lytton, trying to piece together information on what was happening.

"It was like 50 degrees," she remembers. "I was handing out water to people, trying to figure

out things.... It was so hot, no one was wanting to stand outside. So, I suggested that we go to [a nearby] band office, which is maybe half a kilometer away.... We told the RCMP where we were going and...to give directions to the community members to stop at the hall."

But the band office was not prepared for the unprecedented influx of people: "They didn't have any extra water, there was no electricity by that time. So, there was no air conditioning.... As the minutes were going more and more people were coming. And I was trying to think of what to do, like, how can I help?"

Pauline reached out to others in her network for help, and finally got a call back:

Lower Nicola Band would allow us to gather at the arena in Lower Nicola on the reserve...So, I was telling the people that they could go to the Lower Nicola band arena, that it's cool there. There's a place where we can figure stuff out or what have you.... By that time the ash was falling on us, it was like it was snowing. You could see the smoke. You could see the ash falling on everybody, and people were hysterical. It's hard, this is hard to say but even the leaders of our community didn't know what to do. And that kind of made me panic because they're our leaders, and they're supposed to know what to do, but they didn't have a clue.

Pauline commented that had a plan been in place, there could have been better use of resources: "the Band office has a health center, the health Center has vans, they didn't go into [Lytton] to go see if they could pick people up off the street. It was the people in Lytton driving down Main Street that were grabbing people and putting them in their cars."

Gracie Henry, a member of Lytton First Nation residing on Sq'ewqeyl (Skowkale) First Nation when the fire happened, remembers how hard it was to find her mother. Since she had no

information on evacuation sites and no way to contact her mother due to burned cellphone towers, Gracie resolved to drive toward Lytton. By the time she learned her mother was at the Stein Valley Nlakapamux School, the evacuees were being moved to Lillooet. The confusion of the evacuation and family separation was hard on her mother, Gracie said:

It seemed like my mom's family all went towards Spences Bridge, but because my mom's downtown, she kind of got to Stein Valley and her and her family separated at that point, and so she was with another Elder and they drove. And when I finally was able to speak to my mom, I think it was like 9 'clock that night. And I was like, how are you doing? She's like, "you need to come get me, I don't even know where I am, I don't know whose house I'm in... there are strangers all around me."

M. Michell reflected on the need for advance planning to prevent this type of separation and community member isolation: "I think the big thing is identifying when and if this happens again, where to go to...because the big thing was everyone separated, because you scatter, you panic.... Everyone was everywhere." M. Michell suggested that two set locations for evacuation could be selected, depending on where people live within the community, and that these evacuation locations should account for the size of the community, "because we overran Lillooet extremely."

Leona recalled how coordinating a response during the fire was too late. Calling into an emergency Chief and Council meeting, Leona remembers:

They were deliberating what was actually happening, and I don't think they knew the urgency of it. And I was texting the Chief at the same time saying, you know, these guys are at a crossroads, and the smoke and the ash and everything is falling all around them. They need to make a decision ASAP....There was a lot of dialogue from council saying this would be a good time for collaboration and Nationhood building and yadda, yadda, and I'm like hurry, like, I was just really trying to get the ball rolling. And then one of the chiefs got on that call with me and he said, we got to go. He goes, we're getting pushed out of here, he goes, we're going to Kamloops, like, we don't have a choice.

Retired Chief Patrick Michell summed up the need for advance planning: "If we know that these catastrophic events are going to occur in greater frequency, duration, intensity, then plan for it. You don't want to come up with a response plan during the response."

Leona suggested the need for "a Nation emergency plan" to help coordinate across communities and help limit displacement. "All we could think," she said, "is we have to have a better plan next time, like we can't keep traumatizing people and we should have agreements with our neighbors ahead of time."



Railway post fire. Photo Credit: CTV News.

Having a plan in place is also essential, Pauline noted, because community leaders may also be impacted and not able to provide needed guidance. During the Lytton Creek Fire, Pauline observed, “There was no leadership to be seen because they were in flight mode themselves.... They were like running around with their heads cut off, looking for their family.”

For Sue Sterling-Bur, Vice President of the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT), the Lytton Creek Fire was an awakening to the importance of having a plan for NVIT specifically. As the only Indigenous post-secondary school in British Columbia, located just outside Merritt, NVIT was well placed to provide culturally-safe emergency housing and support. Sue remarked that “prior to the fire in Lytton this was not even on anybody's agenda.” But as the fire cut through Nlaka’pamux territory she started getting phone calls from people looking for a place to go. “We have student housing on our campus, plus a large gymnasium,” she shared, “we're known within the territory, we're a safe space for Indigenous people plus our Indigenous allies to come.” The school ended up hosting evacuees for several months.

Now NVIT is formalizing its role ahead of future disasters. “We have actually just recently signed an agreement with the province.... We're looking towards getting provincial designation as an emergency, Indigenous emergency social service space [to] provide support for our Indigenous and non-Indigenous people,” Sue shared.

Need For Emergency Planning Inclusive of Members Living Off-reserve

Band members living off-reserve expressed frustration at how they often fell through the cracks amidst overlapping jurisdictions.

Even where they still lived near or maintained property on a reserve, people off-reserve had no official warning of the fire and no

direction on how to protect themselves or their properties. Pauline Henry, for example, lives off reserve but has a home on reserve. She did not receive official notice of the fire, but thankfully her cousin warned her so she checked on the renters living on her property. Sue Sterling-Bur noted that while her property borders a reserve, when the reserve was evacuated she received no evacuation notice from her local government:

There's a clear disconnect between that communication of when is the moment of evacuation, and how do we get people in the same area on the same page so that if my neighbour's evacuated, then I should be evacuated too.... [C]ommunication between on reserve and municipalities would be extremely beneficial...like, who is doing what? And I know that...some of those conversations are trying to happen, we're a part of it here at NVIT as well.

Need For Increased Emergency Management Resources and Capacity At All Levels

The lack of capacity for emergency management increased the difficulty and efficacy of emergency response.

Pauline reflected that at the time of the Lytton Creek Fire, turnover impacted leadership's capacity to respond to the disaster. The Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) manager for Lytton “was just hired the day before the fire. So, he had no training, nothing under his belt to even think what to do,” she said. “At that same exact time, we had a brand-new Chief and Council for Lytton.”

“When there's nobody in charge and there's nobody in command or there's nobody there to help your people, what do you have?” Pauline reflected. “You have volunteers that don't have training like me, and I just did it by instinct.”

Sue similarly observed, “where our governments need to do better is that [emergency response] can't be volunteer. You need to have a minimum of a few people paid on staff who are in charge at least, because there's a lot of people who want to volunteer. But when it's just left to volunteers, and nobody knows who's doing what, that's a situation for more disaster.”

Preparing communities for disaster also requires ensuring dedicated staff are appropriately trained, Leona shared. “[I] felt like there was a lack of coordination....I was quite frustrated because I knew the resources that Lower Nicola Indian Band had, but the current staff wasn't trained so we couldn't be that EOC for them, so we pulled in Upper Nicola Band.” Thankfully, she said, “Upper Nicola Band's emergency center, they were quite well rehearsed.”

Sue suggested every Indigenous community should have an Indigenous emergency position of some sort. “If they're smaller communities, maybe they have one that's partnered with a neighboring community,” she suggested. “If something happens, it's like the First Nation's on their own, they need more supports, and that individual could then be connected to First Nations Health Authority [and] all of these different ministries and agencies. That could be their whole role.”

Pauline similarly suggested: “My recommendation is to have the Federal Government cough up that money and say, we are now going to have a program implemented in all the Bands.”

Leona recounted how, when she was on council from 2016 to 2019, work was underway to address First Nations emergency management capacity needs in British Columbia. During conversations feeding into the development of the Tripartite Memorandum of Understanding to improve emergency management services for B.C. First Nations, Leona and her Chief called on the Federal Government to uphold their

obligations to First Nations: “we were like... you guys are still federally responsible for us, and we need emergency planners throughout the Nation to help build out a more holistic, collaborative emergency plan.” The federal and provincial government “went away at lunch time, and they had enough authority to come back to say, we hear you loud and clear, yes, all the Nations, one emergency planner per Nation.” But when the time came to implement, it was unclear where these positions should be housed. “I think the Nation planner ended up under Nlaka'pamux Health,” Leona said, “so he tried to engage with all the bands within our Nation and there was resistance. Like, who are you, we have our own way of doing things, right?... I don't even know if that position even exists anymore.”

There needs to be more collaborative effort, Leona acknowledges but also, “[the Federal Government] can't back out that easy, we're still their responsibility.” The First Nations' Emergency Services Society of British Columbia (FNESS) provides some support, but otherwise communities must rely on consultants: “There's a flurry of competing consultants out there, kind of preying on all these communities, right, and they're making a lot of money.”

Nlaka'pamux people also reported a need for increased emergency management capacity across the board, and expressed frustration at the lack of meaningful presence of professional emergency management services or government during and after the Lytton Creek Fire. Sue recalled that “there were no check-ins [on the evacuees staying at NVIT]... we could have been out doing whatever we wanted, and nobody would even know,...the people staying [at NVIT] couldn't even get vouchers right? It was pretty dire. I think they just didn't know how to even mitigate such an immense crisis.”

Pauline expressed frustration at ESS leadership being spread too thin with people “double dipping” by working in multiple roles in different areas and thereby “not present.”

During her own time volunteering in Merritt, Pauline reflected, “there was no leadership in that building....Somebody was at the door doing registration for volunteers, I don't know who they were, Red Cross? ...You know, normally they wear vests with ESS and First Nations emergency or whatever. There was nobody visible. So, days just went on like that, like day after day, after day after day...there was just total confusion, no coordination between the ESS people in Merritt in town with the people that were volunteering their time at the arena, no coordination at all.”

Leona worked as part of an EOC for 21 days and remembers the struggle of under-staffing. “We didn't have a backfill plan in the event when we were rotating,” she said, “and you need to have some of those champions come in and take your place and know that it's going to continue under the same process.”

Gracie, thinking on her post-fire experiences working at Camp Hope, also remembered lack of capacity. With only one EOC worker per region, people were stretched to the limit: “when I was off, there was no off because you still get phone calls.... And I still get phone calls, even like... what are we? Eight months after? I'm not working, and I'm still getting calls ... saying they're still trying to get a hold of people, it means that they're still struggling with that issue of not enough workers.” A 24-hour access phone is needed, Gracie acknowledged, but emphasized that the burden of maintaining a continual phone line can't be carried by one person alone, “every region should have had two or three EOC workers.”

Well-meaning individuals tried to help, sometimes adding to the confusion and overwhelm. Retired Chief Patrick Michell recalled:

Donations started coming, unsolicited donations. ... They were throwing out expired food, they were handing out winter jackets. Furniture started arriving at Kanaka Bar and while I love the benevolence of people, what are we supposed to do with a truckload of bananas at 44-degree temperature? ... There was no organization. British Columbians wanted to help the people from Lytton. Well, the people from Lytton were in Abbotsford. Why were you bringing this stuff to Lytton? Siska set up a donation center. Skuppah set up a donation center. Lytton First Nation set up two donation centers, and they had a lot of stuff. But there was nobody there for this stuff.



Damaged structures are seen in Lytton, B.C. after a fire destroyed most of the village on June 30. Photo Credit: Darryl Dyck / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

Sue suggested:

For the individuals like the paid positions, in the moments of ESS operation, maybe those are housed in [the Ministry of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness] or wherever they come from, and then they're in a paid position to be satellited out to wherever these ESS centers have to be set up, and not just for 7 days, you know, because especially, I think it has to be based on the crisis of whatever is happening... if they could have, you know, 10-15 positions across the province where that's all they do is support ESS operations. They can rotate them and satellite them through wherever they need to go. Yes, there's going to be a cost to it, but it's going to help alleviate all of these issues and challenges that ESS operations are having.

Need For Culturally Appropriate Emergency Response

Nlaka'pamux people encountered negative experiences interacting with official emergency response actors that revealed a need for trauma-informed, culturally appropriate responses to disasters.

"We were displaced all over BC and we were treated different in different areas," Pauline shared. "Kamloops was really, I don't like to say it, but really prejudiced. And I had to stand up a few times to the ESS workers and some of the government workers, and even like, the floor managers." Gracie similarly noted that the registration centres in Kamloops or in Merritt were not as accessible because they were not run by First Nations."

In Merritt, after multiple evacuations, Elder N'kixw'stn encountered a stressful situation interacting with an Emergency Support Services worker that could have been prevented or mitigated through more

respectful understanding of cultural protocols. Elder N'kixw'stn recalls continuing the task she had been assigned back in Lytton, of keeping track of the people noted down in her binder and was told by the ESS staff person to turn over the binder. "I said, listen, you may not know who I am, but I am not going to give you this binder, because this binder contains all members from Lytton, I want to make sure that, you know, Lytton receives ... these two binders, so we know who's here and who's not." The ESS worker, however, called a constable to try to force Elder N'kixw'stn to hand over the binders. Elder N'kixw'stn remembered:

And the constable came in and said, 'what's the problem?' And the lady said, 'This is the lady from Lytton, and I need to get her binders, so we know who is here and who's not.' And the constable looked at me and he was my cousin. And ... 'N'kixw'stn,' he says, 'I'll take you to where you can photocopy.' and then you can give her the photocopy. And the lady goes, 'No, I need the original,' and the constable said, 'Who's the constable here?' ... And so, we went and ... I said, 'Could you go photocopy it and bring it back?' I said, 'I want to keep working with my people here.' So, he went, and he photocopied it and came back and gave me the binders, and I checked it over to make sure that it was the original and then he gave her the photocopy list. And, like, two days her and I were butting heads, because, you know, I guess I've been in the military long enough that, hey, I don't take any shit from anybody, especially when I don't know what their status is, you know, I've been given a responsibility and I'm going to stick by it.

Thankfully the constable in this instance had community context and cultural knowledge to be able to defuse the situation.

Gracie, meanwhile, recounted the difference she experienced in being able to center Indigenous ways of being and healing in her post-fire work at Camp Hope. When she heard that people sheltering at the Christian retreat facility were not eating well because the camp was preparing unfamiliar meals, she approached Camp Hope management to see if they would be open to receiving some help. "I was like, 'Do you know how to cook for carnivore First Nations people?'" she remembers asking, adding, "It's a part of our diet ... we used to live off meat and root vegetables. So, it's a must." The camp cooking staff did not have experience cooking traditional meat, and were open to changing their approach. She began to network for salmon. "If you don't know how to cook meat, it's the easiest thing," she said. "It's like baking eggplants." At one point, someone even brought in a whole moose, which led to a positive moment of cultural exchange:

I said, 'Unless we're going to pay a thousand dollars to have it processed, we have to process it.' And it was just a cultural experience to have somebody be like, 'There's something that's hanging in the shed, and we've got to cut meat off of it to cook.' They did really well though... they did better than I expected. I thought I was going to be having to do everything and cook all the time [but] they just dove in, they tried butchering, they tried learning how to cook.

Not only was Grace able to help ensure access to traditional foods so that displaced community members could eat properly, but she was also able to connect people with other traditional supports:

I have a network of Indigenous healers and Indigenous workers down here ... so that really helped Camp Hope and they're thriving

I know a lot of people were frustrated with the number of things that were going on there. But it wasn't that we had more money, or we had more access to stuff, it's just I'm married into down here, right? And I know my network of people are huge like, you need a drummer, I have one, you need someone to sing, I have it, you need someone to go and do healing, I know where they go, you need counseling, I know where to go, and they are all Indigenous.

Need To Eliminate Barriers To Supports

Nlaka'pamux people described the frustrating and exhausting barriers they and others faced in accessing needed supports in the immediate aftermath of the fire.

"I felt like we had barriers everywhere," Grace Henry said, "like there's so many things to access, and it was like we were jumping through hoops."

Interviewees described how lack of organization, and unclear roles and responsibility made it difficult to know where to go to get help. "There was no identified person of, 'I'm running this shit here in Kamloops, I'm running this shit here in Shulus, I'm the captain', you know, like there was none of that," M. Michell observed. Leona noted, "There was a frenzy of organizations that thought they had the authority to get emergency task numbers, and so there was too many agencies that were applying for the task numbers and, but in the meantime the people were not being serviced the way they should have been."

Interviewees also described how those most in need faced the greatest barriers to accessing supports. People who lost everything in the fires, those who fled with no personal effects, did not have access to ID and therefore spent longer waiting to receive benefits.

M. Michell observed, “people who did have IDs were getting monies and hotels right away, and people who didn’t, the people who lost literally everything and needed the most help weren’t getting anything because they didn’t have supporting documents to get that paperwork.” Leona described her own experience applying for emergency supports when she was evacuated:

I went to the Kamloops area and I got my number and did the application, they said they would phone when they can start processing [my paperwork] and it was three days, and I was like, man like, what if people are sitting in hotels or don’t have a hotel room to go to, have no place to go, and they’re sitting in the cars waiting...? Like I was the lucky one. And there were people sitting in their cars for days.

People who were forced to relocate multiple times, Leona added, faced even longer waits for resources, and often didn’t have enough money for food “because their bank cards were left behind, and all those things.” M. Michell lamented that many of the people left stranded were young families with children, some of whom ended up having to camp outside with donated tents in the midst of the heat dome: “It was the fucking heat dome, it was hot here too and they were sleeping in tents, and they were outside 24/7.... and if you didn't have a car, how are you supposed to go to the emergency center to cool off? There were no modes of transportation, so they were cooking.”

Even when people were able to access supports, they were quite limited. For example, Sue explained how grocery vouchers were restrictive for families:

They had a \$750 voucher for this grocery store, and the grocery store was demanding that they use it all in one spend, that they couldn't carry it forward. So that was another big issue with when you got a voucher or the

grocery store you had to spend it all at once. So now we have families buying \$750 worth of food. So okay, I'm going to buy a giant bag of rice, I'm going to buy big potatoes, I'm going to buy cases of food, and it's all going to sit in my hotel room because I can't cook it. What do they do with it?

Sue noted that paper vouchers for specific restaurants were also problematic:

The restaurants wouldn't have any food to feed them, because they ran out of food. And so, they didn't have a voucher for anywhere else to go and eat. They literally had no food, nowhere to go, because you get a voucher for one restaurant, breakfast, lunch, and supper.

Further, the application for emergency supports was re-traumatizing. Retired Chief Patrick Michell observed, “Everybody's evacuation experience is personal to them. For some it was probably the most traumatic thing they've ever experienced, and every time they go to an emergency center, they're re-traumatized.” Gracie Henry recalls how people had to go renew their benefits every three days:

I'm like, their house is burnt down, do you really think they're going to go home in three days? Putting them through that exposure every three days was traumatic, because every three days you're reminded that you don't have a home and you have nothing, because you're having to refill ... Red Cross or the ESS forms.... I was like, I'm just coming in with the folder of everyone's renewals, and I'm going to do them.... I can have them consent via phone call or a letter or something, but they don't need to be coming in every three days ... it's not fair, because you know what, they burst into tears, and

then they're crying, and then the whole day is crap, and then, you know, they got one good day where they kind of get their mind off it. Then the next day they're going back again.

Gracie was not the only one that stepped in to address serious gaps in access to benefits. Sue described how NVIT took on significant responsibility and financial cost to ensure the safety of evacuees who were not able to renew vouchers, particularly when the nearest ESS (a 10km drive away), was closed unexpectedly, leaving evacuees stranded and uncertain where to go:

Myself and our President made the call that there was no way we were ever going to ask anybody to leave, given the situation. And if they couldn't get an ESS number or an extension because of the bureaucracy of one ESS shutting down and then not knowing where to go for another, we were never going to have that impact them, because they were already displaced and had lost everything. So, we had people staying up until September. We documented and kept track. We kept their first ESS file form on hand, and then just kept track of how long they stayed, and if they left etc.

NVIT made sure people were housed, provided meals, and hired needed security, accruing a \$90,000 bill. But the school has significant trouble being reimbursed, at one point having to contact the Ministry of Advanced Education to try to advocate on their behalf with other government actors. "We even got to a point where we were like, you know what if we don't get it back," Sue remembers, but adds that the cost was worth it, because "we were there, we helped the community." It was over a year, however, before *NVIT was reimbursed.

Interviewees recommended that governments fund navigators to help evacuees access benefits and ensure immediate access to emergency funds that can be easily accessed by registering through a simple on-line platform that is available all year round. This is also key to ensuring people do not fall through the cracks. Elder N'kixw'stn, for example, was so busy helping other people amidst the chaos of evacuation, she didn't realize she needed to register with ESS for benefits. She recalled, "I started paying for my own way, and that took all my pensions together." The end result was months of personal financial difficulty as she covered costs for temporary lodging and personal needs after having lost her home in the fire, all because she did not know she needed to register with ESS in the midst of the chaos of the fire.

Need For Immediate Mental Health And Cultural/Spiritual Wellness Resources in Wake of Disaster

Nlaka'pamux people identified a need for mental health and wellness resources in the immediate aftermath of disaster.

Pauline H. described the state of shock many were in after fleeing the fire:

I was at the arena meeting the people at the door...and just kind of directing people, because they were coming in in droves and just like zombies.... Some of them were just standing outside like they didn't know what to do, like, everybody was just in shock. I was in shock myself. Like, I could barely function. But I was thinking I was better off than them so I needed to help them. And one person came in and sat down.... He was burnt, his hair was all burnt one direction. He had second degree burns on his face; his clothes were burned. He was dirty. He was like, full of soot. And he just sat there and didn't talk to anybody. He was in so much shock."

*Sue also noted: "it's my understanding that they've now changed it where they can do it e-transfers per day, so they now get a per diem e-transferred to the individual."

Over the course of a few days, by sitting and talking with him, Pauline was able to help him open up. When he came to, he wanted to share his story of what had happened to him and share pictures he had taken of the fire. Pauline said she couldn't yet handle looking at the photos, but she sat with him and listened to his story. Thinking back on it, it still makes her emotional to this day.

Looking back on the Lytton fire, Sue said, there were no mental health resources present to help people process their trauma:

There was literally people coming in with burnt clothes on for days because they were in serious crisis and just suffering from PTSD and ... there was people there volunteering but again, there was no support provided for helping people navigate what they just experienced, right, like, I've heard some of the stories of people running to escape and not knowing if family members survived and I just think of like that whole situation and all of those people, you know, like hundreds and thousands of people dealing with that, there is no help from, you know, the mental health like the provincial government or federal government. I mean, I won't say there's none, but it wasn't on the ground, it wasn't in the front lines that we saw it.

Lack of access to traditional and cultural resources for wellness made this lack of mental health resources even worse. Pauline Henry shared, "I'm that person like...I need to be out in the bush. That's just...where I felt good. You could smell the nature, fresh air, whatever. Right? Now I don't do that because it's all burnt, and our river is destroyed."



Damaged structures are seen in Lytton, B.C. after a fire destroyed most of the village on June 30. Photo Credit: Darryl Dyck / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Not only are land-based healing options now more limited, but cultural supports such as from Elders and traditional healers were often not available. Sue reflected:

Because of the impact of the fire and the amount of people who were impacted, our resource people that we use, because here at NVIT we have an Elders' Council, we have 16 Elders who are readily available for support and resources, half of them were the ones who were impacted. So, it was really challenging to draw them in, to provide those, so like we couldn't, we couldn't even ask them to provide support. And then our Elders, other Elders, were so attached to the people who were impacted that it was very challenging for them to be that support person as well.

Sue shared that First Nations Health Authority was an important resource in filling this gap in support: "They did send in cultural people to come and do brushing and ceremony, and just to be there.... That was a good piece."

M. Michell noted that non-Indigenous medical resources were also lacking or difficult to access. Pre-existing issues like the lack of access to family doctors made it difficult to get needed medication or referrals, and the COVID-19 pandemic conditions made walk-in clinics less accessible. While there are free counseling services available by phone or on-line, she noted, many people don't know how to access them, or when they did, they faced long wait lists. When people were able to get a session, it often wasn't able to provide the support they needed, she said. "You're only allowed a 45-minute session, and most of it is just background stuff. You're not even working on what you need to. It's more...trauma dumping, and then your session is over with no tools being given."

In the absence of needed support, M. Michell said, people were left to cope on their own. "Those first few days, people were hungry, they were traumatized, and they were left alone. And they're still that way, sadly, a lot of them and they're just holding on to this trauma for like two years." Some she added, self-medicate, they drink, do drugs, or adopt other forms of coping which often cause harm to themselves or others.

Pauline underscored how disaster experiences can also trigger past trauma, adding to the need for mental health and wellness resources: "The federal government really needs to look at the fact that when it comes to trauma, it's continual. Our people were already traumatized, from the residential school and having it in Lytton. It affected every single person in our community, you know, and we're just starting to recover from that and then all of a sudden this happened." Leona added that between the COVID-19 pandemic, the announcements about the unmarked graves of children at Residential Schools, and multiple fires, the stressors have been constant, and the toll is making itself known in increased substance use and overdose deaths, as well as in more violent domestic disputes.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of supports being available for as long as people need them. M. Michell noted that the frequent news coverage of the fire, and the sharing of photos and video footage of the destruction on-line and in news media meant that survivors were constantly being re-triggered. Even in the absence of specific triggers, the trauma can persist. Gracie described how her mother woke up every morning for three months and had to re-realize that she could not go home: "it was an everyday event, like half a day would be gone to her being re-traumatized because she woke up and thought she was dreaming every single day."

The long-term displacement created its own unique mental health needs as well. Retired Chief Patrick Michell explained:

It's one thing to be evacuated temporarily, but it's another thing to be evacuated, knowing that your home and hometown is gone. That means you're not an evacuee, which connotes you're leaving and coming back. By 5:45PM on June 30th, I knew I was a refugee. As a refugee in a first world country, I'd lost my home, I'd lost my hometown.



Stacked fencing and hydro pole installation in the Village. Photo Credit: Nonie McCann

Need For Mental Health and Cultural/ Spiritual Wellness Supports For Long-Term Volunteers and Frontline Responders

Nlaka'pamux people working on the front lines to support their families and communities did so with little to no support and continue to lack access to necessary mental health and cultural/spiritual wellness supports.

Sue shared:

I wasn't individually impacted, like my home was not impacted in either of these situations because I live just out of town above the river, high enough where there was no damage. I didn't have to evacuate, because we're on septic and well, so we were okay. But... because I was now a helper and I was in those moments...helping other people through their trauma and anxiety after about a year, it impacted me immensely where I'm still struggling with anxiety and PTSD just from being a helper, you know, and listening to everybody's stories and helping them walk through and helping them navigate and get supports. And there is no help, I can't, I literally am still on a waitlist to get a mental health clinician and that's not okay.

Sue said she is "trying not to be in constant crisis mode," but the anxiety is difficult to manage, especially because of the cascading disasters that occurred after the fire, with flooding and more fires. "I was dealing with anxiety and panic last year...where I'm not able to, wasn't able to leave my house," she said. While Sue did talk to a doctor and "ended up in the hospital a couple of times," Sue emphasized, "it's that mental health support that is really lacking." Sue said her "saving grace" has been her culture and connection to land: "Turning to my medicines and turning to the land and turning to the water...doing my prayers and eating properly and sleeping properly to be able to manage panic attacks."

Pauline likewise remembers the toll of the immense, constant work of emergency response, starting with the Lytton Creek Fire. "[I] think two weeks after the fire I was feeling like I needed help...I'm holding people up that are crumbling in my arms. And I was feeling like, I started feeling like, I don't know if I can do this." But the work continued. "I was busy every day all day," she said, for months on end, "and we didn't get one day off. We were so busy." Further, through it all, Pauline had to evacuate herself multiple times. She said, "We were in the help mode and then all of a sudden, we're getting shipped to Kamloops.... Then we had to evacuate again when the floods came. So it didn't stop."

Gracie, echoed these sentiments: "There was not one [resource for wellness or support], we couldn't even get funding for us to do a wellness day...I'm like, what do frontline workers do then?... we just need something for us that's just us, where we can turn our phone off." Gracie noted that the result of lack of rest and mental health supports for frontline workers was burnout, and an inability to function in a trauma-informed way: "People were spending countless hours and time away from their own families. And it, it made people change, like people were saying things that they wouldn't normally say. And then, now their reputation is tarnished because...they're at a burn out state."

Gracie attributed her own resilience in being able to continue to maintain professionalism in the midst of impossible circumstances to the training she received on trauma-informed practices working with Indigenous communities, particularly the Indigenous Focused Orientation Training (IFOT):

I really strongly recommend that anyone that's dealing with First Nations communities and is thinking about going into an EOC role or the ESS that they are required to take that IFOT training.... I was the only one on our team that had that training, and I was the only one that was able to just

keep pushing through. You're taught so many ways to protect yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally, and spiritually, through that program when you're talking to people that have been traumatized.

Need For Support For People With Disabilities And Older People

Nlaka'pamux people spoke about the ways in which people with disabilities and older people did not receive the care and supports they needed to ensure their safety and wellbeing during and after the Lytton Creek Fire.

When news of the fires first spread, people were most often worried about how older loved ones and loved ones with disabilities would be able to evacuate safely. There was a lack of planning for transport options well-adapted to the needs of older people and people with disabilities. Gracie, for example, described the challenges of getting an Elder home to safety:

[The Elder could] barely even get into a car. My truck's 6 inches lifted with 35-inch tires on it. We don't have a ladder, we're like, how are we going to get her into the car? So, we didn't get to her until midnight, it took us five and a half hours and she was in shock. She didn't know that her house burnt down. She didn't know that the town burned out. She was wondering why there were so many people at the relief center, because we went there just to try to grab some things that I knew she would need, that I didn't have. So, we managed to get her into my vehicle, and she was like, just put a pampers on me because I'm not going to be able to get out and go to the bathroom, and it's a six-hour, like five-hour ride.

There was also a lack of emergency housing adapted to the needs of older people and people with disabilities. Interviewees

recounted challenges with having to house older people and people with mobility challenges in housing that was not accessible for them because it required being able to walk up stairs.

Interviewees also identified the need for trained emergency response staff able to support people with disabilities in a trauma-informed way. Sue explained that trauma presents very differently for all people, but especially for people with disabilities. She observed a lack of people with the training and knowledge to be able to provide needed support:

We had people with disabilities who were in our housing complex. My specialty area is working [with] and supporting people with disabilities so I was able to help...ensure that they felt that they had the supports in place, but it was only because...I was noticing that they were wandering around, and that they weren't really connected to anybody, so they were just dropped off here and said, here, here's your room, figure it out on your own.

Sue noted that her personal background and expertise enabled her to help in these situations and to identify the need for intervention, but that may not be true for others. Sue underscored the need for foundational understanding of disability as well as someone with more specific training on crisis intervention, trauma, and disability "on every volunteer team" to ensure that needed support is available. Sue said that the intersection of disability and Indigenous identity makes the need for this type of support even more pressing in Indigenous communities:

Thirty percent of all Indigenous people across Canada identify as living with a disability. Those are diagnosed people. So, if we think of Indigenous people as a whole, there is a whole area of individuals who are undiagnosed

because of where they live, because of living in rural communities, because of lack of access to medical systems to get diagnoses. So that's a really important piece of ensuring that not only for people with disabilities, but people, you know, like Elders that need that extra support.

The consequences of lack of support can be lethal. Interviewees attributed the death of at least one Elder with chronic health conditions to the disruption of displacement. Pauline described losing her sister in the months after the fire:

I always thought to myself, if that fire never happened, she would still be here. Because it totally disrupted everything in her life. Everything. you know, she was on a regimen for her medication.... Disrupting that schedule, put her downhill and she didn't survive it, which is very unfortunate...I lost my sister, and my kids lost their aunt. And she was a big part of our family. She was more my mom than my sister.

Gracie, meanwhile, expressed alarm at the lack of health supports for Elders like her mother who require mobility supports upon returning to Lytton First Nation after the fire.

I asked my mom, I was like, how are you guys being supported? She went home in February, and she's like, well, we're promised all these things, but we don't see anything. She actually went back into the hospital a month after being back in Lytton, because she didn't have the support that she needed.... I sent a big letter, because I was like, you know, you guys put all these promises that my mom is going to be okay going home, and it took one month before she was back in the hospital. It's like, that falls on you guys as a community saying that you guys have everything that you need to support community members that are

ill already or elderly. If you're not, then just say that, that's okay, too. It's like, it's okay to say that you can't support them.

Gracie said her mom is thankfully out of the hospital and back home and "she seems to be doing better." Her mother is also receiving more support now, including regular check-ins.

Need For Youth Programming Post-Disaster

Nlaka'pamux people expressed concern that youth have been left unsupported, particularly as communities try to recover.

M. Michell, 28-years-old, remarking on the difficulty of processing the trauma of the fire and related displacement, said:

I feel like everyone's just frozen. Or not, okay, let me rephrase that, the adults are frozen, our elders are frozen, and our youth, from a youth perspective, they're fucking pissed...they're like, no one's helping me.... They're angry, they're living through this, too, but their parents aren't available to talk about it.... They can't come as a mom and dad, go to their kids and say, let's talk about this fire, that was very scary... they're just so traumatized.

Pauline echoed these sentiments, noting that the fire took away the available sources of community, positive activities, and connection from youth. "Lytton didn't have a community center. We already had nothing," Pauline said, "Now we have no town, no community... no restaurants, no activities...no schools, no sense of community whatsoever." There also was no ability to go fishing or hunting on their traditional lands because everything burned up. "You can't hear a bird sing, because there is nothing."

Pauline and M. Michell both remarked how this dynamic has resulted in many youth turning to drugs and alcohol, resulting in increased

addictions, youth incarceration, and deaths. "It's hit every single family that I know, either somebody in their family overdosed and died, or they overdosed and survived and are addicted," Pauline said.

M. Michell notes that it's not just youth that are turning to drugs and alcohol, but that they are also dealing with the impacts of seeing adults in their life who were sober and on the *Red Road fall back into patterns of drinking and substance use after the fire: "I feel like over the last 15 years so many people got sober. And in the new generation that Gen Z and Alpha weren't seeing that same alcoholism that I grew up in. And now I think they're back to that...everyone's boozing. The kids are starting to booze really young again."

Pauline noted that Lytton is having events again now that there is a hall to host them in again, "but it's too late for some of those kids, they're not coming home, they're not coming back because they're dead."

Need For Greater, More Coordinated Recovery and Rebuilding

Nlaka'pamux people expressed exhaustion and frustration at the slow pace of recovery after the Lytton Fire, and shared how prolonged displacement has only increased the toll on individual and community wellbeing.

Sue summed up the situation:

We're a year and a half, almost two years out, and there's still people who don't have any answers for what's going to happen or what's taking place. And they still want to go home. That's their home, they were born and raised there. They have their family there, and they want to go home. And I know that there's just not a lot of help for

rebuilding and repairing, and I don't know if it's because of the location of Lytton: that it was such a small, little community – you could drive through it in three seconds when you're going through on the highway – but if this happened in Vancouver, or if this happened in Kamloops, or it happened in Kelowna, damn straight they would be in there rebuilding immediately. This did happen in Kelowna, people's houses burnt, entire communities burnt, and they were in there rebuilding so fast. But now we have this small, isolated, rural community, majority First Nations. And there's very little movement. That's a human rights issue. That's an Indigenous rights issue.

The slow pace of recovery has significantly impacted people. Interviewees expressed deep fear at the prospect of losing community connection due to prolonged displacement. Pauline Henry remarked, "If everything went smooth and everything was in order, I'd be a whole different person and so would my whole community. We're angry, we're upset, we're hurt, we're lost. We have no sense of community..... I have friends in Lytton that aren't on Facebook, I have no clue where they are." Some worry this loss will become permanent as people opt to move to other locations. In particular, interviewees worried about the loss of Elders who may pass away before they can return, or who may need to move elsewhere to ensure access to needed medical treatment and supports that are not currently available in Lytton. And it is not just Elders making this choice, Leona said. "I know others that they've simply just up and moved, you know, they knew they weren't going back, there's nothing to go back to, so they had to come to terms with that and start all over again."

* "The Red Road is a phrase frequently used by Natives signifying a deep commitment to living life in the best way possible — with an intrinsic respect for others, oneself, and creation and a dedication to worshipping the Creator. It also means turning one's back on addiction to drugs, alcohol and anything else that may damage yourself or others." -- <https://theredroad.org/story/history/>

Some also remarked on the loss of family connection. Retired Chief Patrick Michell, for example, observed, "One of the things that losing an intergenerational home, six bedrooms, two floor house is that the family, we don't gather anymore. We do, but it's not the same. You know, sitting outside a camper you make do, right?"

The slow pace of recovery also has devastating impacts on youth, M. Michell observed, because they are forced to drive through the burnt remains of the town on their bus ride to school:

I literally have to plan my way to get to Kanaka, I have to be there at least half hour to 40 minutes ahead, because I will have an anxiety attack every time I drive through, because I grew up there, that was my hometown.... I see our youth are so angry, and I'm just like you fucking drive through this every day to go to school and this is how I'm feeling? Imagine you're 12 years old, you're going through puberty, you already going through all this shit, but every day you're driving past the pool, every day you're driving past your old hangout spot, and you know what gets me is having it sit the way it is for two years, the fucking street signs are still burnt up, there's benches there burnt, like get rid of that. It should have all been cleared out. Why would you leave visual reminders of the fire being there?*

The slow pace of recovery has also taken a significant toll on the financial security and development of the community. In January 2022, the Insurance Bureau of Canada (IBC) warned that the estimated costs of the fire in Lytton had increased, reaching \$102 million in insured damage, up from the initial estimate of \$78 million.** "With the number of claims largely unchanged, the significant delays in



*Nlhaka'pamux Child and Family Services Culture Camp
Photo Credit: Chrissy Thomas*

and reconstruction are a key driver of the increased costs," IBC noted. With many homes not being insured, the total costs of the devastation caused by the fire are likely much higher.

Pauline H. said, "When it comes to rebuilding our town, it's going to be a pretty small town. There's not going to be a lot of businesses or buildings because people are spending the money that they have on rebuilding or what have you for their home, because I think it was only 40 percent of the people in our whole community have insurance. Now they're in fighting with the insurance people because of the time lapse. So, there's a lot of things...that are affecting people so they're not even going to go back to the community."

Sue also noted the impacts on local businesses that are still displaced, including businesses that provide essential services. "I think one of the daycares who provides an immense amount of work, you know, like they did infant, toddler, 3-to-5, after school care, home visiting,

* Visual reminders of the fire began to be cleared out April-May 2022, per correspondence with Village of Lytton councillor Nonie McCann. The interview presented here captured a snapshot in time.

** <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/insured-losses-in-lytton-bc-increase-to-102-million-834053641.html>

support for children with special needs, and they still are displaced. They don't have a building yet. We're two years out. Like, the province of BC and Canada have to do better.”

Amidst it all, Nlaka’pamux people and people of Lytton are persevering.

“The resilience of that town and the town people is crazy,” Gracie observed. “I've never seen something like that happen in my life, and I really didn't think that people could be as strong as they were...because the town is so broken already from residential school that I just really thought that town would flat-line, but they didn't, and they're doing as well as they can.”

The lessons learned in 2021 also led to stronger subsequent emergency responses. Kanaka Bar for instance ensured that all community members evacuated to one hotel during a 2022 evacuation, only returning to fight the fire in the community after ensuring members were safe. The Village of Lytton reports being grateful for the border-less generosity of neighboring communities that did not draw lines around membership or non-membership in offering support.

But rebuilding takes resources and leadership from government decision-makers. “We need to find a way to come together as a Nation,” M. Michell observed. But support from the provincial and federal governments is also key: “[Rebuilding regional water infrastructure] will be a lot of work and I can already see it. Well, who's going to pay for that? ... LFN ain't got money. They've got to build the whole town and homes, but it's something we need. So,

is that something the government can do? I would hope so.”

Interviewees remarked on the frustrating way overlapping jurisdictions seem to get in the way of action. “It's a tale of five jurisdictions,” Retired Chief Patrick Michell explained, “federal, provincial, regional, municipal, First Nations.... All five governments need to be in the same room, at the same time getting into the same boat, pointed in the same direction, and stroking with a paddle at the same time. That's all we have left. Somehow, we need to walk away from the silos that our governments have created.... until that shovel hits the ground then the Lytton story is one that's just bogged down. Bogged down in what? In an inability of decision makers to make decisions, an inability of people to work together.”



Canyon with fall leaves. Photo Credit: Kanaka Bar Band Lands Department

INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

When the Lytton Creek Fire broke out, it exposed how resource inequity in disaster situations can exacerbate emergencies and undermine rights. The origins of the fire illustrate the effects of not recognizing Indigenous ecological knowledge as legitimate and necessary and, therefore, not providing support for, or in some cases, restricting stewardship.

Lytton's experiences show that neglecting Indigenous sovereignty and rights in federal and provincial disaster response frameworks results in undermining rights. Under-preparedness is demonstrated by holes in frameworks, lack of consultation and cooperation with Indigenous communities, and harm to communities' water access and ability to steward their lands, all of which undermine the community's health and socioeconomic development.

Following the disaster, community members reflected on the inequalities within response efforts which made the trauma and damage done to their homes, community, and sense of safety worse. Community members have spoken out about the lack of communication during the early hours of the fire. Chair of the Nlaka'pamux National Tribal Council, Chief Matt Pasco, reported that emergency authorities took hours to respond to requests for assistance; persons actively surviving the crisis were forced to take on responsibilities that should have been that of the BC Ministry of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness, among other provincial agencies. The experience at Lytton also demonstrates that prolonged support - in years, not months - is required for Indigenous communities to recover from the trauma and deep grief over the devastation of their land, and rebuild.



Community bbq at the St Barnabus Church. First community gathering in the Village after the fire. Photo Credit: Jennifer Thoss

When comparing Nlaka'pamux experiences of displacement during and after the 2021 fires against federal obligations under the United Nations Declaration Act, our analysis suggests that disaster events have implications as follows:

Consultation and Cooperation

- We find that impacts in disaster events are amplified when Indigenous peoples are not actively included in and considered by emergency management efforts. The rate at which the 2021 fire spread, combined with the lag in communications, contributed to the devastation of the fire: at least 20 structures were already burning by the time the first reports of the fire were made.
- During the first 14 hours of the Lytton fire, Indigenous communities reported having no support from the provincial government, instead taking on emergency response efforts themselves. Government officials later noted insufficient communications; however, this acknowledgment of inadequacies in communications does not account for the reality that even when communication occurred, response efforts were slow and underwhelming. Consistent with other areas of federal law and policy, disaster response efforts lack mechanisms for consulting with First Nations to identify and address potential vulnerabilities in emergent situations. Frameworks for consulting must be proactive. Canadian Pacific Railway resumed service after the fire despite Lytton communities identifying train cars as a likely cause of the fire and even protesting their resumption of service.

Culture

- Our analysis finds that disasters and environmental damage negatively impact cultural rights. Disasters such as wildfires separate communities and destroy land and sacred sites, undermining individual and community safety and agency.
- The rights of Indigenous people to access and practice culture are iterated in Articles 3, 5, 8, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, and 31 of UNDRIP.

Land

- Our analysis finds that legislation restricting controlled burns-like the Wildfire Fire Act, when enforced, not only violate stewardship rights but exacerbate risk, as controlled burns have been proven effective methods of clearing dead brush from the forest floor, reducing the velocity of spread in instances of wildfire.
- UNDRIP recognizes the importance of Indigenous peoples to make autonomous decisions about their land in Articles 25, 26, 27 re: "tenure systems," and 32.



River behind beach. Photo Credit: Kanaka Bar Band Lands Department

Health

- Our analysis finds that physical and mental health are undermined in disaster displacement events like wildfires. In addition to respiratory issues suffered by survivors, rates of mental health issues related to trauma, including PTSD, were reported. For example, parents reported needing to console children who survived the Lytton wildfire when triggered by smoke in later wildfires.
 - Rights to physical, mental, and spiritual health are recognized in Articles 7, 17, 24, and 32 of UNDRIP.
- The case study finds that water access in Indigenous communities remains a concern when considering community health as well as disaster mitigation, especially in the context of wildfires. Indigenous communities are disproportionately under water advisories: 73% percent of First Nations' water systems are high to medium risk of contamination.* These risks are made worse by disaster and/or infrastructural vulnerabilities. In the Fraser Canyon, spring runoff onto already old and inadequate infrastructure creates supply and sanitation issues. Supply issues make fire mitigation nearly impossible: in July of 2022, one year after the Lytton Creek fire, the Nohomin Creek fire approximately 1.7 kilometers northwest of Lytton burned an estimated 3,745.0 hectares of land during which time Lytton found themselves struggling to mitigate the disaster, as water pump systems, which were dependent on electricity, failed as the fires had knocked

the electricity out. The Nohomin Creek fire destroyed six homes and necessitated the evacuation of 80 people. The Nohomin is demonstrative of a lack of federal and provincial grappling with the 2021 Lytton fire. Infrastructure and emergency preparedness once again were unable to meet the communities' needs. It also exemplifies how disasters, especially those which result in displacement, have compounding impacts. Many community members in Lytton were still living in hotels, unable to return to their community when Nohomin broke out. A community ravaged by compounding disasters, without the support structures to improve infrastructure or other disaster preparedness measures, cannot reasonably exercise autonomy over its economic development.

- Economic development is recognized in Articles 3, 20, 23, and 32 of UNDRIP. Rights to housing and sanitation are recognized in Article 21 of UNDRIP. Health is recognized in Articles 17, 21, 23, 24, and 29 of UNDRIP.

*"Safe Water for First Nations," The Council of Canadians, June 22, 2023, <https://canadians.org/fn-water/>

CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD

Dealing with disaster is not new for the Nlaka'pamux Nation. Elders like N'kixw'stn James survived residential school, and their communities continue to overcome the legacy of that trauma. Fire, as well, is a specific threat the Nation has confronted before. "Fire is not new to our community," Lytton First Nation member Pauline Henry, noted, "but the scale of harm is changing." Leona notes that disasters like the Lytton Creek Fire are no longer "a hundred-year occurrence, it could happen at any season and... communities are starting to be more in tune with that and starting to train up people and do prevention and start to have those collaborations between the jurisdictions on how to work together."

But more is needed at every level to address the harms in Lytton and prevent similar or worse from happening in the future. "You've got an entire community wiped out in one incident," Retired Chief Patrick Michell emphasized. "These types of incidences are going to occur nationally and internationally with greater frequency."

This knowledge of what is to come, he says, makes figuring out the Lytton recovery and rebuild even more essential, because it heralds what will come again in the future, and how it will or will not be addressed. "Our governments federally, provincially, municipal, have to find out what people need," he said. "Because that's what the state should be providing."



June 30, 2023 two year anniversary of the fire walking down Main St for the first time since the fire. Photo credit: Nonie McCann.

As stated by Elder Pauline Michell:

"Truly, one day we can all look back at this and be open to learn and take the good out of this and appreciate; take the negative to learn from and how to make it better for healing. Trauma comes in many different forms, and it is only up to individuals to take a moment to acknowledge a trauma moment to begin their own healing to move forward.

We may not by far be the same person prior to the fire and floods; however, we can prepare to be more prepared within this everchanging atmosphere and adapt, be resilient and explore, brainstorm together for better support and become united and stronger. These stories and many more we continue to share will be the legends for our children and great grandchildren for the next seven generations to come.

As we continue to strive to work together with a variety of different experiences we can become more prepared, united and stronger as a community and nation."

From our hearts to yours, thank you for your willingness to walk in our journey.

Sharing

*I wrote a post
about the past year
the lonely impossibility
of it all
mentioned
that due to bureaucratic delays
my insurance isn't enough to rebuild
said
maybe healing
and maybe art
but Klowa's doors are closed*

*and the world reached out
to thank me for that space
to hold me in my mourning
to life me with support
the strength of community
through loss
and through grief
is the blanket
draped gently
over my shoulders*

*"Sharing." From Fandrich, M. (2023). Burning Sage:
Poems from the Lytton Fire. Caitlin Press.*

Kanaka Bar Indian Band

General inquiries to Chief and Council can be sent to these numbers or addresses:

2693 Siwash Road, Kanaka Bar, BC V0K 1Z0

Mailing Address: PO Box 610 Lytton, BC V0K 1Z0
Kanaka Band Office Number: 1-250-455-2200

Toll-free number: 1-844-655-2200

Fax number: 1-250-455-2201

reception@kanakabarband.ca

Front cover: Aerial view of Kumsheen with fall leaves. Photo credit: Kanaka Bar Band Lands Department

Back cover: Regrowth after the fires in Kumsheen. Photo credit: Pauline Henry

