First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Experiences:  
*The case of Sandy Lake First Nation*

*by*

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• Research assistant Charles Anshinabie.

• The members of Sandy Lake First Nation who shared their experiences.
The First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership

Goal

- To examine how Aboriginal residents and communities have been affected by wildfire evacuations and identify ways to reduce negative impacts of wildfire evacuations on Aboriginal people.

https://www.eas.ualberta.ca/aue/?page=home
Wildfire evacuation in Canada

Sandy Lake
First Nation
Ontario far north
- 17 square miles of Federal Reserve land - Treaty 5
- It is fly-in community- gets accesses to ice road during winter to the town of Red Lake (appr. 400 kms)
- Registered population 3,014 (ANANDC, 2015)
- Median age 20.5
- In 2011 (during the community wide evacuation) total population was about 2800.
Wildfire history near Sandy Lake First Nation
Research objectives

General objective

To investigate how Sandy Lake First Nations residents were affected by the 2011 wildfires and wildfire evacuations

Specific objective

• Examine how issues related to pre-event evacuation preparedness influence evacuation experiences

• To examine what attributes of individual, community characteristics and Aboriginal social context influenced evacuation experiences, either positively or negatively.

• Propose ways to improve future wildfire disaster preparedness and response in remote Aboriginal communities.
Research methods

• Community-based Qualitative case study
  • Community participation
  • Meeting chief and council (initial field visit summer 2014)
  • Discussion about the research project and meet people who had a management role during the evacuation
  • Community advisory committee established
  • Research assistant recruited

Former Sandy Lake First Nation Chief Adam Fiddler (right) and Henok W. Asfaw – August, 2014
Field work - July/August 2015

- Data collection
  - In-depth interviews
  - Focus Group Discussion
  - Direct observation
  - Document Review

- 56 interview

- 2 Focus Group discussion

With deputy Chief Robert Kakegemic (left) and Councilor Fabian Crow (right) - August, 2015
Table 1: Distribution of interview participant for the resident interview identified using a combination of purposive, snowball and convenient sampling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewed residents</th>
<th>Recommended by the community research advisory committee and the research assistant (snowball sampling)</th>
<th>Recommended by interviewed participants (snowball sampling)</th>
<th>Identified from the list of 2011 evacuated members of the community (purposive sampling)</th>
<th>Identified from “Sandy Lake First Nation evac info” closed Facebook group (purposive sampling)</th>
<th>People randomly met by the researcher (convenient sampling)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evacuated residents</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residents who stayed behind</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coding of interview data: a combination of these techniques

• Descriptive coding (close to the respondent’s terms)
• Pre identified topics/themes used in the interview guide
• Analytical or more theoretical insights drawing from existing literature
• Nvivo 10 qualitative data analysis software to facilitate the coding of transcribed interview transcripts, link data, clarify themes and concepts.
The 2011 Sandy Lake wildfire evacuation

• Early in July 2011 => wildfires were burning forests surrounding Sandy Lake

• Wildfires were advancing by the west side towards the community airport

• **July 18** – partial evacuation was declared (stage one-evacuees)

• **July 19** – full evacuation
“We have our local radio through which everybody get information and obviously you could really smell and see all the ashes falling, and they were kind of reddish, you could really tell it’s really bad” (Participant 019).

“I don’t think anybody was really prepared with the evacuation […] some people even were talking about going to their camps” (participant 040).
“I was concerned because of medical issues […] I was concerned about my granddaughters; two of them had asthma, along with my wife” (participant 002)

“At that time […] my son had respiratory problems growing up. So when they declared evacuations my wife and my son were the first one on the list to be evacuated and I was supposed to stay behind” (Participant 027).
Adequacy of time to prepare for the evacuation

(28 [70%]) < 1 hour
(7 [17.5%]) 2-3 hours
(5 [12.5%]) had to leave immediately.

“Yeah, me and my husband, and kids, we left, it was all last minute too ‘cause we were just at home, sleeping. And then all of a sudden, about 10 o’clock in the morning they were announcing on the radio that they needed people evacuated because it was like raining ashes at that point already” (Participant 016).

“I was at the store and they came and they said to me ‘go home, we’re taking you out right away. The plane is leaving in about an hour [...] I barely had time to pack. By the time I got home, I was still packing when that van was there picking us up, come on, the plane’s coming in” (Participant 002).
“I don’t think anyone was prepared for that fire to happen like that. I know it was chaos, they were just grabbing people off the roads here saying well you got to go on this plane, you’re on this plane, you know it wasn’t set up properly. But then again you know, nobody wasn’t prepared for it. I don’t think even the people that were handling the family situation wasn’t prepared for it too” (participant 31).

“We weren’t following, there was no set guideline at that time, and we weren’t following a book [Emergency Management Plan] saying here’s what you do in this case. Basically we just took charge right from the beginning, and it was common sense, things that we did, no brainer things that OK here’s a step, here’s what we need to do next” (Participant 020).
Organization of the evacuation

The lack of community emergency plan resulted in:

- Some medically vulnerable elders sent without a care giver.
- Some grandparent unable to evacuate with their child/children
- Family separation
- Some elders forgot to take essentials (e.g. medicines, puffers and so on)
- Community evacuation liaisons

Source: (http://www.ctvnews.ca/ont-sending-mobile-medical-unit-to-help-fire-evacuees-1.673527)
Leaving the community

- July 18-20, 2011 full evacuation
- Canadian Forces CC-130 Hercules aircraft
- EMO, MNRF, AANDC
- It took about 21 Hercules
- Stage one evacuees were sent to Sioux Lookout and Thunder Bay
- Stage two evacuees were scattered to eleven towns throughout Ontario and into Manitoba.

The evacuation ‘displaced and scattered’ the community members

One of the key things was that our people were scattered, they were displaced. It started with phase one evacuation babies would go out and the mothers, and in the next phase of the evacuation, the father would go out with the older kids and I had one family where the mother was in Winnipeg and the father was in Moosonee, near Quebec, and one of their kid was in Ignace. They did not know where each other were [...] so it created a lot of panic and fear that people were concerned about their families so families were split [...]” (Participant 020)

Photo: Evacuees waiting for transport at Thunder Bay airport hunger, Ontario

Photo source: http://www.ctvnews.ca/ont-probes-report-families-split-up-in-fire-evacuation-1.674355
This characteristics of the evacuation has resulted in major adverse consequences:

- It made communication and coordination challenging.
- It increased the chance of family members’ separation and complicated the task of communicating and reuniting separated families.
- It negatively affects community cohesion and support services.
The evacuation ‘displaced and scattered’.....cont’d

1. The challenges of communication and coordination

   “When people were put on the plane, they didn’t know where they were going. For you, if you want to go somewhere, and you’re going on the plane, you know where you’re going, right? You know your destination. But these people, they were just put on the plane without knowing where they were going” (participant 044).

1. Effects on family separation

   A lot of times people would get on the plane here and would not know where their final destination would be. And that’s not a good feeling [...] it was an awful experience, not only not knowing, but being split up [with family members]. That part wasn’t a pleasant experience” (participant 001)

2. Effects on community cohesion and social support

   The evacuation breaks up families, it breaks up that ‘community-ness’, how you feel home [...] that’s difficult because if there’s family issues and children issues, and elder issues, women issues, [...] And if you’re up there the host community has to address those issues, and that’s not the way we would do it here” (participant 45).
• Evacuees were hosted in a variety of accommodation types

• Meals were provided for all evacuees in places where they were staying.

• while some participants, particularly elders, missed the traditional foods that they would normally eat.

• In some hosting communities donations (such as clothes, shoes) were provided


Premier McGuinty and Grand Chief Beardy talk with Sandy Lake First Nation Elders, Thunder Bay
Staying behind in Sandy Lake

- Approximately 21 members of the community stayed behind to maintain essential services and help protect the community.
- Some assisted the firefighters deployed in the community in setting up sprinkler system to protect houses.
- Took turns to drive around and patrol the community, assist the chief in providing updates.
- Some were assigned to look after the hydro and water treatment plant; and a few others served as cooks for MNR firefighters; and feeding dogs and other pets.

Background photo source: [http://www.simonteakettle.com/sandylake.htm](http://www.simonteakettle.com/sandylake.htm)
People who stayed behind photo Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0ZTDam5Xg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0ZTDam5Xg)
Most stage-two evacuees returned home after two weeks while stage-one evacuees remained evacuated for three weeks.

The repatriation took eight days

A community feast was held at the traditional site as a welcoming ceremony for community members.

Photo source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGj8NsXqxG0
Factors that affected the experience of evacuees

Stage-one evacuees (elders)

(1) The lack of caregivers

(2) The lack of support from homecare staffs in the hosting communities;

(3) Leaving behind medicines and other essentials

(4) Overcrowding of hotel rooms;

(5) Coping with health issues in the absence of family support;

(6) The need for traditional foods, language barriers and cultural competence.

“[…] I was running into problems because I did not have any of our homecare staff come on this flight with us and so I did call Sioux Lookout the homecare office there and they couldn’t assist me because a lot of the Elders are sort of bedridden and mobility is very limited to them and I’m only one person and so I had to make another call and I called Thunder Bay and Thunder Bay responded fairly fast. We got some workers down by that evening; I needed help with hygiene care of these elders and the chronic and so I really appreciated them coming down from Thunder Bay to give us a hand on our elders” (participant 006).

“A lot of the time, they do not know or it's hard to describe what their past history is and they may not know what their medicines are. If you ask them what pills they are taking they identify it with color only. If they go out and see a medical professional, they wouldn't know what that is so they take the photo copy with them” (participant 028).
Perception of negative experiences at the host communities: stage-two evacuees

1. Issues related to accommodation conditions: lack of sleeping cots, unsanitary conditions, uncomfortable cots, lack of privacy, and noise

2. Financial problem

3. Lack of activities for evacuees, particularly for children and youth

4. Negative relation with the host community manifested through a perceived problem of racism

5. Concern over the condition of homes, property and pets
The findings from this study further revealed a number of other factors that contributed to evacuees’ positive experience during their stay in the host communities some of which include:

1) Reception and support from the members of the hosting communities;

3) Communication updates and Chief leadership
Lasting Effects

- Lingering bad memories
  - ‘feeling of never again’
- High level of concern for wildfires risk and disruption caused by it
- Increased awareness of risk and a learning lesson for future evacuation

“With this evacuation I’m sure it’s in the back of everybody’s head, they haven’t forgotten, it’s just right there. Everybody has their own experiences, how they felt, and I’m sure it’s still with them. ‘It’s been how many years?’ and I feel like I’m just going through it again […]” (participant 003).

“I think there is a feeling that "never again". People do not want to go ever again. It is not because they are treated badly out there, it just because that is an awful thing to go through. I think people would be more reluctant next time. It was chaos; families were really struggled because families were torn apart. Daily life was turned upside down. But the important thing is people were safe. But people do not want to go through again” (participant 020).
Recommendations

- Up-to-date community evacuation plan
- Resources and personnel evacuation planning and preparedness.
- All parties involved in emergency response need to adhere to provincial standards in Ontario’s Mass Evacuation Plan: Far North and municipal level service level evacuation standards.
- Maintaining family and community unity; the importance of family care for frail Elders
- Hosting communities need to prepare to address the needs of evacuees
- Financial support for evacuees
For more information on the First Nations Wildfire Evacuation Partnership and for a short summary of this research as well as other researches completed in other FN, please visit our website

https://www.eas.ualberta.ca/aue/?page=home

Thank you!

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