

# Journal of Indigenous Research

Full Circle: Returning Native Research to the People

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Volume 8  
Issue 2020 March 2020

Article 1

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March 2020

## The Struggle for Indigenous Representation in Canadian National Parks: The Case of the Haida Totem Poles in Jasper

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### Recommended Citation

Johnston, Jason W. and Mason, Courtney (2020) "The Struggle for Indigenous Representation in Canadian National Parks: The Case of the Haida Totem Poles in Jasper," *Journal of Indigenous Research*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2020 , Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26077/7t6x-ds86>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir/vol8/iss2020/1>

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## The Struggle for Indigenous Representation in Canadian National Parks: The Case of the Haida Totem Poles in Jasper

### Cover Page Footnote

To the Indigenous participants and the participants from Jasper National Park, thank you. Without your knowledge, passion and time, this project would not have been possible. While this is only the beginning, your contributions to this work will lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the complexities of the issues surrounding Indigenous representation in national parks.

## **The Struggle for Indigenous Representation in Canadian National Parks: The Case of the Haida Totem Poles in Jasper**

National parks hold an important place in the identities of many North Americans. They protect some of the most beautiful landscapes on the planet and are home to a wide variety of wildlife species. Every year millions of national and international tourists visit Canadian national parks to take in the immense beauty and to learn about Canadian histories. National parks play an important role in preserving vital ecosystems, however that was not the original intention behind the creation of these protected spaces. Early national parks, including Jasper National Park (JNP), were designed to promote nation building and increase railway profits through making these areas more attractive to tourists (Binnema and Niemi, 2006). While borders of the national parks in the Canadian Rockies were altered on several occasions to accommodate resource-extraction industries, these parks were originally promoted as “pure,” “untouched” wildernesses (Mason, 2014). Therein lies the source of many issues that would develop over the 20<sup>th</sup> century which denied the reality that diverse Indigenous groups actively managed and relied on these lands since time immemorial. In order to achieve the ideal “empty” landscapes that railway companies and national park officials promoted to tourists, park officials began to forcibly remove Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands inside these newly established parks (Snow, 2005). Ironically, tourism industries also provided opportunities for local Indigenous

groups to return to their territories. For example, Nakoda Elders and leaders strategically built relations with tourism entrepreneurs and local politicians as active participants in regional tourism economies. These relations ensured that local peoples regained access to sacred sites and traditional territories that were redefined as the Rocky Mountain parks (Mason, 2014). JNP is one of the oldest (established in 1907) and largest national parks in the Canadian Rockies, spanning 11,228 square kilometers. In a contemporary context, JNP management has a unique set of challenges, but also many opportunities to work with local Indigenous peoples (MacLaren, 2007).

While our research examines a number of issues found in the Rocky Mountains park's educational programming, in this article we focus on one particular representational challenge, the Haida totem pole that sits at the center of the town of Jasper. The pan-Indianism that homogenizes Indigenous cultures in Jasper is further endorsed by the Haida totem pole, which promotes northwestern coastal Indigenous cultures that have no traditional connection to the region (Johnston, 2018). Meanwhile, there is nothing to acknowledge local Indigenous cultures. This is token representation of Indigeneity is misleading for visitors to the park. Indigenous cultures and histories presented through interpretive programming and signage from non-Indigenous perspectives can form large gaps in knowledge as Indigenous peoples are not consulted about what aspects of their cultures should, or could, be shared. Guided by Indigenous Methodologies

(Smith, 1999; Kovach, 2009), this research was based on 18 personal interviews with management of Jasper National Park (**Table 1**) and an informal body of Indigenous representatives referred to as the Jasper Indigenous Forum (**Table 2**).

**Table 1**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position with Jasper National Park</b>
Greg Deagle ( <i>Métis</i> )	<i>Administrative Assistant for the Indigenous Affairs Unit</i>
Mark Young ( <i>Swampy Cree</i> )	<i>Indigenous Affairs Manager</i>
Gloria Keyes-Brady	<i>Interpretation and Information Centre Coordinator</i>
Brian Catto	<i>Interpretation Coordinator</i>
Joshua Ibelshauser ( <i>Algonquins of Greater Golden Lake First Nation</i> )	<i>Information Centre Coordinator (former Indigenous Interpreter)</i>
Alan Fehr	<i>Field Unit Superintendent for the Jasper Field Unit</i>

*Jasper National Park Management Participants*

**Table 2**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Nation/Ancestry</b>
Barry Wesley	<i>Bighorn Chiniki Stoney/Nakoda</i>
John Wesley ( <i>Elder</i> )	<i>Bighorn Chiniki Stoney/Nakoda</i>
Seona Abraham	<i>Bighorn Chiniki Stoney/Nakoda</i>
Charlie Abraham ( <i>Elder</i> )	<i>Bighorn Chiniki Stoney/Nakoda</i>
Raymond Cardinal	<i>Sucker Creek First Nation and Paul First Nation</i>
Christopher Gall	<i>Métis Nation of BC</i>
Laurian Gladue	<i>Kelly Lake Cree Nation</i>
George Lampreau	<i>Simpw First Nation</i>
Christina Plante ( <i>Elder</i> )	<i>Métis and Cree</i>
Loretta Belcourt	<i>Lac Ste. Anne Métis</i>
William Snow	<i>Stoney/Nakoda Nation</i>
Rick Ouellet	<i>Descendant of John Moberly</i>

*Jasper Indigenous Forum Participants*

We address the following questions in this short article: 1) why is the history and presence of a totem pole in JNP problematic; and 2) how can relations be improved between local Indigenous groups and park management to take advantage of educational opportunities that will benefit numerous groups?

### **Problems with Indigenous Representation in Jasper**

JNP management currently collaborates with 26 Indigenous communities who have traditional ties to park lands. These communities make up the JIF, an unofficial advisory committee that provides input to park management. Although park management works with many diverse groups, Indigenous representation in JNP is severely lacking. The park histories, that are shared, overwhelmingly profile European narratives. These highlight European explorers and discoveries, while simultaneously glossing over the rich Indigenous histories of the park. The interpretive and educational programming that attempt to address aspects of local Indigenous histories and cultures are done so from a Eurocentric point of view (Youdelis, 2016). This serves to perpetuate stereotypes of Indigenous cultures and histories, such as the idea that all Indigenous peoples are the same, interacting with Europeans in the same ways, without distinct cultures or languages. As was common in tourism industries throughout Canada, these forms of homogenization of Indigenous peoples through general statements about their cultures and simplified representations caused considerable harm to Indigenous communities

(Snow, 2005; Mason, 2015). Rather than acknowledging their distinctiveness, these token Eurocentric perspectives undervalue Indigenous histories in Canada and fail to embrace the vast diversity of Canada's Indigenous peoples. The Haida Totem Pole in Jasper exemplifies these issues.

### **The Totem Poles**

When JNP was established, the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway brought in the first Haida totem pole, known as the Raven Totem Pole. This pole stood for almost one hundred years before being replaced by the Two Brother Totem Pole in 2011. The basic origins of the first pole are known, but the mindset of those who erected it is not clear. Parks in the past were primarily tourism focused and Indigenous art was certainly a draw for tourists (Mason, 2015). Especially during the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the desire of tourists to experience Indigenous art and culture fueled a global industry where misrepresentation, misappropriation and theft were common (Deloria, 1998). Totem poles were prized representations of Western North American Indigenous cultures and consequently were regularly targets of these industries (Ames, 1995). According to Stoney Nakoda Elder John Wesley (personal interview, October 11, 2017), people did not think of how the erecting of a Haida pole would be received negatively in Jasper. The lack of consideration for local Indigenous cultures

speaks to the Euro-Canadian perspectives of Indigenous peoples when Jasper was first being established.

In the midst of reconciliation discussions in the park, the 45ft tall Haida totem pole, remains a highly visible structure, that continues to misrepresent local Indigenous cultures. Millions of tourists that arrive in Jasper have little knowledge of Indigenous cultures or histories and they rely on information provided to them in places like national parks to foster experiences with Indigenous cultures. This lack of knowledge of Indigenous cultures is also prevalent among residents of Jasper townsite. As Brian Catto, the Interpretation Coordinator at JNP, points out there remains little knowledge and awareness of Indigenous peoples among local residents (personal interview, August 29, 2017). Raymond Cardinal, representing Sucker Creek and Paul First Nations in the JIF, explained that most park management and members of the JIF agree that the totem pole serves as a way to reinforce stereotypes about Indigenous cultures (personal interview, November 14, 2017). As there are not many opportunities to increase Indigenous awareness among Jasper residents, structures like the totem pole can lead to uniformed ideas. The Field Unit Superintendent for the Jasper, Alan Fehr, explained that proper cultural awareness training for staff could provide them with knowledge that can be disseminated throughout the town of Jasper, which is predominantly residents of Euro-Canadian descent (personal interview, September 22, 2017). Mark Young, Swampy Cree, is the Indigenous Affairs Manager of the park. He feels it



is unfortunate to have a totem pole in Jasper, as it continues to confuse the understandings of traditional territories (personal interview, August 28, 2017).

The totem pole makes cultural awareness more difficult as it is harder to communicate the importance of Indigenous connection to this place when the only symbol of Indigenous culture does not accurately represent any of the local Indigenous groups.

Even though the current totem pole was erected in 2011, there remains no recognition of any of the local Indigenous groups who are part of the JIF. It appears that there is disagreement over whether or not to accept the Haida totem pole. Deagle, a Métis member of the Indigenous Affairs Unit for the park, spoke of the pipe ceremony that took place in Jasper on July 15, 2011 between some of the local Indigenous communities and the Council of the Haida Nation. The Haida were welcomed as an honorary member of the Jasper Indigenous Forum, but Deagle suggested that there are Indigenous communities who still have issues with the totem pole (personal interview, August 24, 2017). Many JIF members were concerned that the totem pole would spread misinformation about which Indigenous peoples actually lived in Jasper and that it also did not represent any nations who currently reside in the province of Alberta, as opposed to the Nations who now live in the province of British Columbia. This sentiment was echoed by Fehr, who argued that JIF members were more focused on the development of their own cultural representations in the park to educate visitors than on the totem

pole (personal interview, September 22, 2017). Deagle stated that eventually local Indigenous peoples will have an opportunity to celebrate their cultures in proximity to the totem pole (personal interview, August 24, 2017). Laurian Gladue, Kelly Lake Cree Nation, noted that for many JIF members, the progress on the development of their own representations is far too slow (personal interview, November 16, 2017).

While there are initiatives underway to improve relationship between Indigenous forum communities and JNP management, the issue of the totem pole does not appear to have gone away. Some Indigenous forum members see the totem pole as a reminder that the government will do what it wants, regardless of connection to place, regardless of whose traditional territories it is (Young, personal interview, August 28, 2017). Having a Haida totem pole in Jasper has upset some of the local Indigenous communities. As Gladue suggested, it misrepresents Indigenous cultures to visitors and locals, and it denies local Indigenous groups the ability to present their own cultures in their own territory (personal interview, November 16, 2017).

### **Recommendations for the Totem Pole: Remove It or Add Context**

There is no historical reason to have the current Haida totem pole (Two-Brother Pole) in Jasper, other than the fact that there has been a totem pole (Raven Pole) in the park since JNP was established in 1907. Wesley, J. explained that it

does not relate to local Indigenous communities (personal interview, October 11, 2017). However, it does act as a reminder to local communities about how decisions used to be made. Josh Ibelshouser, from Algonquin of Greater Golden Lake First Nation, is the Information Centre Coordinator for Jasper National Park, and believes it can also be a reminder of how decision-making processes can be improved by consideration and consultation with local Indigenous communities (personal interview, August 30, 2017). There is a general understanding, among park management, that the totem pole is not entirely respectful of local Indigenous groups, but there is little notion that the pole will be removed (Catto, personal interview, August 29, 2017). Despite the acknowledgement by some JIF members and JNP management that the totem pole is not culturally relevant or appropriate to local Indigenous cultures, there does not appear to be any plans to remove it or add clarifying details to its interpretive panels to address the cultural discrepancy it poses (Deagle, personal interview, August 24, 2017). While removing the totem pole does not seem to be an option that JNP management is pursuing, there remains a different step to take in shaping the representations of local Indigenous cultures.

To address this misrepresentation, the interpretive panels located next to the totem pole should include content that reflects the history of the totem pole's arrival in Jasper and its lack of connection to Indigenous groups whose traditional territories it stands on (Wesley, J., personal interview, October 11, 2017). These

interpretive panels relay the story of two Haida brothers who travelled to Jasper. While the panels refer to the pole raising ceremony and the Haida multiple times, they fail to explain which local Indigenous groups participated in the ceremony or where they were from. The local Indigenous peoples are simply referred to as “regional Indigenous” communities. Ibelshausen contends that this type of acknowledgement of the history of the totem pole could be more beneficial than simply removing it. Our research findings suggest that unless the totem pole is removed entirely, this situation could be rectified by adding interpretive panels to clarify the lack of cultural significance it has to local Indigenous groups. This will allow visitors to better understand that local Indigenous cultures are distinct from token or stereotypical symbols used to represent Indigenous peoples across Canada. As it stands, the totem pole is lacking in context and explanation for its presence and it does not acknowledge the Indigenous groups with traditional connections to JNP. The consequence is the continual misrepresentation of local Indigenous cultures that reproduce the colonial mindset and violence that the park was founded on and communities were displaced to begin with.

Until recent changes to the National Parks Act (2000) in Canada, Indigenous peoples were banned from practicing their traditional subsistence practices and ceremonies within national park boundaries (Langdon, Prosper, & Gagnon, 2010). Changes have been minimal when they have occurred at all. However, any progress has stemmed from shifting government policies due to

land claims, historical treaties and supreme court victories in favour of Indigenous land rights and title (Turner and Bitoni, 2011). While Indigenous land rights are being recognized across Canada, incorporating those rights in practice is an incredibly slow process. The results of this research assert that increasing consultation with Indigenous groups over interpretive content could debunk negative stereotypes and also form better relationships between local Indigenous peoples and JNP management. Our findings encourage park managers to rethink representational images to account for the impacts on local Indigenous peoples and reconsider the educational opportunities to help reconcile the past and move forward to address some of the concerns of Indigenous peoples in Jasper and those encountered by many Indigenous communities more broadly throughout North America.

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