Collaborative Conservation: Reconnecting People, Land, and Bison through the *Iinnii Initiative*

by

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ABSTRACT

COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION: RECONNECTING PEOPLE, LAND, AND BISON THROUGH THE IINNII INITIATIVE

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The Iinnii Initiative is a Blackfoot-led conservation effort to restore free-roaming bison to Blackfoot traditional territory around the Waterton-Glacier region in Alberta and Montana. It has brought together a collaborative network of stakeholders and rightsholders across various borders and presents itself as a unique example of Indigenous-led collaborative conservation. However, jurisdictional, cultural, and socio-political complexities create some challenges.

Through practicing a decolonized methodology, this research explored factors that inform collaboration between actors, challenges to the Initiative, and ranchers’ attitudes towards bison reintroduction. Investigating and understanding these elements supports the active efforts of the Iinnii Initiative, offers lessons from which other conservation practitioners can learn, and may also assist in facilitating dialogue between various settler and Indigenous individuals and groups. Such dialogues can enhance relationships with ranchers to mitigate challenges of reintroducing bison, foster reconciliation among different social groups, and reinforce the Iinnii Initiative as a positive model for collaborative conservation.
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Chapter 1 Thesis Introduction and Context

“But, to me it just hit me that these calves, they left as calves and they wanted to return as calves and grow up here. It just hit me right there, standing there looking at those animals, that all of these things that happened up to that point, they made that happen. [Iinnii] made that happen. Bringing people together, agencies together, organizations together, they’re the ones that made that happen and I truly believe that.” – Ervin Carlson, Blackfeet Buffalo Program Director, President of ITBC

“The buffalo is walking ahead of us and creating new dialogue” – Mike Bruised Head (Ninapiiksi, Chief Bird), Kainai Elder

1.1 Introduction

With the mountains out the passenger window, the sun shining down, a cool wind coming across the plains and foothills, I drove south through the Blackfeet Reservation from Browning on Highway 89. It was a refreshing spring day in early June. I took a left on the first road next to the Two Medicine River, driving past old buffalo jumps, riparian habitats, and fresh spring grass. A small lake came up on my right after a little while longer, which was my sign to take the next dirt road on the right.

“If you go past the cattle guard, you’ve gone too far”, I remember someone instructing me on direction. You are not given addresses out West, just landmarks and approximate distances the good old-fashioned way – something to which, as an Easterner, I had to get accustomed. The dirt road, not lacking in rocks and bumps, was a good off-road test for my 2008 Ford Fusion, and as I went down around a small hill I came out upon the AMS Ranch. I could see a herd of buffalo¹ up to my right, slowly and powerfully walking north together towards the fence line. It was time to move the Blackfeet buffalo herd from their winter pasture to the summer pasture near East Glacier, and the buffalo – Iinnii – were ready to go.

After some introductions, casual chatter, an opening prayer and food – all important parts of any Blackfoot² event I have come to learn – we drove up to the road to witness the first

¹ I use the colloquial term, buffalo, interchangeably with the scientific name, bison, and Blackfoot word, linnii. In North America, there are two sub-species of bison, the plains bison (Bison bison bison) and the wood bison (Bison bison athabascae). The bison that are being reintroduced to the Waterton-Glacier region are plains bison but are frequently referred to locally as buffalo and thus when using the terms bison, buffalo, or linnii, this is the sub-species to which I am referring.

² When I refer to the Blackfoot Confederacy, language, culture, way of being or worldview, I use the term Blackfoot as it is all-encompassing and embraces a common identity between members of each Blackfoot nation or tribe in the Confederacy.
crossing. We were sitting in our cars as they eventually crossed the road to the field on the other side. A thunderous, and powerful herd of buffalo, running 15 feet in front of you is a sight to behold and one that might normally stir up a sense of unease, but this was different. I felt safe and grounded, and as I looked around me, everyone was in pure awe and amazement.

Cheri Kicking Woman, the Blackfeet Innii Initiative coordinator had tears in her eyes – tears of happiness – and she said that all the organizing, hard work, and sleepless nights were worth it just to see the buffalo making their march. We stood there for a moment in a comforting embrace as we watched Innii calmly move forward on their path. These buffalo have a beautiful story; it is a story of loss, of adventure, of relationships, and of finding one’s way back home. It is a story that I am going to try and tell in my own way, from my own experiences conducting research in Blackfoot country.

I open this thesis in narrative form because personal experiences and the story of this research process are important parts of situating the analysis in my own experiences. “The social sciences are concerned with humans and their relations with themselves and their environment. [They] are founded on the study of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p.xxiii). I understand and come to know the world around me through experiences and stories, and consequently it is partially through experiences and stories that I also present my understanding of this world; research is part of this inquiry and sharing. I resonate with Clandinin and Connelly (2000) when they say:

“Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it...narrative thinking is part of the phenomenon of narrative...narrative method is a part of narrative phenomena. Thus, narrative is both the phenomenon and the method of the social sciences.” (p.18)

This research journey resulted in a number of transformative experiences that shaped my understanding of myself, the world around me, and bison, which I will explore further in Chapter 2. Therefore, narrative form is valuable to help the reader “see” what I was seeing and how certain experiences helped to shape my understanding of the research and subsequent analysis. This also reflects a Blackfoot way of knowing as described by Angela Grier (Waterton Dialogue 2017):

Blackfoot people, despite the tribe or nation they come from, often refer to themselves as Niitsitapi, which means the Real People. I use the name Blackfeet when specifically referring to the Blackfeet Nation in Montana and use the respective names when referring to the other Blackfoot Tribes.
“…when we visit our elders…they’ll tell us [stories], and we realize that one story was really strong, and that is what we came here for.” – Angela Grier, Piikani

The story that I share in the introduction was one of those moments that also helped me understand better the significance of bison and their return to Blackfoot country. It was one of the numerous experiences, or stories, during the research that held significant strength, which is why I chose to share it.

The Iinnii Initiative, led by the Blackfoot Confederacy, is an effort to reintroduce free-roaming bison to Blackfoot traditional territory in and around Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. It is centered on and driven by Blackfoot values and practice, seeking to enhance the cultural, physical, and economic health of Blackfoot communities, youth education, and ecological integrity. This initiative has brought together a collaborative network of rights holders and stakeholders across various borders primarily including the four Nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Glacier National Park, Waterton Lakes National Park, the State of Montana, and to some extent, some other non-government organizations (NGOs), and local ranchers. The Waterton-Glacier region in Blackfoot territory is fragmented by reservation, protected area, ranch, and international boundaries. This creates jurisdictional, legislative, social, and managerial complexities, which necessitate effective collaboration among diverse actors.

The Iinnii Initiative is a rare example of Indigenous-led conservation that stands in contrast to a history of colonial conservation practice, which has been a force of dispossessing and alienating Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands (Stevens 2014). It seeks to reconnect people, land, animals, and strengthen culture by transcending boundaries, rather than the colonial approach of separating nature from people through constructed borders. Therefore, the aim of this research is to contribute to the development of decolonized conservation practice and research by 1) using a decolonized research methodology and 2) understanding the Iinnii Initiative as a potentially positive model for decolonized collaborative conservation.

3 Aligning with Blackfoot protocols of respect and knowledge sharing, I identify Angela by name to appropriately recognize her, the insights she shared, and her role in shaping this research. I do this with other participants who gave their consent to be referenced by name. I anonymize identities of participants who requested to remain anonymous or if identifying them in a quote may cause potentially negative repercussions for them and their relations with others.
1.2 Literature Review

The issue of conservation in Canada and the United States cannot be separated from settler colonialism. In order to understand the Innii Initiative as a form of decolonized conservation governance within this historical and present colonial context and the evolving field of conservation, I draw on three primary bodies of scholarship: political ecology, the political ecology of conservation governance, and settler colonialism.

1.2.1 Political Ecology

Mainstream environmental research has been critiqued for its apolitical approach, which often fails to identify and critically engage with the social, economic, and political factors that influence human-environment relations, and neglects power and control (Bryant 1997). Political ecology is a framework and mode of explanation that challenges the historically “apolitical” approach to understanding ecology and seeks rather to understand ecological change and human-environment interactions via the intersections of social, political, and economic influences and institutions (Robbins 2012). It has gained traction over the last few decades and offers itself as a “hatchet and a seed”, dismantling and deconstructing previously apolitical and problematic narratives while creating space for cultivating new and more nuanced possibilities and explanations (Robbins 2012, p. 98).

Through the use and expansion of political ecology, five main theses of the practice have emerged: degradation and marginalization; conservation and control; environmental conflict and exclusion; environmental subjects and identity; and political objects and actors (Robbins 2012, p. 22). This research engages with multiple elements of this practice including struggles over knowledge, power, politics, and justice that underpin environmental conflict (Watts 2000) in addition to environmental narratives and their political dimensions (Stott & Sullivan 2000 as cited in Robbins 2012). This research also engages political ecology as a lens to explore the relations between environmental actors and their changing landscapes and the drivers behind these changes. In other words, I look to political ecology as a lens to “examine the factors that shape relations of power between different social groups the biophysical landscape, and global processes” particularly how participatory conservation is produced through discourse and institutions (Bixler et al. 2015, p.168).
1.2.2 Colonial Conservation & Blackfoot Relations with Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks

Political ecology has also been instrumental in destabilizing the discipline and practice of conservation and offering critiques to improve upon its conventional top-down, fortress conservation approach, and move towards more collaborative and holistic forms, particularly ones that engage Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems. The nature-culture dichotomy that positions humans and nature as existing separately pervades conventional fortress-model conservation and Western thought and was the underlying philosophy for the initial establishment of National Parks and protected areas in the United States and Canada (Cronon 1995). This “Old Paradigm” of protected areas is predicated on four main assumptions: 1) that they should be created and governed by states; 2) their purpose is for nature and biodiversity preservation and conservation; 3) this requires protected areas to be free of human habitants and human resource use, especially local and Indigenous communities; 4) physical coercion and eviction may be legally and morally necessary (Stevens 2014a, p. 36). The concept of preservation of wilderness is derived from a longstanding Western view that “wilderness” is a divine landscape of “pristine nature”, separate from the ills of human impact, and needs to be protected (Berkes 2012; Cronon 1995; West, Igoe & Brockington 2006).

These ideas are also reflected in the North American model of wildlife management that is shared by the U.S. and Canada. A few of its guiding principles include: “wildlife resources are a public trust…allocation of wildlife is by law, wildlife can be killed only for a legitimate purpose, wildlife is considered an international resource, and science is the proper tool to discharge wildlife policy” (Organ et al. 2012, TWS Technical Review). These views and ideas are largely situated in a Western perspective, modeled by understanding nature as something separate from humans and inherently “wild” that needs to be protected from human exploitation (Cronon 1995). It also reflects the idea of state-centered management that utilizes western biological and natural science methods and technology to monitor, objectify, control and manipulate natural habitats, wildlife populations, and how people interact with them (Bryant & Wilson 1998; West, Igoe & Brockington 2006); thus, it reaffirms the legitimacy of certain – mainly Western – knowledge systems, and the role of outside “environmentalists” and “experts” over Indigenous knowledge systems and people who have lived on and relate to those particular landscapes and animals (Rettie 2006).
This mentality and practice of state controlled conservation and protection of natural landscapes can be exemplified in places like the Mkomazi Game Reserve in Tanzania, and most U.S. or Canadian National Parks such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, Jasper or Banff – protected areas that were created through eviction of Indigenous peoples, and separated from human use, often in a militaristic or manipulative manner (Brockington 2004; Brockington & Igoe 2006; Rettie 2006; Robbins 2012; Stevens 2014b; Youdelis 2016). It is clear that such a practice not only erases Indigenous peoples from the cultural history of the land, but effectively disempowers them and marginalizes them from the land, its resources, economic benefits, and the management process (Brockington 2004; Goldman 2011; Stevens 2014b).

Particularly relevant to the Innii Initiative is the establishment of Glacier National Park and Waterton Lakes National Parks. Glacier remains a point of contention today as it was created after the Blackfeet and other neighboring Tribes such as the Salish and Kootenai were dispossessed of their traditional land through the Lame Bull and Hellgate Treaties, which opened it up for Western expansion and settlement (Farr 2001). From the 1880s through the 1900s, Blackfoot country in southwestern Alberta saw an influx of both Mormons fleeing religious persecution in the United States to southwest Alberta who eventually became integral in the development of agricultural irrigation and individual ranchers seeking available rangelands drawn by the idea of the Western frontier and the potential for capitalizing on international beef markets (Evans 1987; Rosenvall 1987). These socio-political, cultural, and economic changes on the landscape, and the surrender of land and limitation of Blackfoot livelihood through Treaty 7, indirectly, yet ultimately made way for the establishment of Waterton Lakes National Park further alienating the Blackfoot from their physical, social and spiritual relationships and responsibilities with and to the land and its beings.

The creation of Glacier National Park, in particular, neglected previous treaty rights and agreements established in 1895 between the Blackfeet and the U.S. government, and now limits Blackfoot use and access, while denying any decision-making power to the Blackfeet for what was and still is their traditional territory (Craig et al. 2012; Sholar 2004). Even though the establishment of Waterton is less openly contentious, it still lies on Blackfoot territory, demonstrates rather tokenistic Blackfoot engagement through storytelling and educational programs for visitors, and maintains no Blackfoot engagement in the management or decision-making process of the park. However, more recent projects in the park and on the Blood Timber
Limit, led by Earthwatch (an outside citizen science environmental research organization), have partnered with Kainai students and researchers while being guided by Blackfoot “traditional knowledge” (Eisenberg, Hibbs & Edson 2016). Furthermore, Waterton does engage with the Kainai and Piikani when it is time to cull the Park’s display buffalo herd, participating in ceremony, and providing the communities with live buffalo and meat (field notes 2017). Both Glacier and Waterton are home to important cultural and spiritual sites for the Blackfoot people, yet the existence of a formal co-management arrangement has yet to be seen. This alienates Blackfoot people from their physical, social, and spiritual relationships and responsibilities with and to the land and its beings (Craig et al. 2012; Farr 2001; Oetelaar 2014; Sholar 2004; Spence 1996).

Although the United States National Park Service (NPS) agency-wide goals and Centennial A Call to Action report claim to support Native American engagement (NPS 2015), and some co-management arrangements exist, it also appears the NPS is still reluctant to establish co-management agreements out of concerns that it will undermine conventional park management (Craig et al. 2012). Waterton Lakes NP’s management plan (2010) openly admits the presence and use of the Park lands by Indigenous peoples dating back to 10,000 years ago. It also claims to support efforts to culturally reconnect Aboriginal people with the lands and resources of the park by, enhancing relationships with Aboriginal communities, increasing the use of traditional knowledge, and establishing a formal Aboriginal advisory committee for park management (WLNP 2010). Waterton Lakes NP does hold cultural events with the neighboring Kainai and Piikani individuals, and there are some collaborative efforts regarding the Kainai Timber Limit and creation of the new visitor center (personal communication 2017, 2018). However, an Aboriginal advisory committee still does not exist and significant decision-making power regarding the park and its management still rest with Parks Canada. Even the Convention on Biological Diversity, which supports the notion of increasing local and Indigenous knowledge and involvement for sustainable development and maintaining biological diversity, effectively limits and delegitimizes certain forms of knowledge and fails to recognize Indigenous sovereignty (Reimerson 2013, COP-CBD 1996 [preamble, Article 8(j), Article 10(c), 17.2, 18.4]).
1.2.3 A “New Paradigm” of Conservation

As aforementioned, conservation has been led by the state, and an active force in the displacement and marginalization of Indigenous and local resource users from land, decision-making, and management process. This has led to a number of critiques with regard to unequal power relations (Bridge & Perreault 2009); the realization that non-state actors lack genuine involvement despite often being the most impacted by state environmental policies and decisions (Bryant & Wilson 1998; Robbins 2006); and increased calls to recognize, respect, and uphold the rights and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples (Notzke 1995; Stevens 2014; Watson 2013).

Over the past few decades, conservation practice has been working towards more collaborative efforts that engage other actors including market-based actors, NGOs, Indigenous communities, and other local resource users (Carroll 2014; Lemos & Agrawal 2006; Margerum 2008; McGregor 2011; Olsson, Folke & Berkes 2004; Wyborn & Bixler 2013). With these more recent actors have also come “hybrid” forms of governance that seek to decentralize and share power, decision making, and benefits between actors such as co-management between the state and local resources users (Berkes 2009), public-private and private-social partnerships (Lemos & Agrawal 2006), and community and NGO partnerships.

Co-management governance systems between the State and Indigenous communities range from the consultation of an advisory group of Indigenous elders or communities (Goldman 2011; Notzke 1995; Youdelis 2016), to the full engagement of Indigenous peoples and their values in the research, decision-making and policy creation process (Murray & King 2012; Notzke 1995; Watson 2013). Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site in British Columbia is an example of co-management between the Haida Nation and Parks Canada that has been identified as one of the strongest co-managed protected areas in Canada.

These various forms of collaborative governance can potentially be beneficial for all parties involved, leading to creative novel ways of conserving and accessing land, resources, and culture; however, they can also go wrong leading to more conflict, and at times perpetuate the marginalization of Indigenous peoples from their land and the decision-making process of conservation and resource management (Castro & Nielson 2001). Still present are indictments of continued unequal power relations, the lack of adaptive approaches and proper capacity building (Armitage 2005; Bradshaw 2003; Diduck et al. 2005; Olsson, Folke & Berkes 2004), the
minimization of local and Indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences resulting in the
disempowerment and marginalization of these resource users (Berkes 2009; Mattson et al. 2006;
Robbins 2006; Stevens 2014a), and tokenistic involvement of Indigenous individuals and
knowledge systems that does nothing to genuinely enhance Indigenous peoples’ self-
determination or control over their territory (Carroll 2014; Watson 2013; Youdelis 2016).

Despite the challenges, collaborative conservation efforts between Indigenous peoples
and the state, or NGOs, is particularly important for advancing reconciliation in light of settler-
colonialism and its influence on conventional Western conservation paradigms. It is possible for
shared governance to support and secure the rights, sovereignty, values, and policies of
Indigenous peoples and potentially become part of a process of reconciliation (Ross et al. 2011;
Stevens 2014a). However, it also has the ability to “diminish autonomy, and many people have
found that in practice they have been disappointed with power-sharing arrangements and the
degree of respect for their cultures, concerns, and rights” (Stevens 2014a, p.77). As ideal as such
partnerships may sound, there is an inherent flaw in “participatory” or “shared” governance
particularly in the Canadian context, in that it recognizes Indigenous peoples as stakeholders
equal to others, rather than constitutionally recognized rights-holders as Nations who originally
engaged with the land and resources before colonial intervention (von Der Porten & de Loë
2013). Needless to say, the realistic manifestations of the various forms of shared governance
often turn out to be less inclusive than originally planned and perpetuate the dominance of
Western thought while continuing to delegitimize Indigenous knowledge systems and
sovereignty. These shortcomings of co-management and governance are witnessed and
extensively studied in protected areas and wildlife management of East Africa (Goldman 2011),
but also in the United States and Canada (Watson 2013; Youdelis 2016).

It is easy to become cynical about this reality, however there are examples of successful
collaborative and Indigenous-led efforts in the United States and Canada that reflect a rights-
based “New Paradigm” of conservation where Indigenous peoples are recognized as rights-
holders, and they are actively participating in the biocultural conservation and management of
their land (Stevens 2014). Such examples can be seen in Badlands National Park and the shared
use and management with the Oglala Sioux (Craig et al. 2012), and the co-management of bison
in Yukon by Champagne and Aishihik First Nations and the territorial government (Clark et al.
2016). Indigenous-led management and assertion of sovereignty over traditional territories and
resources is also realized in Tribal Parks such as the Ute Mountain Tribal Park in Colorado, the Frog Bay Tribal Park in Wisconsin (Carroll 2014), and the Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Parks in British Columbia (Carroll 2014; Murray & King 2012). It is within such Indigenous-led examples that we see the affirmation and application of Indigenous knowledge systems in conservation that also challenges the conventional and colonial nature-culture dichotomy that has previously dominated the conservation psyche.

1.2.4 Relating to the Non-Human: Indigenous Ontologies and Knowledge Systems

Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being have been avidly explored by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars alike. I use the term Indigenous, in accordance to how Shawn Wilson (2008) defines it in Research is Ceremony, as referring “to the people and peoples who identify their ancestry with the original inhabitants of Australia, Canada and other countries worldwide” (p.34). It is “inclusive of all first peoples – unique in [their] own cultures – but common in [their] experiences of colonialism and [their] understanding of the world” (Wilson 2008, p.16). However, for this thesis, I refer primarily to Indigenous peoples in North America. I recognize that Indigenous knowledge systems and worldviews, though often sharing commonalities, are locally and contextually situated. Different Indigenous people around the world and different First Nations in Canada have their own distinct cultures, and thus there is not one homogenous “Indigenous” perspective or worldview. Many Indigenous scholars use the term “Indigenous” to encompass common elements among the worldviews of different Indigenous people (Little Bear 2000; McCue 2007; Nicol 2007; Wilson 2008), and so for ease of discussion I will do the same. I do not assume the following concepts apply to all Indigenous peoples; they are, however, useful in guiding and understanding the research and topics of this thesis.

Given that, I utilize Wilson’s (2008) articulation of a relational ontology where he posits that all things come into being, or become real, through relationships with other things, and thus reality is a set of relationships. Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing are relational, they are developed through their relationships with the “cosmos around us, as well as with concepts”, and all beings; knowledge is formed through relationships (Wilson 2008, p.73). Dr. Leroy Little Bear, an honored Blackfoot scholar, explicates knowledge from an Indigenous perspective as “holistic and cyclical; its languages are process and action oriented...[it] is about participation in and with the natural world” (Little Bear 2012, p.1). This is distinct from Western
knowledge systems which he defines as linear, singular, and where language is noun-oriented (Little Bear 2000; Little Bear 2012). Berkes (2012) defines Indigenous knowledge as the “local knowledge held by Indigenous peoples” (p.9), and within this broader realm, defines Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment.” (p.7).

This definition is a well-rounded helpful foundation that I think can be enhanced further by delineating that “TEK is much more than just a body of knowledge…TEK also encompasses such aspects as spiritual experience and relationships with the land. It is…a ‘way of life’; rather than being just the knowledge of how to live, it is the actual living of that life” (McGregor 2004, p.79). Kiera Ladner (2003) provides a helpful example of knowledge as a process that works through relationships with the land and its beings, by explaining how the Blackfoot live, structure their society and guide their relationships through an “ecological context of inquiry” where observations are made, questioned, and explored. According to her, “governance” is a relationship with “all beings within a territory, and it is about people establishing a relationship with a territory and learning from that relationship” (Ladner 2003, p.125).

In the Blackfoot worldview, medicine bundles are opened annually where songs are sung, prayers and blessings are requested and given, vows are renewed, dances are performed, all of which have been done the same way (or with minor variation because of the shift to a Western-dominant society) for thousands of years. These bundles, and the songs, dances, and medicine that come with them were given to the Blackfoot people by various animals or spiritual beings such as Beaver, Buffalo, and Thunder (Ewers 1983; Schultz 2002). Such knowledge systems and ways of life are cultivated from a perspective of being in relationship with the cosmos, the land, its beings and learning from them (Bullchild 2005; Ewers 1983; Ladner 2003; Little Bear 2000; Oetelaar 2014). The Blackfoot recognize the buffalo as a relative, and treat it as such, with a reciprocal respect that requires regular ceremonies, prayers, and songs to renew this relationship, and in return the buffalo agrees to give itself to the Blackfoot to sustain them (Oetelaar 2014).

Similarly, the Native Alaskan Koyukon Athabascan people hold a relationship with the migratory greater white-fronted geese and understand western wildlife biology and management practices (i.e. neck banding, tagging, etc.) to be harmful, disrespectful and “bother” the animals
causing them to leave and not return (Watson 2013). It is apparent that the axiology, or the ethic that coincide with these particular ways of being and knowing, reflects a respect and accountability to the relationship that exist between the human and the non-human animal being hunted or managed. Such concepts are foreign to many conventional biologists and wildlife managers, as is clearly seen in the North American Model of Wildlife Management previously mentioned.

This aspect of human-animal relations is further explored in Cree and Kluane First Nation hunting cultures. Specifically, the relationship between the hunter and the non-human animal being hunted is highlighted and recognized as a process of reciprocal exchange and respect that is developed over years of experience with the land and the animal being hunted (Berkes 2012; Nadasdy 2007). These non-human animals are no different than humans, in that they maintain their own agency, and make the decision to give themselves as a deliberate, reciprocal act, to a hunter that has demonstrated this respectful relationship overtime (Watson 2013).

Indigeneity, and knowledge, is a situated, “lived, practiced and relational” experience that is “rarely seen as legitimate on its own terms” (Hunt 2014, p.129), and is not often considered “equally valid to Western Sciences” (Watson 2013, p.1086). Therefore, even though there have been various efforts and conversations to engage with Indigenous knowledge systems and peoples in collaborative conservation and co-management initiatives and research, such knowledge systems are often abstracted and misappropriated out of their situated context. Further, there is still the sense that Indigenous knowledge systems are seen as illegitimate or inferior, and a challenge to collaborative policies, practices, research and ideas that are still dominated by Western-scientific thought (Berkes 2012; Goldman 2011; Nadasdy 2007; Watson 2013; Wilson 2008).

Scholars, such as Berkes (2012), challenge this view by demonstrating how Cree and Dene traditional knowledge and systems of monitoring and hunting caribou not only provide some of the same information as Western scientific methods of caribou monitoring, but also exemplify an effective form of social learning and adaptive management that is based off of a learned and evolved ethic and respect for the animals. The Chisasibi Cree of James Bay also have a traditional subsistence fishery management system that actually solves some of the conservation problems of contemporary fishery management and practices (Berkes 2012).
Berkes (2012) is explicating that traditional Indigenous knowledge and Western practices do not need to be at odds with one another, and can in fact be complementary, and should take part in an adaptive learning process together to develop a more comprehensive and ethical management system. Advancing this “New Paradigm” of collaborative conservation governance, where the rights, knowledge systems, and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples is affirmed and supported, is necessary in order to heal broken relationships that are the result of failures and transgressions in conservation’s settler-colonial history.

1.2.5 Settler-Colonialism

Early relations between First Nations in North America and Europeans were quite different from what we see today. Interactions go back to the 1600s, but one of the primary phases of treaty making and relationships between First Nations and Crown was the “Peace and Friendship Treaties” from 1725 to 1779 (Wallace 2013). These relationships and interactions were founded upon a sense of nation-to-nation respect. First Nations were seen and treated as self-governing, self-determining peoples who had their own traditions, laws, and knowledge, and with whom the British could (and needed to) cooperate. There was no land surrender in these early treaties, they often contained some sort of reciprocal exchange, and the negotiations were not solely determined by the British, but rather a cooperative agreement (Wallace 2013). This period resulted in numerous “peace and friendship” treaties and agreements. An example is the Two Row Wampum (gus-wen-tah) between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (in present-day Southern Ontario) and the Crown. It represented a covenant between each group of people living together, but separately, not interfering with each other’s path (McGregor 2011; Porter 2002). This philosophy of “noninterference” is also expressed by Leroy Little Bear (2000) as a “respect for others’ wholeness, totality, and knowledge”, which further manifests itself in the value and practice of sharing. These early pacts and treaties represent a shared recognition between Indigenous people and Europeans that the other was a sovereign “nation” (Milloy 2008; Porter 2002), self-determining and autonomous.

However, after the Seven Years War and the Royal Proclamation of 1763, the British felt as though they no longer needed the assistance of First Nations (Wallace 2013). They expanded their influence and control over lands and began to change the way they viewed their relationships and treaties with First Nations. These understandings became misconstrued to
create power inequalities and subject First Nations to the Crown and its authority, resulting in the settler-colonial relationships and structures that Indigenous people are still trying to navigate today (Vowel 2016; Wallace 2013). This manifested itself in various ways such as the dispossession of land and forced removal of Indigenous people from their traditional territories (particularly through the numbered treaties in the 1800s), and assimilation, abuse, and cultural genocide through the Indian Act and residential schools (Ewers 1983; First Rider et al. 1996; Hornaday 1889; Milloy 2008; Wallace 2013). Such national level policies and practices played out in Blackfoot territory in an equally traumatic fashion.

The mid-late 1800s was a tumultuous time for the Blackfoot Confederacy and many other plains First Nations. It was during this time that bison were nearly extirpated due to increased hunting pressure upon westward expansion of settlers, the incentives of the fur trade, and the introduction of the repeating rifle (Hornaday 1889). The extermination of bison was also a strategic move to eliminate a primary source of food, shelter, clothing, and spirituality of the Blackfoot people that would ultimately force them to give up their traditional lifestyles and move to reservations. In 1877, the Canadian government established and signed Treaty 7 with the Blackfoot Confederacy (Kainai, Blackfeet, Piikani and Siksika), Stoney and the Tsuu T’ina (Sarcee) nations. This treaty resulted in the loss of most of these nations’ traditional territory in what is present day Alberta and forced the people of these nations to reserves.

Treaty 7, like many of the other numbered treaties, contained vague and confusing terminology and was understood differently by both the Crown and the First Nations represented (First Rider et al. 1996). It is accepted by most elders of these nations that Treaty 7 was supposed to be an agreement of land and resource sharing, and peaceful coexistence in exchange for the goods and provisions offered by the Canadian government – there was no expectation on the part of the First Nations involved that they were “surrendering” their land (First Rider et al. 1996). This understanding reflects Blackfoot ideologies and practices of “noninterference” and “sharing”, further supporting the reality that the Blackfoot and other First Nations were not interpreting the treaty through a Western lens. Furthermore, the idea of private property and ownership of land is a Western-European concept that was implied in this treaty resulting in confusion, misinterpretation, and unjust dispossession of land.

In addition to the loss of land – a central component of settler-colonialism – Indigenous people across North America experienced severe physical and cultural genocide. Through
government policy in both Canada and the United States, residential schools were established to “kill the Indian in the child” or more specifically colonize and assimilate Indigenous people out of their alleged primitive, pagan, and uncivilized ways into what was considered proper Western society and customs (TRC 2015). Children were not allowed to speak their language, practice their customs, or wear traditional garb; they were forced to adopt Western-Eurocentric education and religion, and were often physically or sexually abused (Grier 2014). The results of such a system (and continuation through more subtle policies and mindsets) have left many Indigenous peoples lost, disassociated, and disconnected from their culture and their communities, physically and spiritually damaged, and continuously marginalized. These wounds reverberate through the generations, bringing with them a variety of mental, social, economic, and health struggles that are exacerbated by policies that still exist and limit Indigenous self-determination.

Declarations such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2008), and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) are examples of attempts at righting some of these colonial wrongs. These declarations and commissions have heightened the conversation on reconciliation, recognizing and affirming Indigenous rights and sovereignty. The UNDRIP (2008) specifically recognizes the right for Indigenous people to renew and practice their culture, the right to be involved in decision-making for matters that may impact their rights, the right to maintain and strengthen traditional (and contemporary) practices and relationships with the land and its resources, as well as the right to maintain relationships across international borders (Articles 11, 18, 20, 25-26, 29, 31, 36). It also asserts the necessity for states to consult and engage with Indigenous people (Article 19), positioning Indigenous people as sovereign collectives thus putting the state in a consultative relationship with them (Nicol 2016). Sovereignty through international law is here presented as a shifting concept.

There is greater recognition in Canada today of Indigenous peoples’ rights, identities and cultures; however, some Indigenous scholars such as Glen Coulthard (2014) argue that these “politics of recognition” only perpetuate the colonial relationship that Canada has with Indigenous people and does nothing to challenge the dominating colonial system. The Canadian state adopts the more powerful role as a colonial government that defines and delegates Indigenous rights, particularly as existing within bounded traditional territory, thus limiting First Nations’ efforts of establishing sovereignty through the state’s political system and further
reifying the control of Indigenous people by Canada (Nicol 2016). It is still clear, however, that First Nations were originally treated as sovereign nations as demonstrated by the early “Peace and Friendship Treaties,” but Canada effectively re-articulated the relationship and conceptualized of sovereignty in its favor.

Coulthard and others like Taiaiake Alfred call instead for a “turning away” from the “colonial politics of recognition” and a resurgence of Indigenous culture and practices (Coulthard 2014, p.154). Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination are often connected to relations and responsibilities to the land and its beings, as well as cultural strength (Borrows 1992; McCue 2007; Wiessner 2007). It has been articulated by Indigenous scholars as the freedom of a people to decide their own future, (Porter 2002), and as something that is determined by natural law and relationships with Creation, renewed through traditional and proper ceremonies and responsibilities (Little Bear 2000; McCue 2007; Wiessner 2007). Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination still exist but have been re-articulated and limited by the state (Borrows 1992), thus the resurgence of Indigenous culture, values and traditions is a means by which the belief in, and the reality of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination can be realized (Coulthard 2014).

1.3 Making Connections
1.3.1 Niitsitapi, Traditional Territory, and Iinnii

These bodies of knowledge intertwine in the case of the Iinnii Initiative. The Blackfoot Confederacy is made up of four Nations, across present-day southern Alberta and Montana, which include: the Siksika (Blackfoot), the Apatohsipiikani (Piikani or Piegan), and Kainai (Blood Tribe) in Alberta, and the Amskapipiikani (or Blackfeet) across the border in Montana. The Blackfoot people (Niitsitapi) were nomadic buffalo hunters, making regular cycles and movements across the plains and mountains throughout the seasons to follow the buffalo herds, harvest wood and other foods, hold ceremony, and trade (Blackweasel et al. 2013; Hall 2017). Their traditional territory roughly covers the plains and mountain front from the North Saskatchewan River (or the Elk River) in Alberta to the Yellowstone River in Montana and extending from the Rocky Mountains east past the Great Sand Hills into present-day Saskatchewan near Regina (Blackweasel et al. 2013). Today, their Reserves are scattered throughout southwest Alberta and northwest Montana, isolated from each other and intermingled
with agricultural land, settler towns, and National Parks, covering merely a fraction of that traditional land (Fig. 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Approximate outlines of Blackfoot traditional territory in present-day Alberta and Montana around study location. Map created for use in this thesis and subsequent publications by Adam Bonnycastle, University of Guelph, 2018.

The Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park was established in 1932, while Waterton and Glacier National Parks were established in 1985 and 1910 respectively. This trans-border
park spans the Montana-Alberta border and sits within the core of the Crown of the Continent ecoregion, a significant biocultural landscape for numerous plant and animal species, as well as people. This landscape, where the mountains meet the prairies, is a conservation hotspot, prime ranching land, and holds deeply spiritual and cultural significance to the Blackfoot. It is not only part of their traditional territory, but also has various locations that hold significance in Blackfoot stories and practice such as Chief Mountain (*Ninastako*). It is on this land that the Blackfoot people and their life source, the buffalo, were created, and the knowledge to survive was developed (Bullchild 2005; Thompson et al. 2015).

Bison hold a particularly unique role as ecosystem engineers through their grazing habits and wallowing behavior, increasing various forms of biodiversity and promoting grassland health (Knapp et al. 1999, Truett et al. 2001). They are also highly valued by some First Nations and Native American tribes across the North American plains. The Blackfoot relate to Iinnii as an “older brother”, a guide for how to live and structure society, in addition to a critical source of meat, clothing, tools and shelter (Ladner 2003). Buffalo and the Blackfoot were in a deeply connected relationship, living and moving in relation to one another for survival, safety, and healing. However, with the introduction of the repeating rifle and driven by the existing fur trade, industrial need for strong leather, and a colonial interest in clearing the plains and eliminating Blackfoot livelihood, the buffalo were brutally exterminated by the late 1800s – their numbers dwindled down to a mere few hundred (Ewers 1983; Freese et al. 2007; Taylor 2011).

Subsequently, cattle and horse ranching replaced free-roaming buffalo, ranchers and white homesteaders replaced the Blackfoot, and ultimately within these land tenure and demographic changes came the establishment of National Parks – inherently colonial projects – which continued to alienate Blackfoot people from their relationships with the land and its beings. These various settler-colonial events, triggered by the extermination of the buffalo disconnected the Blackfoot from the land, buffalo, and each other. Therefore, the restoration of bison is critical to ecologically and culturally restoring this landscape and the relations within it.

A few notable names of individuals who made early efforts to save the last remaining buffalo include: Charles Goodnight, C.J. “Buffalo” Jones, Theodore Roosevelt, and Samuel and Sabine Walking Coyote – the Walking Coyotes were especially relevant to the buffalo in Blackfeet country. Samuel Walking Coyote was a Pend’Oreille man who was living with the Blackfeet and in the late 1870s he and his wife Sabine started capturing some of the last
remaining buffalo. Eventually they had a herd of 13 that they sold to Michel Pablo and Charles Allard in 1884 who then successfully increased the size of the herd (Zontek 1995). The Pablo-Allard herd of last remaining buffalo north of the Yellowstone area were eventually sold to Canada and became the breeding source for the current population of plains bison in Elk Island National Park today (Oetelaar 2014). This is the very same population from which the *Iinnii Initiative* in April of 2016 acquired their 87 bison that currently reside on the Blackfeet Reservation and are to become the free-roaming wild herd. This genetic relation to the original buffalo that once shared the plains with the ancestors of living Blackfoot today offers an additional layer of significance to this story of restoration for a number of Blackfoot individuals.

1.3.2 Identifying Research Objectives

That the *Iinnii Initiative* is centered on and driven by Blackfoot values, practice, and people, it already does work to challenge colonial approaches of Western scientific and protectionist, state-led conservation, and effectively works towards decolonizing the discipline, whether intentional or not. Given this, and the potential for greater Blackfoot engagement and leadership in “management” of the parks and taking care of bison, the *Iinnii Initiative* has the ability to challenge the “colonial politics of recognition”; it is a means for restoring relationships, maintaining responsibilities and reinvigorating Blackfoot culture and self-determination across colonially constructed boundaries while forwarding the New Paradigm of “rights-based” and ethical conservation.

Given its unique context and collaborative and transboundary nature, exploring and understanding the dynamics between actors can offer valuable insight into what elements aid in the strength of partnerships as well as what potential challenges could hinder them. The relationship between the Blackfeet and WCS is particularly strong, and the relationship between the Blackfoot Confederacy and the National Parks – despite a troubling history – is growing. Illuminating the history and evolution of these relationships with particular attention to relations of power can assist in presenting a positive example for effective and respectful collaboration between federal/state agencies, NGOs, and Indigenous communities in conservation. Such investigations follow a political ecological approach, while contributing to the literature on Indigenous-led and collaborative conservation governance.
Cattle ranching has become a dominant part of society and culture for settler and Indigenous individuals alike. It was identified that the fragmentation of this landscape by ranch and agricultural lands and potential impact of bison on ranching livelihoods could create concern for ranchers, and thus present potential barriers to the restoration of free-roaming bison. Therefore, engaging with the perspectives and concerns of local Albertan and Blackfeet ranchers takes seriously the local and situated knowledge of these individuals, as well as the social and political complexities that inform their experiences and livelihoods. Carefully navigating the multi-dimensional realities of ranching on and off reservation – its settler-colonial origins and repercussions, rancher relations with the environment, the fact that it is a main economic driver, livelihood, cultural practice and identity for these rural communities – considers these complexities and helps to offer a more nuanced and critical perspective of cattle ranchers and their roles in society and conservation.

Identifying, understanding, and supporting Indigenous-led conservation initiatives is important for decolonizing conservation, forwarding Indigenous self-determination, and promoting reconciliation within the field of conservation and society more broadly. It is important to understand the challenges to indigenous-led collaborative conservation governance and the factors that promote effective collaboration in order to inform the human dimensions of conservation and identify successful attributes. Ultimately, such explorations can offer guidance to conservation practitioners, especially those working with Indigenous communities on socially complex, large landscape conservation endeavors. With the shift towards a “New Paradigm” of conservation, other conservation initiatives have been explored and assessed; therefore, there is an opportunity to examine the Innii Initiative as a potentially positive model for decolonized conservation governance and practice.

Given these central insights from the literature and historical context of Blackfoot territory and the Innii Initiative, the following objectives were identified in order to achieve the aim of this research: 1) identify the actors involved in the Innii Initiative and how they interact 2) determine the factors that shape and inform collaboration and the challenges that may hinder it 3) investigate and understand concerns and potential barriers from local cattle ranchers. Achieving these objectives will not only support the on-the-ground efforts of the Innii Initiative, it will also inform collaborative conservation approaches and research between Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors. This research, through its methodology, practical, and academic insights,
also strives to contribute to reconciliation through research practice by seeking to transcend past colonial research methodologies and by demonstrating the positive elements of an Indigenous-led collaborative conservation endeavor that may stand as an example for decolonization and reconciliation through conservation.
Chapter 2  Methodology: Decolonizing Research and the Self through Blackfoot Ceremony and Methodology

2.1  Introduction

It was a late September day in 2016, warm sun with a cool breeze. We were sitting in the meeting room, individual tables crowded for lunch, indistinct and enthusiastic chatter pervaded the atmosphere as bison enthusiasts from around the world held their individual conversations with one another. The Rocky Mountains stood triumphantly on the window, surrounding the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity where the 5th American Bison Society Meeting and the 2nd anniversary signing of the Buffalo Treaty were being held. I was excited, but terribly nervous; I was about to have a conversation with Angela Grier from the Piikani Nation about my interest in doing research with the Blackfoot Confederacy to support the efforts of the Iinnii Initiative – a Blackfoot-led effort to restore free-roaming bison to Blackfoot territory in and around Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. I had just witnessed her stand up to the entire conference earlier that day, calling out the room full of Western academics and scientists for failing to engage with Indigenous people. The problem was that these academics and scientists were talking about Indigenous peoples and their knowledge as if they were not in the room, whereas Indigenous peoples from all over North America had attended this very same conference in the same interest of the conservation of bison, yet there was no relationship apparent. She restated the importance of having Indigenous voice and representation in these conversations about their lands, territories and cultures as they were just as at stake as the bison.

I was just starting my master’s degree at the University of Guelph in Ontario and was in the early stages of my (re)education about the settler-colonial history and present of Canada and the United States. I had little exposure to settler-colonial history in North America, its role in conservation, and especially the ongoing repercussions of colonialism today. Part of this was due to the fact I grew up and went to school in southeastern Pennsylvania where there is significantly less active Indigenous presence than in Canada or other parts of the United States. While where I am from is the traditional territory of the Lenni Lenape (Delaware) and Susquehannock peoples, there are no reservations and little to no education in the primary and secondary school system. Therefore, attending graduate school in the traditional territory of the Attawandaron people and treaty territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, with surrounding Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee,
and Métis neighbors, and beginning research with the Blackfoot Confederacy, my education about settler-colonialism had to be renewed.

I learned about the lasting impacts of settler-colonialism on Indigenous communities such as the loss of Indigenous identity and connection to community and culture, the loss of language, and disconnection from spirituality (Grier 2014). Furthermore, much of the violence that has been done to Indigenous communities through colonial research practices has been done predominantly by the white male population. Examples include the inappropriate publication of culturally sensitive information, the collection and removal of sacred items, and the racist and inaccurate depiction of Indigenous peoples to white western society that reinforces negative stereotypes (Lyons 2011; Wilson 2008). Therefore, I did not want to repeat such mistakes in my own research. Being a white male, educated in a Western perspective, I realized I had to shift my perspective, or at least create an openness to start. The position of privilege and power that such an identity offers me is also the same privilege and power of many other researchers and is the basis for much of the violence – and blindness to such violence – that has been done to Indigenous people through research. My education about the realities of racism included understanding a settler-colonial worldview and the perpetuation of institutional racism and cognitive imperialism (Battiste & Henderson 2009). This brought me to reflect on my role in such systems, which was helpful for laying the groundwork for the beginning of this process. Regardless, I was apprehensive to say the least. I did not want to mess up, say something inappropriate or ignorant; I did not want to come off as the stereotypical white, Western researcher who already believed that he knew what he was talking about and what he was going to research. I wanted to express my interests and research ideas with a sincere desire to learn about Blackfoot world views, how to do research with a community, what research would actually be valuable, and how to go about doing all of this in a way that worked towards decolonizing the research process.

Since then, Angela has shared with me that she felt I was humble and genuine, presenting myself as an academic and sincere learner, and that she felt comfortable continuing the conversation with me. Little did I know at the time that she had an entire set of criteria against which she was assessing me; apparently, I passed. I identify Angela as a “scout” or “intermediary” between me and her community, people, and their collective knowledge, supporting the development of my relationships with them (personal communication 2018;
Wilson 2008). It was through her that I gained my point of entry into her web of relationships in order to develop and expand mine. This was the beginning of many relationships, experiences, and emotions to come along this research and self-transformative journey through a Blackfoot world.

In this paper, to situate my methodological approach, I will first review some of the key literature from Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars that grapple with the concepts of decolonization and reconciliation through research. I will then offer a brief introduction of the Blackfoot worldview (ontology, epistemology, and axiology or methodology) into which I entered through ceremony and that informed my perspective and shaped my being throughout the research process. Finally, I will offer a reflexive analysis of my research methodology in which I explore the parallels between research and ceremony, my self-transformation process and its implications, the relationships that I cultivated, how these things informed my research practice, and what I can improve upon. Guiding this reflection, I draw on the work of others who critically reflect on their own transformative journeys, positionality, unexpected challenges and benefits, what could have been done differently, and advice to others (de Leeuw, Cameron & Greenwood 2012; Menzies 2001; Smithers Graeme & Mandawe 2017; Sundberg 2004).

2.2 Informative Literature
2.2.1 The Colonial Academy and Research Process

A reality about settler-colonialism is that it pervades numerous aspects of life and society including academia. These settler-colonial undertones can be seen in the broader paradigms that influence research theory and practice, institutional ethics review boards, knowledge production, and the classroom. Historically, and often still today, outside researchers (who are often white males) go into Indigenous communities and perform their research on the community – by which I mean gather information about the community, make observations of how they function, and then write up their paper for publication with little to no engagement with or benefit for community members themselves (Wilson 2008). This has been common in the health sciences, psychology, and anthropology fields. Geography, as a discipline, is not free from this colonial influence and has been a formative factor in Indigenous communities’ apprehension towards outside researchers (Coombes, Johnson & Howitt 2014).
There are numerous issues with the approaches that these disciplines have practiced, which include but are certainly not limited to: the imposition of an outside research agenda that is often not relevant to the community’s needs; the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about Indigenous communities; the reinforcement of the notion that Indigenous communities are to be studied rather than be the studiers; the predominance of an external Western analytical lens (Wilson 2008); and the inappropriate use and publication of culturally sensitive information that neglects intellectual property rights (Lyons 2011). As Coombes, Johnson & Howitt illuminate, “transcultural research” and other collaborative research with Indigenous communities is hardly free from “neo/colonial excess” and thus require “ongoing scrutiny” (2017, p.846). No research approach is perfect, and therefore a close reflection and evaluation of my own methodology with oversight and review from my Blackfoot mentor and committee member, Angela Grier, and other community collaborators is necessary and will ideally offer insight for myself and others of how to improve decolonizing research methodologies. Such involvement of Indigenous individuals throughout the research process also ensures outcomes that align with Indigenous needs, which is part of the research ethics protocol that I discuss later.

Other ways in which academia has been colonized by a Western Eurocentric worldview is through the hegemony of positivist and other Western paradigms. Positivist views presume that researchers are objective, that objects, people, and phenomena can be observed and abstracted from the whole system to be controlled and understood, and that rigorous scientific inquiry is the legitimate knowledge system and approach for proving what is real and true (Wilson 2008). Other paradigms exist such as critical theory and constructivism that maintain space for diverse realities that are specific to and embedded in individual experiences and places (Wilson 2008). Research approaches such as participatory action research (PAR) that recognize reciprocal relationships between participants and researchers through the co-production of knowledge and seek to change, rather than simply describe social realities have also grown in the collection of research pedagogies to combat problematic forms of research that do not engage communities appropriately (Pratt 2000, as cited in Flowerdew & Martin 2005); yet, such research approaches are also critiqued for having too narrow a view of racism, which focuses on the individual rather than broader socio-historical processes and systems that limit communities aspirations (Coombes, Johnson, & Howitt 2014). Furthermore, despite these alternative paradigms, Indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies are often questioned and held as
less legitimate, while White Western academics continue to paternalistically explain “Indigeneity”, “settler-colonialism”, and “reconciliation” to Indigenous individuals.

Such ‘epistemic violence’, produced through discourse that constructs limits on what is real and unreal, results in the delegitimization of Indigenous knowledge systems and the dehumanization of Indigenous people since Indigenous ways of being and knowing are part of what creates Indigenous identity (Hunt 2014). This is one way that Western society has tried to continue colonizing Indigenous people. Hunt (2014) shares how it is a challenge to be taken seriously as an Indigenous scholar in the broader academic discipline of geography, as her world views and methodologies are inherently different than those of other Western scholars. Indigenous people continue to experience discrimination, unsupportive environments, and racism and cultural discontinuity in curricula within Canadian education systems (Grier 2017).

Education and academic institutions based on Eurocentric knowledge systems have been sites of intellectual and cultural colonization since residential schools, portraying Indigenous knowledge systems as inferior, barbaric, or primitive, and are thus rejected and neglected (Battiste & Henderson 2009). The exclusion and rejection of Indigenous knowledge systems (especially in the language and heritage) has been integral in the project of assimilating Indigenous people into mainstream Eurocentric, Western society and culture.

Today, the while attempts to “recognize” and include Indigenous geographies and knowledge systems by Western academia may be made, they in fact reinforce Coulthard’s (2014) argument that settler-colonialism is perpetuated through “politics of recognition” that minimize Indigenous self-affirmation. Such recognition from the state results in Indigenous people identifying with the mis-recognition or “asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition either imposed upon or granted to them by the settler state and society” (Coulthard 2014, p.25). This, he argues, denies Indigenous self-affirmation and requires a “turning away” from the state and its “colonial politics of recognition” by Indigenous people through various forms of Indigenous resurgence. Such a resurgence is being supported in academia and research as well.

Western scientists also try to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems into natural resource management; however, such practices often result in unequal power relations, force Indigenous knowledge systems to stand up to and be substantiated by Western science, and label Indigenous knowledge as “traditional” which “mystifies [it] and devalues [its] use as a valid contemporary way of knowing” (Weiss et al. 2012). Therefore, the challenge remains to rethink
the status quo philosophies that underpin the academy and research in a way that bridges
Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews and practices to exist alongside one another, with
the opportunity to interact in positive and constructive ways. Doing so will allow for more
respectful ways of working across cultures, enhance the development of innovative methods and
solutions for research problems, and ensure that Indigenous communities are actively engaged in
and benefited by the research that occurs within their communities that is fiscally more
responsible with public research funding. Such practices are important for trying to decolonize
academia and research and forwarding reconciliation.

2.2.2 Decolonization and Reconciliation

In Canada, the current phenomenon surrounding reconciliation between Indigenous
people and settler society has been focused on healing the wrongs of the residential school
system. This government led policy began in the late 1800s, took more than a hundred thousand
Indigenous children from their families, and “stripped Indigenous people of their languages and
cultures” (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is & T’lakwadzi 2009). Indigenous people in North America
continue to demonstrate the highest rates of high school suicide; Indigenous incarceration rates
are higher than average Canadian society; Indigenous youth are constantly being trapped in and
moved around institutionalized government social service systems; and drugs, alcohol, and
violence become outlets to manage past and present trauma and current realities (Grier 2014).
These are just some of the lasting repercussions of colonization. Trying to grapple with how
Canada could right these wrongs, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was
established in 2015 after losing a lawsuit that was filed by residential school survivors against
the federal government. This Commission makes mandatory reconciliation across all aspects of
government and was driven by the survivors of this system. The TRC openly admits to the
physical, biological, and cultural genocide of Indigenous people in Canada.

“Physical genocide is the mass killing of the members of a targeted group, and biological
genocide is the destruction of the group’s reproductive capacity. Cultural genocide is the
destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States
that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the
targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred, and their movement is
restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted. Spiritual practices are
forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to
the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity
from one generation to the next. In its dealing with Aboriginal people, Canada did all of these
things.” – Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2015, p.1
Indigenous survivors of this violent system were integral to getting the Canadian government to recognize and accept these wrongs and work towards reconciliation. Thus, the TRC defines reconciliation as “an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships…that involves repairing damaged trust by making apologies, providing individual and collective reparations, and following through with concrete actions that demonstrate real societal change” (TRC 2015). Reconciliation has also been articulated as a process of healing that seeks truth, justice and forgiveness; it focuses on co-existence, cooperation, sharing, and relationships building founded upon respect and understanding (Smithers Graeme & Mandawe 2017).

However, Indigenous scholar and activist, Leanne Simpson (2011), warns that focusing solely on residential schools runs the risk of Canadians believing that colonial injustices are a thing of the past and that these historical injuries have been healed. However, as mentioned in the examples above, this is simply not the case and Indigenous individuals still suffer the harmful impacts of settler-colonialism. The Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE) recognizes that reconciliation is going to differ according to each Indigenous nation, and it is therefore up to each nation to define what reconciliation means to them in terms of a healing process between the Crown and Indigenous peoples, and between all people and the lands (ICE 2018). The Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE) was created as a National Advisory Council to support Canada’s responsibilities under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), in particular the implementation of the Pathway to Canada Target 1 that focuses on the protection of terrestrial and inland waters (ICE 2018). This group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians demands decolonization and reconciliation within conservation given the historical role of conservation in displacing and marginalizing Indigenous peoples from traditional territory, and their recent report to the Canadian government outlines how the Pathway to Canada Target 1 can be achieved, particularly through supporting Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (ICCAs).

All in all, within these articulations of reconciliation are common themes of respect, truth, healing, relationships, Indigenous cultural and political resurgence, and co-existence.

Decolonization places Indigenous values, practices, and participation at the core (Grier 2014). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) articulates decolonization in research as: “…the unmasking and deconstruction of imperialism, and its aspect of colonialism…alongside a search for sovereignty; for reclamation of knowledge, language, and culture; and for the social
transformation of the colonial relations between the native and the settler” (p.88). She highlights the importance of relationships between researchers and Indigenous communities in pursuing this larger project and notes that “research…is a set of very human activities that reproduce particular social relations of power” (p.88). She argues, therefore, that decolonizing research engages in disrupting and transforming research as a collection of unquestioned and dominant structures, and ways of performing, producing and spreading research and knowledge (Smith 2005). Decolonization also means for Indigenous knowledge systems to be taken seriously, seen as legitimate and valuable in themselves, both within and outside of the academy (Hunt 2014; Nadasdy 2007). Reconciliation and decolonization are not mutually exclusive and require equal attention when one seeks to engage in such a project, especially through research.

2.2.3 Indigenous and Decolonized Research

Shawn Wilson, an Opaskwayak Cree scholar, is a leading expert in Indigenous methodology and research. He states, “we cannot remove ourselves from our world in order to examine it” (2008, p.14). This strongly reflects an Indigenous way of being and knowing, while strongly contradicting the conventional objectivity of Western-positivist science. The key, he claims, to Indigenous research is that it must not forego Indigenous worldviews, cosmology, ways of knowing and ethics (Wilson 2008, p.15). A few “strategies of inquiry” that Wilson (2008) discusses are learning by watching and doing, individual interviews, and focus groups in the form of talking circles or seminars. These are similar to conventional social science methods, but what makes them different is the way in which one goes about doing them, focusing on an Indigenous epistemology and axiology, with relationality and accountability to these relationships that are being formed as an overarching imperative.

An example is the application of Anishinaabe *mino-bimadiziwin*, or a spirit-centered approach to the ‘Good life’, as an Indigenous research methodology that brings spiritual practices, guidance, reflection, and relations into the research design and implementation (Ahnungoonhs 4 2010). Indigenous scholars Wilson (2008) and Ahnungoonhs (2010) both link Indigenous methodology (or axiology) and Indigenous epistemology (ways of knowing) together. Knowledge, and thus epistemology and methodology, are about participation in the

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4 English name and citation is Debassige 2010
natural world (Little Bear 2012). Following such a spirit-centered approach that is based on this relationship with land, people, and non-human relatives, is what I refer to when I say that Indigenous methods may be similar to conventional social science methods but are done in a different way. The methodology, which is the “theory and analysis of how research should proceed” (Harding 1987, p.2), is based on spirit-centered and relational Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, and thus inform differently than western scientific worldviews how the methods – “techniques for gathering evidence” (Harding 1987, p.2) – are done.

Judy Atkinson (2001, as cited in Wilson 2008, p.59) provides some guiding principles for Indigenous research methodology, some of which include: approval of the research and methods by Aboriginal peoples, knowledge and consideration of the community and its uniqueness, recognizing cultural and contextual appropriate behaviors and relationships, being a respectful observer and participant, acting in ways that maintain and respect relationships that have been formed, and acknowledging what assumptions the researcher brings as his or her subjective self. These are also reflected in the work of Martin and Mirraboopa (2003) who make clear the importance of “social, historical and political contexts which shape our experiences, lives, positions and futures,” and recognizing the particular worldview, knowledge, realities and social mores through which Indigenous people live, learn and locate themselves (p.205). Another research strategy is to “re-present” the research findings to the people involved, which reflects a relational way of being and doing because it works to keep them connected to the work that occurred and maintains the relationship between researcher and participants (Martin & Mirraboopa 2003).

Brian Noble (2015) discusses decolonial research relations with First Nations in terms of consent, collaboration, and treaty, that ties into the aforementioned sentiments well. He challenges one to think within a model of sharing, reciprocity, and respect, based on treaty relations and apply this to research relations with Indigenous communities. The values and practices explored by these various scholars are part of the decolonizing process and research as reconciliation that informed my methodology. In order to avoid making the mistakes of other western, white, male researchers before me and causing violence to Indigenous people, and to try and change how research is done within the disciplines of conservation and geography, I took these articulations into mind for my research methodology. I tried to approach my methodology
in a way that was grounded in the spirit of reconciliation and decolonization; centered on Blackfoot values and practice and guided by Blackfoot mentors.

In doing research in this way and writing this paper, I seek to participate in the “decolonization and re-education project” that Simpson (2011) declares is necessary for Canadians – and I believe, Americans as well – to engage in order to work and live alongside Indigenous peoples in a “just and honorable way” (p.23). By sharing my methodological approach and working to improve it, I intend for others to learn from my experiences and reflect on their own research praxis when working with Indigenous communities. This is one way in which I can utilize my privilege as a white male research within academia. While I recognize that I am one person and my abilities to engage in structural reconciliation and create a high level of change in larger institutions and systems may be limited, I intend to take advantage of my privilege as a white male in academia and share my methodological approach to inform other non-Indigenous researchers seeking to work with Indigenous communities. My methodology reflects more closely, however, a cultural approach to reconciliation that takes place on the interpersonal or small group level that consists of emotional exchange between people or groups that is a “fuller and deeper process” than structural reconciliation (Bloomfield 2006, p.28). The idea is that it will lead to a more personal and long-lasting transformation that will result in a “meaningful end-state of wholly reconciled and harmonious relationship” (Bloomfield 2006, p.28), which will then influence the rest of my life’s journey by establishing long-term connections, informing future work decisions, everyday interactions with Indigenous people, and ways in which I engage with and share my experiences with settler individuals.

2.3 Identifying an Appropriate Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology

Entering into a research relationship with the Blackfoot meant that I first had to become more aware of Blackfoot history and experiences with settler-colonialism. Part of this was through identifying which numbered treaty the Blackfoot were a part of in addition to other treaties, events, and relations that have been significant impacts on Blackfoot past and present life such as the extermination of buffalo and relationships with neighboring US and Canadian national parks. In terms of Blackfoot culture, ontologies, and epistemology, I read works suggested by Blackfoot individuals, or written with or by Blackfoot scholars, knowledge holders, and cultural committees (Bullchild 2005; Blackweasel et al. 2013; Grier 2014; Ladner 2003;
Little Bear 2000, 2012; Luna 2012; Pikunii Traditional Association 2015). Admittedly, some of the publications I read were not written by Blackfoot individuals but rather written by individuals who did research with or about Blackfoot history and relationships with Glacier National Park, bison, cattle ranching, and so on (Craig et al. 2012; Ewers 1983; Farr 2001; Oetalaar 2014; Schultz 2002; Sholar 2004; Spence 1996; Wise 2011). However, I recognize this as a limitation that further reinforced the necessity of relationship building, participation in ceremony and community events, and regular conversations with Blackfoot individuals that I did in the field to continue and enhance my learning.

I also had to become more aware of Indigenous issues and realities more broadly. I make these statements carefully, however, because I realize that one cannot homogenize or generalize Indigenous peoples or cultures—each has their own stories, practices, and approach to knowing, relating to, and understanding Creation. Sarah Hunt, a Kwakwaka’wakw scholar, puts it well: indigeneity and knowledge are situated, “lived, practiced and relational” experiences (2014, p.129). An abundance of literature exists from various Indigenous scholars that discuss Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, which helped me understand some concepts, such as relationality, that are held in common across a number of Indigenous cultures and world views and are crucial in cultivating a foundational understanding of Indigenous ontologies. In addition to literature, I took an Aboriginal Issues graduate course taught by a Mohawk faculty member where we visited the Six Nations Reserve, Mohawk Community College, and Mohawk Institute Residential school; attended events facilitated by the University of Guelph Aboriginal Resource Center; and spoke regularly with a Mushkegowuk Cree colleague and friend, Roberta Nackoochee. These were other avenues by which I came to enhance my understanding of Indigenous issues and realities. I recognize that such actions do not make me an expert by any means, and this is not what I claim to be; I still, and always will, have much to learn.

Shawn Wilson (2008) articulates ontology as the study of being or existing, or the “nature of reality”; to have ontological beliefs is to have beliefs about what is real (p.33). Epistemology is the “study of the nature of thinking or knowing”; how one acquires knowledge and goes about the process of knowing what is real (p.33). These two concepts, Wilson explains, are intimately linked, for one’s ontological beliefs will deeply influence the way that one understands or knows that “reality”, or how one’s knowledge process works. Put simply, ontology is the study of being, and epistemology is the study of knowing, and the former influences the latter. Furthermore, he
posits that all things come into being, or become real, through relationships with other things, and thus reality is a set of relationships. Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing are relational, they are developed through their relationships with the “cosmos around us, as well as with concepts”, and all beings; knowledge is formed through relationships. Therefore, ontology is epistemology (Wilson 2008, p.73). Axiology, then, is “the ethics that guide the search for knowledge and judge which information is worthy of searching for” (p.34) and come from teachings from relations with Creation. In relation to Indigenous ontology and epistemology, it is the respect and accountability to these relationships (p.77). Relationships and relational accountability are central to an Indigenous worldview and methodology and therefore guided my approach to research.

2.3.1 Niitsitapiisinni (Blackfoot Way of Life) or Niitsitapi Way of Being

I include this section that focuses more specifically on a Blackfoot way of being because these were the people with and for whom I was doing my research. Dr. Leroy Little Bear, an honored Blackfoot (Kainai) scholar, explicates knowledge from an Indigenous perspective as “holistic and cyclical; its languages are process and action oriented...[it] is about participation in and with the natural world” (Little Bear 2012, p.1). This is distinct from Western knowledge systems which he defines as linear, singular, and where language is noun-oriented (Little Bear 2000; Little Bear 2012). In the Blackfoot worldview, medicine bundles are opened annually where songs are sung, prayers and blessings are requested and given, vows are renewed, dances are performed, all of which have been done the same way (or with minor variation because of the influence of Western society) for thousands of years. The repetition and renewal of these practices follow the cyclical nature of Creation and a Blackfoot worldview. These bundles, and the songs, dances, and medicine that come with them were given to the Blackfoot people by various animals or spiritual beings such as Beaver, Buffalo, and Thunder (Blackweasel et al. 2013; Ewers 1983; Schultz 2002). Such knowledge systems and ways of life are cultivated from a perspective of being in relationship with the cosmos, the land, its beings and learning from them (Bullchild 2005; Ewers 1983; Ladner 2003; Little Bear 2000; Oetelaar 2014).

Relationships, as described by Angela (personal communication 2018), are a renewal of information, and each time that one goes through that renewal process, one learns something more. “We constantly learn and reshape our understanding of different concepts throughout life
and through repetition and renewal of relationships” (Grier, personal communication 2018). Ceremonies, such as bundle openings, sweat lodges, and the *okaan* (Sundance) (Little Bear 2012), are a few ways in which this is done,

Engaging with a Blackfoot worldview necessitates engaging with *Iinnii* (buffalo). The buffalo is a relative to the Blackfoot, a source for learning how to structure and govern themselves in relation to their own people, to other beings, and to the land (Ladner 2003).

“Iinnii is a relative of the Blackfoot. *Iinnii* and the Blackfoot live in a spiritual context and reciprocal relationship with one another that originated in the care *Iinnii* brought to the Niitsitapi (the people).” – Grier, personal communication 2018

Bison were the original food provided to the Blackfoot by Creator Sun and were the primary source of clothing, shelter, and healing (Bullchild 2005; Ewers 1983; Ladner 2003). Buffalo are non-human beings with their own agency with whom the Blackfoot have an ongoing reciprocal relationship of respect (Fox 2014; Oetelaar 2014). This requires regular ceremonies, prayers, and songs to maintain, strengthen, and renew this relationship, and in return the buffalo agrees to give itself to the Blackfoot to sustain them (Little Bear 2000; Oetelaar 2014). Various Blackfoot elders have declared about the Blackfoot people, “We are the buffalo, we are *Inniiwa*...”, and “we need them to be strong again…” (Fox 2014). Clearly, buffalo and the Blackfoot are inextricably linked.

Some Indigenous scholars articulate sovereignty as deeply rooted in relationships to the land and its beings, established not by people, but by natural law, and something that must be renewed through proper ceremonies and responsibilities to these relationships with the land (McCue 2007; Wiessner 2007). Dr. Leroy Little Bear, a respected Blackfoot scholar, explains that such customs are the role that Indigenous people play in maintaining the relationships that hold Creation together (2000). The role of the Blackfoot in fostering the relationship with buffalo and the land is a form of sovereignty in itself, delegated upon them by the natural law of Creation, for only they can maintain this specific relationship with buffalo and ultimately reinforce the fabric of Creation. However, since the extermination of buffalo in the late 1800s, this relationship has been severely damaged.

Therefore, the restoration of the buffalo to Blackfoot territory is also the restoration and renewal of this relationship, and subsequently the resurgence of Blackfoot culture, language, and health. Other research has demonstrated positive impacts of restoring bison to the Ft. Peck reservation in Montana, some of which include spiritual and cultural reconnection to self and
community and overcoming settler-colonial trauma of the past (Haggerty et al. 2018). The restoration of short-finned eel habitat and traditional Gunditjmara aquaculture practices in Lake Condah in Victoria, Australia resulted in a cultural reconnection, leadership development through traditional ownership, and enhanced economic opportunities for the Gunditjmara people (Rose, Bell & Crook 2016). Returning buffalo to Blackfoot territory has the potential to, and already is resulting in similar effects, particularly reinvigorating spirituality and reconnecting youth to Blackfoot traditions (personal communications 2017). Furthermore, the potential for reintroducing bison as a traditional food source into the diet of Blackfoot communities will help enhance community health and nutrition and hopefully reduce heart disease, diabetes, and other ailments, while having the potential to promote sustainable economic development (BirdRattler interview 2017).

2.4 Cultivating a Blackfoot Lens
2.4.1 Replacing or Expanding my own Lens?

Living and doing research in Blackfoot territory and trying to understand a Blackfoot context and connection to land and the buffalo requires a Blackfoot lens. Fostering this understanding started by reading, but ultimately, the best and only way to truly learn this was through immersion; examples include but are not limited to talking with people who lived within this context and by participating in ceremony, entering in to a Blackfoot world. The following pages reflect upon this “entering in”, how gaining a Blackfoot name and family brought me into part of the Blackfoot universe that resulted in a personal and spiritual change. This change brought me closer to a Blackfoot worldview and helped me develop a Blackfoot lens through which to view the research and its importance, while also influencing the way I walk the world and decide to maintain and renew these relationships in the long-term.

Reality and research are not objective. Thus, my reality as a white male, educated in a western-Eurocentric tradition and its subsequent influences will never be removed from anything I do or experience, including research. I make this point clear because in cultivating a Blackfoot lens, I was not eliminating my Western lens – this is not possible – but I was opening myself up to a different way of thinking about, viewing, and experiencing the world. I was initially concerned about doing this because I am a white male from an upper middle-class family who has no experience with colonization. I was concerned that I would be appropriating or
misrepresenting a Blackfoot worldview if I tried to “eliminate” my Western lens and adopt a Blackfoot one. Inaccurately representing Indigenous worldviews, cultures, and people is a colonial injury that past external researchers have been guilty of doing to Indigenous communities (Wilson 2008). However, Angela helped me realize that “when in Blackfoot country, do as the Blackfoot do,” which reflects Blackfoot values of non-interference and respect, things that were lost through colonization. Angela offered the analogy that in the corporate world, cultural sensitivity and respect is stressed as paramount in positive business relations and outcomes; therefore, demonstrating that same respect of traditions, protocols, and practices is a critical part of developing lasting trust, cultivating positive Indigenous relations, and beginning to address racism (Grier, personal communication 2018).

Eva Mackey states that colonialism not only impacted Indigenous peoples, it also negatively impacted the mindsets and abilities of settler peoples to be able to look past their myopic field of view and rethink things in ways that decolonizes themselves and subsequently settler-Indigenous relations (2016). Maintaining narrow settler constructs of civilized society, the superiority of Western worldviews, and ‘fantasies of entitlement’ to land (Mackey 2016) are ways in which settler society continues to perpetuate itself and Indigenous people continue to be oppressed and left out of conversations around resources, money, and land. Settler-colonial policies and “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” philosophies were designed for settler society to benefit from Indigenous lands and the eradication of Indigenous peoples, whether through their death or assimilation into Western society and culture. Opening myself up to a Blackfoot perspective was an attempt to expand my limited vision and explore and practice different ways of understanding buffalo, the land, research, and myself in an effort to break away from settler constructs of knowledge, land, and persons. I did not get rid of my white western lens, I simply put the Blackfoot one on top.

2.4.2 My Point of Entry

After a couple of weeks upon arriving in Blackfoot territory, Angela and I met at the Waterton Reservoir to discuss the logistics of a dialogue that we were going to hold in Waterton Park with various Blackfoot knowledge holders. She affirmed the importance of listening at the dialogue; knowledge holders were going to share stories and it was up to me to get what I needed and learn from them. She pointed out that if I maintain too narrow of an “agenda” I am going to
have a selective vision and miss a lot of important lessons and ideas. We also communicated the importance of the research being tied to the land, the people and remaining committed to them. To help Iinnii and the Blackfoot Confederacy, I needed to be open to changing my perspective, to learning, and to maintain a committed relationship in the long run. Such paradigmatic shifts reflect the challenge of expanding the myopic settler lens as discussed by Mackey (2016), and the necessity of transcending this limitation in the effort to decolonize oneself.

It was here that I asked Angela to be on my defense committee to which she agreed. It was part of my duty to maintain long-term relationships as part of the process to continue supporting the Blackfoot and Indigenous nations as a settler individual. Angela explained that part of her duty to ensure cultural and ethical protocols were in place to support the research and development of lasting relations, while doing her best to protect intellectual property of the Blackfoot as a Blackfoot academic. We also outlined a couple of the key objectives for the dialogue: 1) to develop and strengthen relationships with the Blackfoot Confederacy and knowledge holders, and 2) present an offering as a commitment to reciprocating knowledge transfer with Blackfoot individuals involved in the research, and to maintain these relationships moving forward. Within the rest of this conversation we discussed the potential benefits of my research for the Blackfoot people, figuring out proper social science protocol that is Blackfoot specific, and she invited me to a bundle opening. Such ceremonies are central to Blackfoot ways of being (Little Bear 2012) and participating in this would become my first cultural and spiritual engagement with the Blackfoot that would also push me to demonstrate respect, non-interference, and commitment to my relationship with the Blackfoot.

2.4.3 Participating in Ceremony and Prayer

The bundle opening ceremony was one of the most pivotal experiences for me that really set the tone for the rest of the summer. One of the common injuries that researchers and other white outsiders have done to Indigenous communities is the inappropriate collection and sharing of sacred knowledge (FNIGC 2018). In the past, researchers would commonly gather sensitive or culturally significant knowledge and information and would then continue to publish said information furthering their field of study and not doing anything to benefit the community from which that sacred knowledge came (Menzies 2001). Doing so also breaches cultural protocol of knowledge transfer (see Poohmahksin below) and damages trust between researcher and
communities. Recognizing this, I cannot and will not publish any specific details of this ceremony – something that Angela also requested of me. I can share personal thoughts and lessons learned from those experiences, but no specific details since this is a sacred event that has been occurring the same way for thousands of years. *Poohmahksin*, or the cultural protocols of transferred rights, determine one’s spiritual authority and ability to share sacred knowledge (Grier 2014). It is a life-long spiritual mentorship that teaches compassion and love, in addition to relational responsibility (Grier 2014). I do not have these transferred rights and therefore do not have the right to share details and knowledge of particular sacred events like a bundle opening.

One of the most significant revelations for me was that of “dancing between worlds” (Hunt 2014). At the bundle opening, two women took me under their wing to make me feel welcomed and help me learn. One of them, Sleeping Woman (*Ookaki*) a Blackfoot psychologist, explained to me that the way people react to you reflects how you present yourself, and that my presentation of myself allowed them to open up to me. We also discussed how they, as Indigenous people, know the feeling of being different, out of place in a different world, and so they were able to empathize with me being a “lone-wolf”. This was a blessing for me as it initiated a new relationship, and taught me a lesson in humility, open-mindedness, and empathy.

The entire ceremony experience took 11 hours and enhanced my understanding of what it was like to exist in a different world. Putting myself as a white, western-educated, male into an Indigenous world and outside of my comfort zone was a necessary and beautifully beneficial challenge to begin to experience the discomfort of feeling out of place that many Indigenous people feel every day while respectful cross-cultural engagement. Sarah Hunt (2014) explores the idea of moving between worlds, and how Indigenous people are normally forced to “dance between worlds”, putting on other identities and fitting into white, western, institutionalized academic worlds. A point where I think Hunt would agree is that part of decolonizing one’s research and oneself is to place oneself as a non-Indigenous academic into an Indigenous world and learn to dance there. I undoubtedly experienced a sense of uncertainty and “settler discomfort” as Mackey (2016) so rightfully puts it. Most of settler society is averse to discomfort because it creates vulnerability and potentially challenges their unquestioned positions of power and assumptions about the world (Mackey 2016). This discomfort is an important part of

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5 Sleeping Woman’s English name is Wilma Spear Chief
breaking down my settler foundations, opening myself up to a different world, and exposing myself to a minute piece of the discomfort that Indigenous people feel every day and have felt for the past 200 years of colonial intervention.

Overtime, as I attended more ceremonies this discomfort started to fade; I felt more familiar with the protocols, less of an outsider, more engaged and connected to the ceremony, prayers, and people. Participating in ceremony eventually became a source of comfort and grounding. Throughout the summer, I participated more in ceremony: in pipe offerings, in a sweat lodge, attending the *Okaan* (Sun dance). My first experience at the bundle opening introduced me to a living Blackfoot spirituality in which I also engaged by being painted and receiving blessings. During this painting and blessing, I presented an offering and said a prayer, asking for a healing heart, strength, guidance, and right actions during this journey with the Blackfoot and Iini. Doing this was an important part of my learning process because, as Angela explained, buffalo are central to ceremony and the teachings I would learn would be applicable to the research process and maintaining good relations. Additionally, ceremony and prayer offer the ability to communicate with spiritual guides and transform energy waves for positive outcomes (Grier 2014). My participation in ceremony would enable my spirit to engage in its own way with the spirits and energy being brought into the ceremony, and through my prayers and being blessed, would bring positivity to my research journey. This was my first step into a Blackfoot world that catalyzed a number of events throughout the summer.

I cannot reflect on each of these events in full detail here, but I will elaborate on one of them that became crucial to shifting my perspective, my being, and thus the research. The dialogue that we held in Waterton consisted of a knowledge holders and scholars from Piikani, Kainai, and Amskapi-Piikani, and myself and my advisor from the University of Guelph. It was organized by Angela and co-facilitated between her and Dr. Leroy Little Bear for the purposes of this research. In line with proper Blackfoot protocol, a pipe offering was held the day before the dialogue and led by Patrick Black Plume (*Omahki’siikookaan, Owns Many Tipi Designs)*. This was held on a hill, overlooking the buffalo paddock, deliberately bringing us closer to the buffalo and the buffalo closer to us since they were at the center of this research. I prayed for the health

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6 While most research ethics protocols require anonymity, Blackfoot knowledge sharing protocols emphasize the importance of recognizing from whom knowledge was shared and transferred. I identify specific individuals in this thesis to follow such a practice. I ensured that consent was given to reference them by name and that I informed these individuals of the purpose of using their name.
and safety of all those here, myself, my family; prayed for all of us to successfully come together with open minds and hearts, to learn and grow together and do what we could to help restore Iinnii to Blackfoot country; and I prayed that the work we do is successful and that it brings about healing and strength for the Blackfoot people and among societal relations. Angela, as my “scout”, following Blackfoot cultural protocol, ensured that the ceremonial leader had transferred rights and authority, and thus she connected me with Patrick. Elders and sacred society members who lead ceremony are conduits or channels between those asking for blessings and providing offerings (Grier 2014). The individual asking for blessings as part of their responsibility must also remain respectful, ethical, and follow spiritual protocol (Grier 2014). Angela explained to me that Patrick was the conduit between me and the spirits, calling upon them to receive these prayers and bring us blessings. Involving elders and knowledge holders in research also promotes respectful community protocol and building relational bridges (Flicker et al. 2015). This ceremony further heightened my responsibility to maintain ethical and respectful practice throughout the research.

At the end of the pipe offering, Patrick turned to me and said that he wanted to give me a Blackfoot name. He shared with me that this name came from his travels where he had given many blessings and received many offerings; he felt honored to be there that day. My name is Akáikkitstaki, or Many Offerings. This blessing, and privilege, is not something that I take lightly. As Angela and I discussed, it has also brought me more intimately into a Blackfoot world. Throughout the summer, I would visit with Patrick and his wife, Alva (Iikiinii’yoohttowa, Heard Softly), at pow-wows, and at the Okaan (Sun dance) to which they invited me. It was there that they adopted me into their family as their son, which further strengthened my relationship with them and subsequently others around them. Cultural kinships such as this serve as spiritual apprenticeships and provide a means of learning, loving, and creating healthy relationships that also aid in the path of recovery (Grier 2014). It offered me a source of spiritual support and guidance in Blackfoot protocols and positive ways of being. Receiving a Blackfoot name, becoming part of a Blackfoot family, and participating in ceremony cultivated within me a very real, spiritual and personal transformation. I had learned more about the practical and spiritual significance of Iinnii and the land; I had witnessed and experienced first-hand the power of that spirituality, medicine, and blessings; I made relationships that connected me very deeply
to the Blackfoot people, to the Blackfoot world, and to Iinnii. The research, then, came to have an entirely new meaning and importance based on the relationships that I had made.

The experiences from the pipe offering and the dialogue in Waterton prompted a reflection on personal transformation, how the research changed, and the parallels between ceremony and research in terms of protocol and connections. The research had new implications for the Blackfoot and the relationships between researcher and community that had been formed, and thus for me. The research and its outcomes needed to promote healing – for the Blackfoot, between researchers and the Blackfoot, and for society. There are certain protocols in both research and ceremony; there are protocols in Blackfoot ceremonies and culture; there are protocols for research in terms of ethics, and there are protocols for how one respects the relationships that have formed and how one renews them. Developing genuine relationships to work or do research with others will result in an expansion of that relational web, but there are proper ways of doing this. Respect and going through the right people are important elements of this relationship building protocol, which requires patience, flexibility, trust, honesty, humility, and an open heart and mind. Things will change, the research “goals” or “objectives” might change because what the researcher thought was important might become secondary to what an elder or community member knows is more helpful or beneficial. Adaptation and collaboration to shape research in a way that is good and beneficial to the community is critical. Co-learning and growth happens during this process.

Shawn Wilson states, “research is ceremony”. This means that one is constantly renewing the relationships throughout the research process, following certain protocols, becoming transformed, thus transforming the research so that it becomes what it is supposed to be. He explains, “an Indigenous research paradigm is relational and maintains relational accountability” (Wilson 2008, p.71) and that “research must accurately reflect and build upon the relationships between the ideas and participants” (p.101). Wilson outlines such relational accountability in the research process:

“The first is through how we go about choosing the topics we will research. The second is in the methods that we use to ‘collect our data’ or build our relationships. The third is the way in which we analyze what we are learning. Finally, we maintain relational accountability in the way in which we present the outcomes of the research. I see these four things in a circle in my mind, with each blending into and influencing the others.” – Wilson 2008, Research is Ceremony, p.107

The methodology used in this study was informed by this Indigenous methodological framework and system of renewal and based on relationships and accountable practices between
the research, the researcher and home institution (University of Guelph), and research participants or collaborators. Relationships were central to data collection and the depth of inclusion of myself and my home institution colleagues amongst the Blackfoot people (and non-Indigenous participants). Each step in the methodology process renewed and reinforced those relationships (Fig. 2.1).

Figure 2.1 A cyclical illustration of the research methodology based within an Indigenous research framework (Wilson 2008). Relationships with Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders informed and fine-tuned the research design. In order to understand the worldview and issues from a Blackfoot perspective, my Blackfoot mentor, Angela, guided me through ceremonial processes to connect to buffalo on a holistic and academic level. Research implementation was paralleled by a reflective process required by Angela through which she also provided insight and feedback. Research follow up included reports, post-research presentations, and discussions of next steps. Relationships are renewed and strengthened through each step, and the positive cycle is reinforced over time.

2.5 Methodological Approach and Protocol
2.5.1 Rationale for Blackfeet Nation Focus

I focused on people, places, and ethics review in the Blackfeet Nation instead of the entire Blackfoot Confederacy because the bison herd for reintroduction is located on the Blackfeet Reservation. Furthermore, while efforts to support the reintroduction and potential

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7 This diagram is of my own design, but based on an Indigenous research paradigm discussed by Shawn Wilson (2008)
locations are being identified across Blackfoot territory, most of the meetings and management design takes place within the jurisdictions of the Blackfeet Nation. Other individuals from Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani have been integral to the Initiative. These include but are not limited to: Leroy Little Bear, Paulette Fox (Holy Walking Woman), and a number of elders who were part of the early dialogues that ignited the larger efforts and remain involved today. However, the logistics and more immediate concerns of ranchers are currently centralized around the Blackfeet Reservation. Expanding the focus to areas along the Rocky Mountain front and to the other Blackfoot Reserves will be important moving forward once the bison are reintroduced and begin reestablishing their relationship with the landscape.

2.5.2 Ethics Review and Protecting Indigenous Intellectual Rights

One of the first steps in this methodological process was the ethics review through my own academic institution and through the Blackfeet Community College Institutional Review Board (BCC IRB). After getting University of Guelph ethics approval, I contacted the BCC IRB, introduced myself and my research, and requested an application for ethics review. This process ensured that the Blackfeet Nation had authority over my research practice, that participants were protected. Ownership and access to raw data and results was also negotiated. While the majority of Blackfoot participants were from the Blackfeet Nation, the BCC IRB ethics review also stood in trust for my research interactions with other members of the Blackfoot Confederacy. This expanded responsibility to relationships with Blackfoot participants and outlined accountability to them in a very explicit way. This research was approved with specific conditions: to include or attempt to include certain individuals, to agree to present research results, to offer timely updates of any changes to research protocol or design, and to give the Blackfeet Nation IRB the right to approve any final publications being produced and retain copies of said publications (Appendix A).

Given the historical and present colonial misappropriation and publication of sensitive Indigenous intellectual information, these steps were crucial in protecting the rights and knowledge of those involved in this research (FNIGC 2018). The First Nations Information Governance Centre outlines the Principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP); these assert the rights of First Nations to maintain control over the collection and use of data gathered in their communities, to access said data, and to physically retain copies of raw
data about or from their communities (FNIGC 2018). Such rights, though not specifically referenced as OCAP, were present in the Blackfeet IRB application and review.

As per the protocols of *poohmahksin* (transfers), certain people have transferred authority to speak on certain things and impart specific knowledge (Grier 2014). Committee member, Angela Grier, the BCC IRB, and institutions such as the FNIGC that outline the principles of OCAP require that this publication undergo final reviews to ensure no Indigenous ethical protocols were breached and that potentially vulnerable or sensitive cultural knowledge or information is not shared. While the University of Guelph does not have formal policy for these practices, they do require a research ethics supplemental form if working with Indigenous communities that is based on the Tri-Council Panel on Research Ethics (TCPS 2) guidelines for doing research with Indigenous people and respect the wishes of Indigenous communities to access and maintain rights to data as per outlined in OCAP (personal communication 2018).

2.5.3 Making Community Connections

Within this application, specific demographics of individuals who would be involved in the research had to be identified, two of which were Blackfeet cattle ranchers and individuals involved in the Iinnii Initiative working group. Important to understanding how these connections with ranchers and Iinnii Initiative members were made, I will first share how I introduced and immersed myself in the Blackfeet community. First, permission was received from the Blackfeet Iinnii Initiative Program Coordinator and Buffalo Program Director to attend an Iinnii Initiative Working Group meeting to introduce myself and the research. Upon introducing myself I shared my Blackfoot name, who gave it to me, some other Blackfoot relations (i.e. Angela, Patrick, etc.), my personal background, motivations for the research and hopes for what it would achieve, and requested feedback, advice for improvement, and how to focus the research to be more helpful. People appeared receptive and welcoming, and it was here that I met Loren BirdRattler, the director of the Blackfeet Agricultural Resource Management Plan (ARMP) who fortuitously invited me to live with him for August and September. Later, BirdRattler explained that he understood the importance of having outside researchers or workers live and make relationships within the community in order to be accepted and develop a sense of legitimacy, which is why he extended the offer for me to live with him. This speaks to the reciprocity in relationships as aforementioned in the research methodology (Fig. 2.1). This was
valuable for creating a positive relationship with this individual and for setting up interviews with ranchers and other Tribal members moving forward. By offering to come into the community, develop relations, and gain legitimacy, it would become easier to do work that was valuable and beneficial for the community in return.

2.5.4 Selecting Blackfeet Rancher Participants

My approach to selecting Blackfeet ranchers began with cold-calling and then expanded to include recommendations from others through their networks. I first contacted an individual who works for the Blackfeet Agricultural Extension Office, who is a rancher herself, and who knows other ranchers on the reservation. Contact via email and phone was attempted, but an in-person visit was most effective – a common practice in Indigenous research according to Grier (personal communication, 2018). The reason I was able to contact her more directly was in part due to my relationship with BirdRattler, again reinforcing the importance of relations in the methodological cycle (Fig. 2.1). The individual who worked with the extension office shared some of their personal insights on the Iinnii Initiative and level of engagement with ranchers, and upon my request, collected names and contact information for a number of ranchers they felt would be interested in participating in the research.

The Blackfeet Buffalo Program Director, Ervin Carlson, who is also the President of the Intertribal Buffalo Council, also offered guidance for interviews. During a conversation with him, I explained how I had completed some interviews with ranchers in Alberta about their perceptions of bison and potential concerns regarding disease transmission and property damage and asked if this would be helpful to continue on the reservation. He affirmed this and suggested that I focus my efforts on connecting with ranchers in the Badger Two Medicine (B2M) and Chief Mountain areas on the reservation, and across the border in Alberta near Police Outpost Provincial Park and the Poll Haven Community Pasture, since these are the regions of interest for bison habitat and movement. I interviewed a total of eight ranchers, two of which were from the Chief Mountain area, three were from the B2M area closer to Heart Butte, and three were located more centrally around Browning. One of the ranchers around Browning was Sheldon Carlson, the Blackfeet Buffalo Herd Manager at the time. He offered some insights into what other cattle

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8 This is similar to a “snowball” strategy in conventional Western social science methods. The same methods were utilized for acquiring rancher participants in Alberta.
ranchers had shared as concerns, in addition to his own experiences relating to and taking care of bison. Most of these ranchers were on the list of individuals that was provided to me by the Ag. Extension Office employee, while a couple of them were connected with me through other contacts and relations.

Supplementing these rancher interviews, I engaged in participant observation at the Blackfeet Stock Growers Association Meeting (BSGA). This occurred at the end of the field season, and it was through the individual who worked in the Blackfeet Agricultural Extension Office and other relations that I was invited to attend. I listened to other agenda items and introduced myself and my project opening up the floor for feedback and input from the ranchers present at the meeting. I did not collect individual names or identities for research purposes, but rather focused on identifying and gathering common concerns, questions, and perceptions about bison and the restoration more specifically. This was helpful for corroborating concerns from other Blackfeet ranchers, and after discussing the potential for setting up a meeting with Iinnii Initiative representatives, was also valuable for identifying a potential venue for future rancher dialogues. Following a similar theme for other interactions, this would not have been possible had I not lived in the community for two months prior and done interviews with other ranchers. Face-to-face interactions and communication, observing and listening to develop understanding before speaking, sharing and generosity, developing cultural sensitivity and political astuteness, and minimizing geographic distance between researcher and community partners are all important values when doing research with Indigenous communities (Ritchie et al. 2013; Smith 2005). These demonstrate the need to immerse oneself in the community. Having my relational network extend to those ranchers, individuals working on the ARMP, in the Ag Extension Office, and in the Iinnii Initiative enabled me to come to this meeting, maintain a greater sense of legitimacy, and respectfully empathize and relate to these individuals on the BSGA, which resulted in a reciprocated respect towards me and the work I was doing. Referring back to the methodological cycle (Fig. 2.1), these demonstrate and reinforce the importance of relational network development vis-à-vis research outcomes.

2.5.5 Selecting Blackfeet Iinnii Initiative Participants

These relational networks were also integral in helping me get interviews with other Blackfeet individuals who are more heavily involved in the Iinnii Initiative. Attending the
working group meeting and observing who was represented, who facilitated the meetings, led presentations, and who was looked to for leadership and affirmation helped develop a sense of key Blackfeet, state, and NGO individuals to interview. Ultimately, four Blackfeet members who I saw play prominent roles in the origins or current development of the Iinnii Initiative, or who were recommended to me by other individuals were interviewed. These were Ervin Carlson, Loren BirdRattler, Carol Murray (who I primarily interviewed as a rancher), and Tyson Running Wolf. Leroy Little Bear from the Kainai First Nation was also interviewed.

Ervin was an earlier contact from the working group meeting, who I was introduced to through Cheri Kicking Woman, the Iinnii Program coordinator. As aforementioned, he is the Director of the Blackfeet Buffalo Program and President of the ITBC. Loren BirdRattler has become a dear friend and colleague and was my host in Blackfeet country for August and September. He is the Project Manager of the Blackfeet ARMP and sits on the Iinnii working group as an individual who seeks to bring buffalo conservation and sustainable agricultural development together. Some of his vocational experiences include positions across the public and private sector, including the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian, National Congress of American Indians, Western Native Voice, and the U.S. Department of Defenses’ Native American Lands Environmental Mitigation Program. Carol Murray holds an M.Ed. in Adult and Higher education, is a respected ceremonialist and knowledge holder within the Blackfeet community, is currently the president at the Blackfeet Community College, and runs a small cattle ranch with her husband just south of Browning. She strongly supports the restoration of buffalo and Blackfoot lifeways and culture, while simultaneously recognizing the challenges of communication and other concerns from community members and the need to mitigate them. Tyson Running Wolf was a member of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council (BTBC) and is a knowledge holder in the community. He worked within fire management prior to this role and holds a degree in forestry, which offered him a “higher learning about ecosystem management and bigger landscape linking” (Running Wolf Interview 2017). He was one of the original signers on the Iinnii Agreement and has been heavily involved in the last four years by bringing the cultural component to the forefront, offering large landscape expertise, and working through the Tribal government to acquire funding for the Iinnii program. Dr. Little Bear holds a law degree and serves as a professor emeritus at the University of Lethbridge, where he also founded the Native American Studies and Management in First Nations Governance programs.
His expertise has been instrumental in supporting First Nations by consulting for the Kainai First Nation, Assembly of First Nations of Canada, and Indian Association of Alberta, while also advocating for First Nations land claims and treaty rights. He was also one of the original signers of the Buffalo Treaty (2014) that brought together First Nations and Native American Tribes to collectively support the bio-cultural restoration of bison to Indigenous territories across the North American plains.

2.6 Reflections and Improvements

Returning to the methodological approach used in this research (Fig. 2.1), continuous self-reflection was a regular practice. Scholars have noted the importance of reflecting on: positionality; identifying points of discomfort; instances where mistakes were made and where measures to improve could be taken; and how one – especially as a white, western, researcher – may remain complicit in colonial and racist structures and systems (Aveling 2013; de Leeuw, Cameron & Greenwood 2012; Menzies 2001; Smithers Graeme & Mandawe 2017). Here, I discuss a few of these instances, what I learned from them, and how I intend to improve in future research endeavors. Critics of reflexive methodologies argue that it can become self-centered and lose sight of the intent to enhance the greater good through experience and knowledge sharing (Smithers Graeme & Mandawe 2017). Some even argue that non-Indigenous individuals should refrain entirely from research with or in Indigenous communities based on their ever-present position of privilege and power, and inability to fully experience colonization and embrace an Indigenous way of being, knowing, and doing (Aveling 2013). Instead, from her settler-ally point of view, Aveling (2013) argues that non-Indigenous individuals should focus on allying with Indigenous researchers to break down structural and institutional barriers that prevent the advancement of Indigenous research.

While, I see the validity in these statements, and Aveling (2013) offers a clear reflection of her experiences that informed this position, I contend that it is important for non-Indigenous individuals to do research with Indigenous communities and partners. Developing Indigenous and non-Indigenous research partnerships and navigating Indigenous Research Ethics Boards can be a good practice for learning how to create “meaningful power-sharing arrangements” (Stiegman & Castleden 2015). Furthermore, Whyte and others share seven Indigenous Principles that can guide environmental governance partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous
actors, which include: self-determination, early involvement, intergenerational involvement, continuous cross-cultural education, balance of power and decision-making, respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, and control of knowledge mobilization (Whyte, Reo & McGregor 2018). Although these principles are discussed vis-à-vis environmental governance, their practice and theoretical underpinnings are just as applicable to research partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors.

Resonating with these scholars, Roberta Nackoochee, a Mushkegowuk (Eastern Swampy Cree) colleague of mine insightfully shared with me that it is integral for non-Indigenous researchers to navigate Indigenous research ethics and create meaningful relationships with Indigenous partners; otherwise, non-Indigenous researchers will fail to understand the importance of these process for decolonization and how to engage in them properly (personal communication 2018). Had I not done research with the Blackfoot Confederacy, my understanding of settler-Indigenous relations and decolonization would much more limited, let alone my understanding of cultural and knowledge sharing protocols, the importance of community data ownership, and power relations between researcher and community members. Furthermore, the relationships that have been cultivated between myself, my advisor, and community members, that were critical to my personal and intellectual growth and in forwarding positive relations between Blackfoot communities and the academy through the University of Guelph, would not have been formed.

Geography is an inherently colonial discipline, laden with patriarchal white privilege and power inequalities between researcher and participants. Being a white-male from the upper-middle class, educated in a Western scientific tradition, situates me in a position where social and political structures and systems privilege my views, actions, skin color, gender, and voice over others. I also come from a tradition that views the world and environment as something from which I can stand apart, observe, understand, and control in an objective manner. So, despite how educated I become and how much I participate in and experience different cultures, spiritual practices, and worldviews, these privileges and western influences will never fully become absent from my reality and interactions with the world.

However, as aforementioned, the relationships developed in this research and subsequent engagement with Blackfoot ways of being and doing cultivated a personal transformation that assists the active awareness and utilization of my privilege for positive outcomes. Such
experiences also work to decenter and challenge the idea that Western ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies are superior to Indigenous equivalents, and instead support what Mi’ikmaw elder Albert Marshall calls a two-eyed seeing approach that “refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all” (Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall 2012). The relations and experiences from this research are thus also integral in helping to decolonize research relations between the Blackfoot and the academy, particularly through the University of Guelph, hopefully continuing positive relations over time and bringing about larger change across the academy.

2.6.1 Hiring a Blackfoot Research Assistant

The first insight learned from this research process relates to hiring and working with a Blackfoot student research assistant. Menzies (2001) outlines four basic steps for doing research with Indigenous communities which include initiating dialogue, refining research with the Nation, conducting research with community members, and the writing and follow up. While I feel that I engaged respectfully and appropriately with the first, second, and fourth steps, I know that I fell short when it came to doing research directly with community researchers. This intention was outlined in the Blackfeet IRB application, and multiple attempts were made through various avenues to connect with an interested individual and work together. Reasons for hiring a community research assistant: the engagement of a community member throughout the research; continuous co-learning and production of knowledge; the potential for putting Blackfeet participants at ease by having another Blackfeet individual present; the active incorporation of Blackfoot ways of knowing and doing into the research and analysis from a Blackfoot individual; the development of specific research skills would stay within the community to minimize reliance on external researchers; and to strengthen relations between the Blackfoot and University of Guelph that could also grow into future, formal research partnerships (Coombes et al. 2014; Menzies et al. 2001; Richardson et al. 2017).

After having an advertisement posted on the Blackfeet Community College Facebook page, one individual expressed interest via email. Plans were made to arrange this working relationship, however, due to personal family circumstances this individual had to retract their availability. Such value conflicts where family and community are prioritized over work are
often a reality for Indigenous individuals and may present a limitation to collaborative research partnerships, especially for non-Indigenous researchers who are unaware of or unfamiliar with such realities (Grier personal communication 2018). Another challenge may be the social and community relations for Indigenous individuals. Erik Mandawe (2017), a Cree scholar, offers his insight on how being a research assistant caused some of his peers to associate him less with ceremony, traditional teachings, and being an athlete, and more with research and the negative association that comes with it for many Indigenous people. Having a positive, transparent relationship with his non-Indigenous colleague where they could openly discuss motivations, challenges, and emotions was cited as valuable and something that is lacking in many research partnerships (Smithers Graeme & Mandawe 2017). Such potential limitations need to be considered so that research relationships are created with the right intentions and understandings to promote positive relations. I made further attempts to hire a research assistant by talking to others in the community and requesting to be informed of any interest, but ultimately this plan did not come to fruition. I was in communication with the Chair of the Blackfeet IRB, throughout this process and informed her of these efforts and eventual inability to hire a community research assistant.

Having a better understanding of summer work and ceremony life in Blackfoot country, and the different timelines and styles by which people work, I should have made the relationships and arrangements for a Blackfoot research assistant earlier on in the research process. This would have been challenging to do before having made the earlier relationships, which took the majority of the summer. Attempts to advertise and acquire an assistant started in August upon first moving to the Blackfeet Reservation, but my relational network in the community was still limited at that time. This limitation to the research reinforces the importance of long-term, time-committed relationship building that requires more than a summer season. Had my advisor not established Blackfoot relations in previous years, this research would not have been possible to complete in this timeline. Having those preexisting relationships and enhancing and expanding them through this research, future efforts to arrange a research assistant in advance may be easier.

While it was never explicitly stated that this work could not be done without a Blackfeet research assistant, reflecting on my positionality, I question whether or not I should have proceeded with the work without one. As listed above, there are a number of positive reasons for
hiring a community research assistant and several considerations and potential negative externalities given the particular context of the research, which may include social impacts, value conflicts, and bias; however, the positives appear to outweigh potential negatives (Coombes et al. 2014; Menzies et al. 2001; Richardson et al. 2017; Smithers Graeme & Mandawe 2017). Hiring a research assistant and working directly with community members may be a means to avoid the trap of the “white savior complex” (Cole 2012). This syndrome and its considerations are discussed well in terms of research by Adams and others (2015):

> “a neocolonial belief that problems of global poverty and injustice require the benevolent intervention of altruistic outsiders who will heroically step forward to lead oppressed Others to liberation. Whether the primary purpose of a sojourner’s work is research, community facilitation, or activism, an important consideration for the success of accompaniment approaches is the extent to which the accompanying outsider participates alongside (or even follows) rather than leads. Especially when the focus of the work is knowledge about or an effect in the marginalized target community, one must consider what qualifies the sojourning outsider rather than local inhabitants to take a leading or even supporting role. In some cases, the answer to this question might be that the outside researcher has access to audience, networks, or modes of representation to which people in marginalized or colonized communities do not. In other cases, the answer is not clear.”

Hiring a community research assistant, and transcending the “white savior complex” is, moreover, part of decolonizing research – creating equal and positive relations between communities and researchers (and institutions) built on trust through knowledge sharing, two-eyed seeing, critical reflection, and reciprocal respect (Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall 2012; Flicker et al. 2015; Morton Ninomiya & Pollock 2017; Smith 2005; Smithers Graeme & Mandawe 2017). While I considered the value of having a Blackfeet individual administer interviews with Blackfeet ranchers alongside me, I mainly considered this in relation to how it would benefit me in developing a better understanding of protocol and community relations. Identifying best practices from lessons learned, hiring a research assistant should have occurred. However, having not hired one allowed for these critical reflections. Making relationships in advance, identifying the specific research context, and discussing potential positive outcomes and limitations for the research assistant with that potential individual are necessary steps that will be helpful for future hiring processes.

### 2.6.1.1 Waterton Dialogue – Creating “Ethical Space”

Another instance that requires careful reflection is that of the Waterton dialogue. It was a gathering of individuals from across the Confederacy including ceremonialists and Indigenous
and non-Indigenous academic scholars to discuss how we could come together to assist the buffalo through research. Little Bear paralleled this dialogue protocol to the Blackfoot custom of an individual asking elders for guidance. I, as the researcher, requested the dialogue and was therefore supposed to take what I heard, reflect upon it, and interpret and apply it according to the concern at hand (Little Bear, Waterton Dialogue 2017). It was an effort to create an “ethical space” and release “tacit infrastructures” (Little Bear, Waterton Dialogue 2017), which resulted in a vulnerability that is important to decolonization (Mackey 2016). In other words, attempts would be made to put aside preconceived notions, biases, assumptions, and agendas, and instead let hearts and minds be open to the discussions and their authentic meanings. He related this process to Blackfoot customs and ceremonies such as smudges and sweat lodges that have a purifying element – releasing tacit infrastructures in a dialogue is a practice of purifying the mind and engaging the authentic aspect of the topics at hand, treating all those involved as equals (Little Bear, Waterton Dialogue 2017). Western individuals often have a pre-arranged agenda, plan, or end goal, which limits their ability for exploration of the self by shedding the ego (First Rider, Waterton Dialogue 2017). This relates to a question posed by First Rider:

“...when you are thinking about buffalo, it’s not just about “how can I help the buffalo?” It’s more about why did we get here in the first place? What happened that I’m sitting here wondering what I can do about the buffalo? So, the big question which you have to take responsibility, which all of us have to take responsibility, is why are we in this situation today? There were certain things that happened and beliefs that put us in this situation today.”

Releasing tacit infrastructures and the ego, putting aside pre-formed plans and agendas, and becoming vulnerable enables one to face these questions posed by Grier and look back at history. It goes back to the colonial history of Canada and the United States and the impacts of that worldview on the Blackfoot people. It goes through past conversations of ‘reconciliation’ and what that meant, what that means, and what that should mean. It goes back to my own history – where did I come from, why do I care, what brought me here? It goes back to the relations that brought me to this spot. Wilton Goodstriker, a Kainai elder and knowledge holder, said at the 2018 Kainai Ecosystem Protection Association (KEPA) Summit, “in order to know where we are going, we need to know where we have been and where we are”. Looking back and accepting truth is part of “truth and reconciliation” and is part of what allows people to move forward together in a positive way. Part of understanding where we are, is knowing and accepting the colonial history that brought us here.
Amethyst First Rider also explained how the Blackfoot worldview and Western worldviews are embedded in their languages; Western languages that categorize things as animate and inanimate and use measurements of time limit what can be understood as alive or containing spirit (First Rider, Waterton Dialogue 2017). The Blackfoot language focuses on land, embodies cyclical processes, relationality, and spirit in all things (First Rider, Waterton Dialogue 2017; Little Bear 2012), which creates the framework for a different worldview and way of relating to the world. This understanding positions buffalo and Blackfoot people as relatives; however, upon looking back, the language is something that was almost lost during colonization. This intermediary space of language rejuvenation is where Blackfoot people are today, and the restoration of buffalo will augment the restoration of Blackfoot culture, language, and wellbeing in the future. Angela mentions “original responsibility” (Waterton Dialogue 2017). Looking back to the “original responsibility” of Blackfoot to maintain a reciprocal relationship with buffalo and to the “original responsibility” of Canada and the United States to the Blackfoot people as outlined in past treaties informs the purpose of this research; looking back to those things brought us here to support the restoration of buffalo and Blackfoot culture, and cultivate, renew, and heal relations across society. Drawing on the methodological cycle (Fig. 2.1), this dialogue was a critical part of reinforcing relations, fine-tuning research design and purpose, and developing a Blackfoot lens.

2.6.1.2 Waterton Dialogue – Cultural Protocol

On the day of the dialogue, one participant expressed to Angela about some discomfort they were experiencing. Two issues were prominent for this individual: first, the setting was uncomfortable for the discussions being had which were sacred and about traditional knowledge; second, this individual was unclear about the protection of intellectual property and culturally sensitive information. A request to audio record was made in the morning session. Angela reminded me to review the consent forms and identify potential risks and pertinent issues. However, this was done after the morning session and after the individual arrived late. This was an important issue as a potential breach in the protection of culturally sensitive information and had occurred reminding this individual of how outside individuals would come and take advantage of sacred knowledge – a point of colonial research violence done to many Indigenous communities (Coombes, Johnson & Howitt 2014; Lyons 2011; Wilson 2008).
In the moment of this mistake, the research became less important, and concern for the potential damage that may have been done to relationships became paramount. After speaking with Angela and this individual to express apologies and offer a way to reconcile the mistake, it was agreed that I would attempt to follow up at the end of the summer to arrange a circle of elders in a more traditional environment that was more comfortable for this individual. Afterwards, this individual left and I explained the situation and apologized to the rest of those who were present. Consent forms were then thoroughly reviewed.

My advisor and I attempted to follow up through various means but were unsuccessful in contacting this individual (potentially because they no longer worked in their previous position). We had been in contact with another individual within the Piikani Traditional Knowledge Center and expressed our desire to follow up on this past request. We arranged to return in March 2018 to meet with two other elders, one of which was Patrick Black Plume, to continue our relationship building as individuals and as a University with the Piikani Nation, to receive guidance and feedback on our research processes and goals, and to discuss future collaborative potential.

This experience helped me realize my investment in cultivating positive Blackfoot relations and trying to do good work. It taught about protocol, not only in terms of research ethics, but in terms of ceremony and relational accountability. It demonstrated that mistakes are going to be made, and that is okay as long as I take responsibility and the necessary steps to fix them. Even though I had read about colonial research practices, I had not fully considered how my positionality inherently influenced my thought-processes. Instead of being at the forefront of my thought process to protect the rights and knowledge of these individuals, the consent forms slipped to the back of my mind because I thought that we were all coming together as equals, and some as friends, to discuss interesting and valuable ideas. Being a white male, and not being a victim of colonialism and racism myself, I was able to think this way. I was able to presume equality, to presume cordiality, innocence, friendliness, and good intentions. Thus, this experience also demonstrated to me the socially, politically, and emotionally complex nature of research and developing community relations. It taught the necessity of being aware of and attending to one’s positionality throughout these processes, and the humility needed to face failure and decolonize oneself.
2.7 Conclusion and Advice for Allies

I was “brought into the community as a “helper” and developed “kinship” with the Blackfoot people in a spiritual form, which is one of the most holy levels since spirituality is at the center of the Blackfoot world (Grier, personal communication, March 2018). Anne Bishop (1994, as cited by Wallace 2011) describes allies as individuals who: connect with all other people; grasp the concept of collective responsibility; maintain a sense of their own power and hold an understanding of “power with” as opposed to “power over”; are honest, open, willing to be vulnerable, and recognize their limitations; demonstrate a knowledge of history and their position within past and present oppressive systems; and recognize that good intentions do not change oppression unless accompanied by action. Paulette Regan (2010) argues that non-Indigenous allies must participate in a re-telling of the version of history that is presented by Western dominant culture and that being uncomfortable upon revealing the truth of settler-colonial history is a valuable and necessary element of this process. Here, I reflect on conversations with my Blackfoot committee member, Angela Grier, about experiences that helped shaped my understanding and development of being a non-Indigenous ally. I then offer some advice from what I have experienced and learned to other non-Indigenous individuals seeking to be allies and work with Indigenous communities.

2.7.1 Having an Indigenous Committee Member and Maintaining Relationships

First of all, having Angela on my committee was crucial as she is from the Blackfoot Confederacy and networked into the communities with whom I was working. She was not only my touchstone for expanding my relational network, she was a mentor for cultural protocol, and assisted me through my reflections that have helped me better understand my role as a researcher, individual adopted into the community, and what decolonizing research requires. She has and will be a valuable reviewer for my thesis and subsequent publications to ensure accuracy and that cultural protocol was not breached, in addition to a potential co-author for this methodology manuscript. Finally, her active presence on my committee helps to set an example for other graduate students doing research with Indigenous communities to do the same, while also pushing universities to make this a more common practice.
With the personal transformations that have come through ceremony, through my new relationships with people and the land, and through research, I have come closer to a Blackfoot world view, which will help me in the long-term work that all of this is for. This research was a requirement for completing my graduate degree, but moreover it was a “stepping stone” on which I made relationships and promises to return and share results, discuss next steps, and continue doing work to help the Blackfoot people in some capacity. What that work looks like in the future will be dependent on a variety of factors including the needs of the community and my own responsibility to the relationships of friends and family back home in Pennsylvania. Having developed a relationship with an Indigenous community that is so far away from my home, family, and other relationships is a limitation in terms of proximity not only with regard to research access and continuation, but also with regard to general relationship maintenance (Ritchie 2013). This is something that others may consider when establishing long-term relationships with Indigenous communities. Often, non-Indigenous individuals come into a community, do work, and leave; cultural data is published or stored, and little benefit is brought to the communities from which that data was gathered (Wilson 2008). I do not want this research to become an intellectual exercise that collects dust on a shelf; I want the research to be valuable for the Blackfoot and non-Blackfoot communities with whom I worked by offering practical insights to support the Iinnii Initiative, facilitate dialogue and cross-cultural communication across social groups, and I want to maintain these relationships.

In the Blackfoot world view, prayers seek to help set an individual on the right path in life by altering energies (Grier 2014). Carol Murray (as cited by Grier 2014) explains that an individual offering prayer may not realize the spiritual work that is happening until retrospectively realizing that their needs were fulfilled, and life course was shifted in a positive way. In a Blackfoot perspective, Vows are the most advanced type of prayer meant to shift negative energies and alter one’s life circumstances and are requested to an elder of a sacred bundle (Grier 2014). A few life circumstances in my first year of graduate study and leading up to my summer in Blackfoot territory held me back from fully investing in the communities and work I was doing. However, with a change in those circumstances, I was blessed to be able to then invest myself and allow my future decisions to be shaped by these relationships. As Angela insightfully reflected, this feeling of serendipity was my realizing my destiny unfolding in front of me. When I stepped into this role, my life started making significant changes. I engaged with
prayer and held a ceremony for my research, and at that point – even without my knowing – my
spirit was having its own conversation. Once I performed that ceremony, I was engaging in a
Blackfoot way, asking for help and support throughout my studies.

Though I did not perform a formal Vow as understood from a Blackfoot perspective, I
did engage in prayer often both in a more formal setting at ceremony, or personally on my own.
It is my belief that engaging in meaningful prayer and trying to do these things for which I
sought guidance and strength helped things positively come to fruition for the research and for
my life. As Angela and I discussed, ceremony is very important in my methodology, thus
recognizing the ways in which I engaged in prayer and ceremony to guide the research are
necessary. Prayer is reciprocal and participatory (Allan Pard, as cited by Grier 2014), and
therefore with these blessings come individual responsibility.

Angela explained, “breaking down methodology is important and helpful for
decolonizing research”, and she pointed out that I have a privilege of being connected, and thus
have a responsibility to share how to properly develop relationships. She further stated, “a virtue
of Blackfoot world view is noninterference. We don’t force anyone to do anything; we leave it
up to the person to demonstrate what they are about. We just do the education and teaching. If
the person does not follow through with the commitment, then that is on them, not a reflection of
the teacher.” Maintaining accountability to my Blackfoot relations and following through to
ensure that the work I do is beneficial to the community is a responsibility of mine to uphold.
One way in which I intend to do that is through continued engagement with Angela and others
moving forward through potential co-authorship of this methodology. I also returned to
Blackfoot territory the following summer to visit with friends and family, renew my offerings
through ceremony, follow up with research participants and collaborators, present research
findings, and discuss potential next steps. Plans for future involvement have not been concretely
determined, but I am fortunate that I have the privilege and freedom – but also the responsibility
– to shape my future life decisions around my ability to return and maintain these relationships.

2.7.2 Decolonizing Research

As was made clear to me by Angela, I have a privilege of being connected to the
Blackfoot people, and thus a responsibility to share how to properly develop relationships. To
close, I will offer some advice for others intending to work with Indigenous communities and
pursue the larger decolonizing project. I also recognize that my positionality as a white-male researcher from the upper-middle class puts me in a very different position of power and privilege than my Blackfoot collaborators and participants and other researchers who are not white men. I never felt unsafe or threatened by other individuals in any community I was in; I could speak freely – although, I often refrained from this and tried to, instead, focus on listening so that I did not fall into the trap of being the white man who explains to everyone else. Thus, the advice I offer does not come from a place of presumed perfect understanding or practice, nor does it neglect the fact that my reality as a white male offers me certain comforts and abilities that other researchers may not have.

To conclude, I have identified three recommendations for non-Indigenous scholars seeking to work with Indigenous people and communities. These include: 1) cultivate cultural competency 2) develop Indigenous relations 3) embrace discomfort. While these lessons developed alongside work with the Blackfoot\(^9\) and hold a specific focus to working with the Blackfoot, they are also applicable to working with Indigenous people and communities more broadly.

2.7.2.1 **Cultivating Cultural Competency**

My first piece of advice is: come educated but come to learn. Before working with an Indigenous community, it is important to know the context of that community, including their traditional territory, settler-colonial history, current projects that are relevant to the prospective research, and some insight on their world view, practices, and cultural protocols. It is also necessary to maintain an open mind and heart, recognizing that there is much more to learn from the people who live in that community, and to demonstrate a desire to participate and enhance one’s own understanding. To borrow from the book *Indian Horse*, “…humility is the foundation of all learning” (Wagamese 2012). Mistakes will be made, and this is normal; it is part of the learning process. However, it is important to take responsibility for such mistakes, learn from it,

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\(^9\) My experiences were mainly with the Blackfeet Nation in Montana and the Kainai and Piikani in Alberta. I did not work with individuals from Siksika primarily due to geographic location. Their reserve is located closer to Calgary which is 3 hours north of Piikani and Kainai and even farther from the Blackfeet. Most of the active linnii Initiative work was happening on the Blackfeet Reservation and the ceremonies in which I participated took place on or near the Piikani, Kainai and Blackfeet Reserves. I met some individuals from the Siksika Nation, but only peripherally.
and make appropriate reparations. Having strong relationships is very helpful in this learning process, which brings me to my second recommendation.

2.7.2.2 Developing Indigenous Relations and Taking Time

Relationship building is key and takes time, so plan for it. Developing Indigenous relations in everyday life and in research are two separate, yet related practices. Coulthard argues that contemporary “liberal politics of recognition” by Canada towards Indigenous people only perpetuate the trapping of Indigenous people in colonial systems of oppression (2007; 2014). Practicing the attributes mentioned earlier by Bishop (1994) and Regan (2010) to develop oneself as an ally alongside Indigenous people is an important part of expanding one’s relational network to include Indigenous people and support their self-determination and “turning away” from the politics of recognition. Indigenous research relations require taking these practices and applying them to the methodology, implementation, dissemination, and future of one’s research. My field season lasted from May 2017 through September 2017. The first two months consisted primarily of relationship building – not only with Blackfoot community members, but with non-Indigenous ranchers and Waterton Park community members as well. Establishing oneself in a community, getting to know people by name, attending events, sharing meals, participating in ceremony, accepting invitations and generally saying “yes” – all of this takes time and is critical to the success of the research, but more importantly to a long-term connection with that community.

Little Bear reminds us that in an Indigenous perspective, time becomes less important than patterns, renewal, cyclical processes, and relations (2000; 2012). On the other hand, Western perspectives and language are centered on time, categorizations, and are linear (Little Bear 2000). If one is trying to decolonize research, relationships must be at the forefront, and time needs to be dedicated to cultivating them. Additionally, Indigenous communities at times have their own needs that may be prioritized over research and research partnerships, which can become a burden to community members especially if lacking capacity or not receiving due compensation for their efforts (Brunger & Wall 2016; Cochran et al. 2008). Putting aside Western linear and results-oriented workstyles, planning for long time periods to build relations, and understanding that research might take longer than expected is a helpful practice for developing Indigenous research relations.
Creating long-term relationships and ensuring that the research is beneficial to the community takes time and can be difficult. One’s own expectations of relationship building, research implementation, ways of talking to people, requesting information or participation, and workstyles may be challenged. It is hard to re-orient such ways of thinking and doing. While the topic of my research was discussed as part of introducing myself, much of the practice and time for relationship building did nothing to actually forward what is normally thought of as ‘doing’ research (i.e. gathering data). However, by shifting my perspective to a more relational and long-term way of thinking and doing, it became apparent that the relationships were crucial to the research in the long-term – by expanding my network and legitimacy within communities through these relationships, ‘doing’ the research became easier later on.

2.7.2.3 Embracing Discomfort

My final piece of advice builds of the previous two: be uncomfortable. It may also be tempting to abandon the research idea altogether to avoid the hassle of a community’s ethics review process, or because of fear that the research will not get done within specific time parameters set by a University or research institution. This is uncomfortable. It might feel to do a second ethics application on top of the one required by one’s home research institution. To reiterate, navigating and following Indigenous ethics review protocol is a necessary aspect to developing relations, protecting rights of participants and the community, and safeguarding cultural and sensitive data. Do not be discouraged by the amount of time and effort this work takes or the flexibility necessary in research design and implementation. Part of this challenge is creating this flexibility and responsibility within our own academic and research institutions.

Another part of the discomfort is being vulnerable. Doing this, opening up to share my story, where I came from, my struggles and challenges, my lack of knowledge or understanding, my intentions and hopes, and what brought me to work with the Blackfoot in the first place became an important practice for relating to others. Ultimately, however, the enhanced relationship and support from others after being vulnerable helped make such a practice easier. Being uncomfortable with my own actions, words, or decisions also made me realize that I was potentially making mistakes and reminded me to check my positionality and intentions. It reminded me that I am not perfect and allowed me to reflect on what I could do better to create meaningful relationships and participate effectively in decolonization. Mackey (2016) reminds
us to embrace our “settler discomfort” and feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. These anxieties and feelings of discomfort are common in many settler persons who are trying to wrestle with their own role in settler colonial society and their role in decolonization. It is a discomfort that I felt as a settler, white, male researcher during this journey, and one with which I continue to struggle. Taken seriously alongside the other recommendations and lessons learned, this discomfort and uncertainty needs to be embraced and supported as it expands our experience, understanding, and relationships that help guide the process of reconciliation and decolonization.
Chapter 3 Manuscript 1 Learning from the Iinnii Initiative: Factors that shape Indigenous-led collaborative conservation

Abstract: Within conservation’s recent evolution to more collaborative approaches that engage the different knowledge systems and skills of diverse actors, there has been an increase in Indigenous-led conservation initiatives that also parallel international calls for decolonization. While past research on collaborative conservation has focused on relationship dynamics between actors at the organizational and regional scale, less focus has been given to the attributes of individuals that shape collaboration. The Iinnii Initiative is a Blackfoot-led endeavor to restore wild, free-roaming bison to Blackfoot traditional territory in and around Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park in Alberta and Montana. Being centered on Blackfoot values and practice and bringing together a network of rights holders and stakeholders, it presents itself as a potential model for Indigenous-led decolonized conservation from which to learn. In order to understand this potential further, this research explores the factors that shape collaboration with a focus on individual attributes and potential challenges. The ability to identify the unique values, skills, and authority of each collaborator; embrace and adapt to uncertainty; maintain a holistic approach to conservation; and demonstrate boundary-breaking thought, were identified as critical attributes that bolstered collaboration. Challenges to the Initiative included transparent and accurate communication, navigating different worldviews and workstyles, and uncertainty and risk.

3.1 Introduction: Bringing Back the Buffalo

Blackfoot knowledge systems and ways of life are cultivated from a perspective of being in relationship with and learning from the cosmos and the land, which include animals, plants, and other spiritual beings (Bullchild 2005; Ewers 1983; Ladner 2003; Little Bear 2000; Oetelaar 2014). Such epistemological views enable non-human animals like the buffalo to be central to the production and sharing of knowledge and to influence the decisions and actions of humans. For the Blackfoot, Iinnii is a cultural and spiritual relative, a guide for how to live and structure society, in addition to a critical source of meat, clothing, tools, and shelter (Iinnii Vision Statement n.d.; Ladner 2003). The livelihood of the Blackfoot people was dependent upon the relationship that they had with the buffalo. The buffalo is treated with reciprocal respect that requires regular ceremonies, prayers, and songs to renew this relationship, and in return the buffalo agrees to give itself to the Blackfoot to sustain and teach them (Oetelaar 2014).

Europeans and Americans who moved west during the 1800s and came across seemingly endless populations of bison saw them as a commodity that could be exploited for fur and leather to enhance industrial development in the eastern part of the continent (Ewers 1983; Hornaday 1989; Oetelaar 2014; Sanderson et al. 2008). Eventually, the U.S. and Canadian governments

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10 Plains bison (Bison bison bison) are colloquially referred to as buffalo in Montana and Alberta and are called Iinnii in the Blackfoot language. Throughout this manuscript I use these terms interchangeably.
realized that the extermination of the bison would also force the Blackfoot and other First Nations to change their buffalo hunting lifestyles to ones of agriculture, cattle, and Western values, and therefore did nothing to prevent the elimination of the buffalo (Ewers 1983). This mentality and specific lack of action forwarded the settler-colonial process that shaped both Canada and the United States and cleared the North American plains for Western settlement. By the early 1880s, the once plentiful bison were diminished to merely a few hundred. Clearly a strategic move to eliminate the primary subsistence lifestyle of the Blackfoot people, the extermination of bison resulted in the near extinguishment of Blackfoot life and culture (Ewers 1983; Hornaday 1889).

Samuel Walking Coyote – a Pend d’Oreille man – and his wife Sabine were integral in early efforts to save the last remaining buffalo in Blackfeet territory in the late 1870s. They were able to establish a herd of 13 that they later sold to Michel Pablo and Charles Allard in 1884 who expanded the size of the herd and eventually sold them to the government of Canada (Zontek 1995). The Pablo-Allard herd has been the breeding source for the present bison herd in what is now Elk Island National Park in Alberta (Oetelaar 2014). The restoration of bison to Blackfoot territory is of ecological importance as they enhance biodiversity through their grazing and wallowing behaviors (Knapp et al. 1999; Truett et al. 2001). Moreover, by reconnecting bison, people, lands, and culture, the restoration of bison may reinvigorate Blackfoot traditional practices, language, and lifeways, enhancing Blackfoot cultural, spiritual, economic, and physical health (Iinnii Management Plan 2017, BFT 1 Interview 2017).

The Iinnii Initiative, officially established in 2011, is a collaborative conservation effort led by the Blackfoot Confederacy that seeks to restore plains bison to Blackfoot traditional territory in and around Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. The reintroduction is a cross-border endeavor on multiple scales, seeking to overcome the various challenges of international borders, protected areas, private property lines, traditional territory claims, and colonially constructed reservation boundaries. This initiative is occurring within the Crown of the Continent ecoregion, a primary conservation and livelihood interest for many organizations, agencies, and communities. Therefore, Parks Canada (PC), the United States National Park Service (NPS), the State of Montana, Province of Alberta, and conservation non-government organizations (NGOs) like the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) all have a stake in this reintroduction, along with local Blackfoot and non-Indigenous cattle ranchers. This large-scale
conservation effort requires the close collaboration of numerous actors and, therefore, also offers an opportunity to explore what such forms of collaborative conservation governance might look like across this complex and fragmented landscape.

3.2 Shifts in Conservation Governance

In the United States, 80 percent of critical habitats for more than half of the species on the Endangered Species list exist outside federally protected areas (Rodriguez 1997). In addition, wildlife is mobile, and moves beyond designated protected area boundaries. Conservation efforts, therefore, need to extend beyond these boundaries as well. The Crown of the Continent ecoregion spans the central core of the North American Rocky Mountains between the United States and Canada. Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park and the Blackfeet Reservation are included in this core. Plains bison are megafauna that shape their ecological, social and cultural environments, and their reintroduction to the Crown of the Continent ecoregion will offer complex challenges that require the collaboration of numerous actors.

Increased large landscape collaborative conservation governance is telling of a global shift away from the top-down fortress conservation model that was based on the Eurocentric and colonial nature-culture dichotomy and concept of “pristine wilderness” (Cronon 1995). This shift in the practice of conservation work towards efforts that are not state-led and engage other actors, often in collaborative ways. Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) is where local resource users, institutions, and customs are actively involved in the decision making and management of a natural resource (Armitage 2005; Bradshaw 2003). At times this can take the form of a co-management arrangement between local or Indigenous communities and government agencies (Berkes 2009). Indigenous-led conservation often takes form as an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA) or Tribal Park that is developed and managed through Indigenous ways of being and doing by Indigenous Nations (Carroll 2014; Murray & King 2012). Collaborative conservation governance brings together diverse actors such as the state, NGOs, local communities, Indigenous nations, or market-based actors to address complex conservation issues (Lauber et al. 2011; Margerum 2008; Olsson, Folke & Berkes 2004; Wyborn & Bixler 2013). A more specific example includes working landscapes where local resource users, such as ranchers, continue to utilize the landscape for their livelihood and partner with NGOs to place conservation easements and implement stewardship projects on their land (Sayre
In this manuscript I focus primarily on collaborative governance structures between the state, NGOs, and local resources users (mainly Indigenous communities).

These various forms of conservation governance can be beneficial for all parties involved, leading to novel ways of conserving and accessing land, resources, and culture (Castro & Nielson 2001). Some argue that CBNRM can lead to more just social interactions, enhanced well-being of communities, ecological integrity, and more positive and effective conservation outcomes by keeping local resource users involved in and responsible for management decisions (Armitage 2005; Bradshaw 2003; Dressler et al. 2010). Collaborative conservation with Indigenous nations offers an opportunity to right some of the wrongs of the ‘old paradigm’ of conservation and “…become part of a process of reconciliation that can support Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty and policies that express and sustain their values and secure their rights” (Stevens 2014a, p.77).

Some of the critiques that were integral in bringing about these shifts in conservation include: unequal power relations (Bridge & Perreault 2009); the realization that non-state actors lack genuine involvement despite often being the most impacted by state environmental policies and decisions (Bryant & Wilson 1998; Robbins 2006); the dominance of western technical science that often simplifies or neglects the socio-economic complexities of local communities and their resource use (Armitage 2005); the recognition that previous forms of conservation were guilty of displacing Indigenous peoples from home territories, erasing Indigenous history and culture, and marginalizing them from the land, its resources, economic benefits, and the management process (Brockington 2004; Goldman 2011; Stevens 2014b); and increased calls to recognize, respect, and uphold the rights and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples (Notzke 1995; Watson 2013).

However, scholars have also critiqued collaborative multi-actor approaches, noting continued unequal power relations (Stevens 2014a); the lack of adaptive approaches and proper capacity building particularly within community-based natural resource management (Armitage 2005; Bradshaw 2003; Diduck et al. 2005; Olsson, Folke & Berkes 2004); the minimization of local and Indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences resulting in the disempowerment and marginalization of these resource users (Berkes 2009; Mattson et al. 2006; Robbins 2006; Stevens 2014a); tokenistic involvement of Indigenous individuals that does nothing to genuinely enhance Indigenous peoples’ self-determination or control over their territory (Carroll 2014;
Castro & Nielson 2001; Watson 2013; Youdelis 2016); and the failure to recognize Indigenous actors as sovereign nations and center collaborative efforts on Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies (Reo, Whyte, McGregor et al. 2017). Using an example of the Boreal Leadership Council, Willow (2016) points out how multi-sector conservation can both empower and limit Indigenous collaborators by having their knowledge, voice, and expertise engaged and valued, but often forcing them to fit within the margins of a non-Indigenous, Western-scientific, and inequitable system.

Some examples of successful collaborative and Indigenous-led efforts in the United States and Canada reflect a rights-based “New Paradigm” of conservation where Indigenous peoples are recognized as rights-holders, and they are actively participating in the biocultural conservation and management of their land (Stevens 2014). Such examples can be seen in the shared use and management of Badlands National Park between the National Park Service and the Oglala Sioux (Craig et al. 2012) and the co-management of bison in Yukon by Champagne and Aishihik First Nations and the territorial government (Clark et al. 2016). Indigenous-led conservation and assertion of sovereignty over traditional territories and resources is also realized in Tribal Parks such as the Ute Mountain Tribal Park in Colorado, the Frog Bay Tribal Park in Wisconsin (Carroll 2014), and the Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Park in British Columbia (Carroll 2014; Murray & King 2012). It is within such Indigenous-led examples that we see the affirmation and application of Indigenous knowledge systems in conservation that also challenge the conventional, and colonial, nature-culture dichotomy that has previously dominated the conservation psyche.

3.2.1 Actor Attributes and Networks

With the shift towards a “New Paradigm” of conservation, other collaborative conservation initiatives have been explored and critiqued, particularly in terms of their successes and failures with a focus on the importance of relationship dynamics at the institutional and organizational scale (Crona & Bodin 2006; Lauber 2011; Wyborn & Bixler 2013). I draw on this body of literature to also highlight the need for a greater focus on individual attributes of conservation actors that influence collaboration.

Scholars like Wyborn and Bixler (2013) have explored in great depth the perspectives, players, structures, and modes of operation of three collaborations in the Rocky Mountains of
North America. Exploring what maintains such networks across different scales, they conclude that “successful collaboration depends on trust and tight social networks built through personal relationships” (Wyborn & Bixler 2013, p.64). Other scholars have also identified the importance of trust building, developing behavioral norms, and knowledge sharing for such adaptive collaboration (Armitage et al. 2009). Understanding the intricate patterns of interactions and relationships between individual actors and organizations can aid in the articulation and success of collaborative conservation initiatives (Lauber et al. 2011). Studies such as these that focus on how individuals interact, how local ecological knowledge is communicated within social networks (Crona & Bodin 2006), and the dynamics and evolution of social relationships overtime that underpin collaborative efforts (Nkhata, Breen, & Freimund 2008) are valuable in understanding and supporting the success and sustainability of collaborative conservation.

However, what appears limited in this body of scholarship is a focus on the specific attributes of individuals instead of group level attributes. Identifying key actors, their roles and interactions, and conservation objectives, are necessary in illuminating how conservation partnerships and relationships evolve and devolve over time (Lauber et al. 2011). Learning from a failed collaborative conservation project, Kretser, Berkmann, and Berger (2018) conclude the importance of separating individuals from organizations by recognizing the role of individual actors and what they bring to the table. Here, attributes refer to political and social power; mandate to manage based on ownership and jurisdiction; capacity in the form of skills, knowledge, and resources; and economic, cultural, or ethical motivation (Castillo et al. 2006; Kretser, Beckmann, & Berger 2018). Armitage (2005) expresses the importance of attributes of individuals within socio-institutional systems in navigating uncertainty and change within CBNRM. The performance and success of CBNRM initiatives ultimately depend on embracing uncertainty, learning from mistakes, innovation and connecting different knowledge systems to enhance learning and adaptation (Armitage 2005, p.707). He further addresses the necessity of understanding how these attributes are influenced by inter-actor dynamics and historical, economic, socio-cultural, and other processes (Armitage 2005). The understanding of these individualattributes is even more pressing given the increase in collaborative conservation efforts alongside Indigenous communities and the recent efforts to decolonize conservation practice.
The *Iinnii Initiative* has also brought together diverse actors, developed a group vision, and a management plan, which are considered stages of success in collaborative conservation working groups (Belton & Jackson-Smith). It has also been represented as a successful example of international and cross-cultural collaboration and a new model for large landscape conservation in public news releases and by collaborators (WCS 2016; Glacier NP Conservancy n.d.; personal communications 2017). Given its success thus far, identifying the attributes of individuals and potential future challenges to the Initiative may offer insights for other collaborative conservation endeavors with diverse actors and benefit the Initiative moving forward. I consider attributes such as power, mandate, capacity, and motivation (Castillo et al. 2006; Kretser, Beckmann & Berger 2018), attributes that support innovation, adaptation, and navigating uncertainty (Armitage 2005), I also remain open to new types of attributes that shape collaboration. Given this context, my research asks: what are the origins of the *Iinnii Initiative*; what are the relationship dynamics between actors; what factors and attributes appear important in shaping and informing collaboration; and what potential challenges exist for this collaborative effort given the unique histories and realities of each rights holder and stakeholder group?

3.3 Methods

3.3.1 Case Study Rationale

*The Iinnii Initiative* presents an example of Indigenous-led collaborative conservation that is hailed as successful through media, individual collaborators, and based on metrics of group success from the literature. It also presents an opportunity to explore factors that shape and inform collaboration with specific focus on attributes of individuals, organizational philosophies, and factors that could be potential challenges. Understanding this not only supports on-the-ground efforts of the Initiative, but also offers an opportunity from which other conservation practitioners can learn.

3.3.2 Positionality and Rights to Share

Recognizing my position as a while-male researcher from outside of the community, it was important for me to first develop relationships with Blackfoot collaborators to ensure that I followed proper community research and cultural protocol. Angela Grier from the Piikani Nation was the first relation I made, and it was through her that I expanded this relational network.
through attending and participating in ceremony and other community events. The purpose of this was twofold: first, it demonstrated a commitment to the community and the research; second, it enabled me to learn the meaning of bison restoration from a Blackfoot spiritual, cultural, and political context. Although I cannot entirely put aside my external, white, western lens, going through this learning process and transformation offered me the ability to decenter the lens with which I arrived.

During my time in the traditional territory of the Siksikaisitapi (Blackfoot Confederacy) in summer of 2017, I had the privilege of visiting with five individuals who were integral to the creation of the Iinnii Initiative. They shared with me their stories about the origins of the Initiative from their perspectives. In this paper, I draw from these accounts, my own experiences in participant observation (at Iinnii Initiative working group meetings, ceremonies, and conferences), interviews, and conversations with others involved in the Iinnii Initiative to share the story of its creation and purpose. I do not attempt to claim this story as my own. However, I recognize that this version of the story is not untouched by my personal experiences. Living and working with Blackfoot individuals and participating in Blackfoot ceremonies during the summer of 2017 has allowed me to cultivate relationships with numerous Blackfoot and non-Indigenous individuals who have a relationship with buffalo, individuals who are involved in the Iinnii Initiative, and with buffalo themselves. Had I not done these things and developed these relationships, I would not feel it was appropriate for me to share this story or offer critique.

3.3.3 Data Collection & Analysis

From May 2017 through January 2018 I interviewed 12 collaborators who are or were involved in the Iinnii Initiative, or whose role may become more prominent in the future. Determining who to interview was based on document review, participant observation, and recommendations from others. The Iinnii Initiative is a grassroots movement, not a formal entity or organization, thus there is frequent turnover in leadership and involvement and no set number of individuals. However, there is a central core working group that consists of individuals from the Blackfoot Confederacy, WCS, Waterton Lakes NP, Glacier NP, and State of Montana. The number of those in this working group does not always remain consistent due to the

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11 I describe these experiences participating in Blackfoot ceremony and cultivating my relationships with various Blackfoot individuals in greater depth in Chapter 2.
aforementioned turnover of leadership and involvement. I interviewed individuals who held some type of leadership role in the primary actor affiliations. I audio recorded and transcribed interviews and then uploaded them to NVivo – a qualitative analysis software – for coding analysis.

I followed a “grounded theory” approach for analyzing the interviews and documents relevant to the Iinnii Initiative’s history and the collaboration between actors. This approach refrains from applying preexisting analytical frameworks and themes to the data, but rather allows these to emerge from the data itself (Clifford et al. 2010). From my observations in the field I identified a few different themes that might present themselves in the data and designed more questions through which to explore the data. While coding interviews and documents with NVivo, I identified themes and categories that emerged from the data rather than applying preexisting categories to the data. While I knew from the literature review that I would be coding for challenges and factors that shaped collaboration, I did not assume what those would be. This enabled the data to “speak for itself” and the specific categories and themes to be self-generating from the data, and thus from the participants themselves.

Once I completed coding of 12 interviews, there were 12 different nodes or themes that categorized my data. To determine the most relevant nodes, I created a node matrix that compared each node and their references with one another (Table 3.1). This displayed the data in a manner where I could identify the most frequently coded nodes and where nodes overlapped with one another. In this paper I explore in greater depth the three most prominent themes that shaped collaboration between actors in the Initiative: 1) individual attributes 2) organizational philosophies and 3) challenges.

Table 3.1. Emergent themes from analyzing 12 interviews with members of the Iinnii Initiative working group. Node matrix cross-referenced themes with one another to provide total counts of individual themes and where overlap occurred. Highlighted values indicate a self-comparison and record the total count for that theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A) Organizational philosophies</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B) Bison habitat</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C) Blackfoot engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D) Blackfoot worldview</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E) Bridging organization</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F) Challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G) Community engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
After identifying these three most prominent nodes, I then reviewed the specific quotes (or references) that were coded within these categories to identify specific details that placed them in the node and interpret what they say about the collaboration between actors in the *Iinnii Initiative*. In the ‘Individual attributes’ node, for example, I performed this second round of coding to identify specific attributes that emerged as sub-categories. I performed this same quote identification and interpretation with the ‘Challenges’ node.

### 3.4 Results / Discussion

In this section I first present the origins of the *Iinnii Initiative* that also further situates the importance of individual attributes that shape collaboration. I then briefly outline the actors involved or impacted by the initiative and their roles and relationships. I finally explore in greater depth identified individual attributes and challenges that shape collaboration.

#### 3.4.1 Origins of the Iinnii Initiative & Identifying Individual Attributes

In 2005 and 2006, Kainai traditional knowledge holders and scholars, Paulette Fox and Dr. Leroy Little Bear, met with Kainai elders for Fox’s graduate work, and it was at these meetings that the elders expressed concern about the youth not connecting to Blackfoot culture or the world around them anymore (KA interview January 2018). They came to the collective conclusion that a large part of this disconnect was the absence of the buffalo, and thus it was time for their return (KA interview, January 2018). Paralleling this concern for buffalo, in 2006, Keith Aune, the previous director of the North America bison program from WCS and some of his colleagues resurrected the American Bison Society (ABS) – an organization that had originated 110 years earlier by Theodore Roosevelt and William Hornaday in an early effort to conserve the few remaining North American bison (WCS 1 interview July 2017). The early conferences of the re-formed American Bison Society focused on the ecological aspects of large-scale bison restoration, particularly locating the best quality large intact landscapes and the other
required elements of the ecosystem. The prairies and mountain front along Waterton-Glacier
International Peace Park and the Blackfeet Reservation were identified as one of the prime
regions for reintroducing bison. Fox and Aune had prior contact through their professional
networks in the environmental field, and eventually these two separate buffalo initiatives became
intertwined when Aune met Fox and Little Bear in 2009. Realizing that their interests and goals
for buffalo restoration were well aligned they began discussions of how they could work together
on this larger endeavor (WCS 1 interview July 2017; KA interview January 2018).

Practicing the dialogue format that Little Bear and Fox used in their earlier elder
dialogues, Aune, Fox, and Little Bear facilitated the first buffalo dialogue in 2010 (WCS 1
interview July 2017; KA interview January 2018). Blackfoot elders from across the Confederacy
came together to discuss how they could bring back Iinnii. As more conversations were held
Confederacy-wide on the U.S. and Canadian side it was as if the Buffalo Days of old had
returned and the international boundary was non-existent. Little Bear recounted some of the
discussions and the spirit of the dialogues in a presentation he gave at the 2017 Roundtable on
the Crown of the Continent:

“But, in all those dialogues, it was as though the elders were kind of testing the youth and seeing
how committed the youth were to the idea of buffalo restoration. Because, in our dialogues we
would sit in a circle, and as you saw in the pictures we would always have an empty seat for the
buffalo. There is always an empty seat there...in fact the buffalo would ask us questions such as,
“you've done without me for 150 years, why do you want me to come back? If I do come back is
just going to be the same old...or what are you going to do?” From all those dialogues, and
questions actually from the buffalo, it turned out that the buffalo spirit, the buffalo never left us. It
was us that left the buffalo.” – Leroy Little Bear, Kainai First Nation

In this particular account, the buffalo is described and understood as being present and
actively engaging in the dialogue. The questions and ideas that are being discussed and
contemplated are not human generated, but rather prompted by the buffalo itself. This reflects the
same type of interactions and agency that other non-human animals demonstrate in Blackfoot
stories like that of the Beaver Bundle and Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle. It also points to the
importance of renewing and maintaining relationships in the proper way with non-human actors.
From the start, the Iinnii Initiative was centered on Blackfoot ontology and epistemology, being
driven and guided by the buffalo. Taking seriously Blackfoot worldviews as the framework for

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12 Similar understandings of non-human animal actors are reflected in Actor Network Theory, where agency is understood as
“the capacity to produce a phenomenon or modify a state of affairs” (Jepson, Barua & Buckingham 2011). With this
understanding, it allows actors to be conceptualized beyond the historically anthropocentric view, making way for non-human
actors, especially in the field and practice of conservation.
this collaborative endeavor is an important part of decolonized conservation and a guiding principle for collaborative environmental governance according to Whyte, Reo, McGregor and others (2018). How particular non-Indigenous individuals engage with these ideas will be discussed more thoroughly later in this paper.

At an early conference that WCS and the ABS held in South Dakota, Aune met Ervin Carlson of the Blackfeet Nation and President of the Intertribal Buffalo Council. Through Carlson, the Blackfeet Nation became more heavily involved since their reservation held two of the most promising locations for bison habitat. The dialogues were held for about four years, and as Aune and Little Bear have both explained, WCS offered technical and financial assistance while taking “marching orders” from Little Bear and the elders (KA interview July 2018). In 2011, what had started as small conversations about the return of buffalo officially became the grassroots movement known now as the *Iinnii Initiative*. Fox’s mother, uncle, and countless other Blackfoot elders and knowledge holders were crucial to the Initiative’s beginnings by offering guidance and inspiration (personal communication January 2018). Overtime they garnered more support from the elders and youth, to the point where it became fully apparent that the return of the buffalo was deeply important and necessary for not only ecological restoration and integrity, but also for the physical health, and cultural and spiritual resurgence of the Blackfoot people.

Throughout the next few years, the *Iinnii Initiative* developed a strategic plan through different specialized working groups that focused on economic development, cultural education and youth engagement, and more. Student interns from the Blackfoot Confederacy were involved throughout these processes. As Aune mentioned, “we were just trying to empower people to do things amongst the group” (WCS 1 interview July 2018). In 2012 the *Iinnii Initiative* transitioned into greater action when the development of an action plan and community outreach began.

Members of the *Iinnii* Working Group and Blackfoot Confederacy created the plan and made decisions through a cultural lens first, followed by Western science to inform and support those decisions (WCS 1 interview July 2018). To answer questions that the elders proposed regarding location for reintroduction and community perspectives, the team utilized GIS mapping and social science surveys. WCS “did not bring any white world folks to come do any of [the] work” (WCS 1 interview July 2018). Aune was one of the individuals who challenged conventional approaches to conservation where science is used first with secondary integration.
of cultural perspectives, and scientists are often the project leaders and decision makers. In 
addition to the management plan approach, he further tried to educate other western scientists, 
particularly within WCS, to make sure that the Initiative did not lose the Blackfoot origins or 
methods. Practices and attributes such as committing time and resources to long-term 
relationship building, willingness to approach conservation in a more holistic manner, and 
breaking down boundaries between science and culture, appear important for these collaborative 
efforts. Having non-Indigenous allies to help create an “ethical space” where mutual respect, 
kindness, and flexibility are regular principles, and knowledge systems are valued equally, is 
important for decolonizing conservation governance and working towards reconciliation (ICE 
2018).

After a few more years of dialogues, and the realization that this initiative required the 
help and support of others, the Blackfoot Confederacy entered into a treaty with their 
neighboring First Nations and Native American Tribes. In 2014, the Buffalo Treaty was signed 
by the four Tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Ft. Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, the 
Ft. Belknap Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes, the Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes, and 
the Tsuu T’ina. The second anniversary in 2015 added the Samson Cree and Stoney Nakoda First 
Nations to the Treaty. Since then, countless others have signed on to this treaty in support of the 
biocultural restoration of wild and free-roaming buffalo across the North American plains, the 
political unification of Plains First Nations and Tribes, the engagement and education of youth, 
improvement of community health and economics, and continued dialogues, all centered on the 
buffalo (Buffalo Treaty 2014, Fig. 3.1).
This movement has not gone unnoticed. In 2015 the United States declared bison the National Mammal. In February of 2017, Banff National Park in Alberta began their soft-release of wild bison back into the Park. Since the signing of the Buffalo Treaty, the İnnii Initiative has garnered support from Waterton Lakes and Glacier National Parks, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, in addition to numerous other NGOs and individual “bison enthusiasts” as Aune calls them. The current director of WCS North American bison program, explained that there is too much to be done for one person or organization to do everything, and therefore it makes little sense to discourage others from doing good outreach or education about bison (WCS 2 interview July 2018).

The İnnii Initiative had one of its most momentous events in April of 2016 when 87 buffalo from Elk Island were transported over 400 miles to Browning, Montana on the Blackfeet
Reservation. These bison are the descendants of the original bison that roamed Blackfeet territory over 150 years ago – the same bison that were nearly exterminated but were saved by the early conservation efforts of the Walking Coyotes, Pablo and Allard. As Carlson said, the buffalo wanted to come home; they left as yearlings and wanted to return as yearlings to grow up in their Blackfeet home (BFT 4 interview 2017).

Today, this buffalo herd is living on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana, waiting to be able to roam freely once more. The Innii Initiative is currently in the process of finalizing a management plan and locating land around Chief Mountain in the northwest part of the Blackfeet reservation and Badger Two Medicine in the southwest that fluidly connect between the reservation and Waterton-Glacier IPP. Within the origins of this initiative are demonstrated certain attributes that appear important for enhancing collaboration and advancing decolonization. Exploring the potential challenges and factors most critical to collaboration among the diverse actors is important for aiding its progress, offering insight into how such a collaborative effort functions in this context, and how it may serve as a model for other multi-actor conservation initiatives that engage or are led by Indigenous nations.

3.4.2 Innii Initiative Actors & Relations

One objective of this research was to explore the relationship dynamics between rights holders and stakeholders in this initiative at greater depth (Fig. 3.2).
Innii are at the center of this relational network because they are connected to and influence all of the other actors in some capacity. Innii are seen by some Blackfoot to be leading the initiative, guiding the process and conversations, and bringing people together. In addition to instigating change socially, politically and culturally, they also raise certain feelings, fears, and emotions in individuals, leading them to develop specific perceptions, causing them to think and act in certain ways. Finally, they are clear catalysts of ecological change, shaping their ecosystem and enhancing local biodiversity (Knapp et al. 1999; Truet et al. 2001). Given these roles of Innii, they are central to this network and treated as a critical conservation actor.

The Blackfoot Confederacy holds a deeply spiritual and cultural relationship to Innii; they spearheaded and lead the Initiative.

The Wildlife Conservation Society has a direct link to Innii because as an organization they want to see bison restored for ecological purposes. Some individuals (i.e. those working directly with the Blackfeet) also support the biocultural component. WCS is directly involved in...
the *Iinnii Initiative* by offering technical expertise and skills, and funding. They have a direct working partnership and friendship with the Blackfeet Nation and the Blackfoot Confederacy in general. This developed during the beginning stages of the Initiative when Aune, Little Bear, and Fox met and aligned their goals for bison restoration, and afterwards when Aune met Carlson. WCS also has an indirect connection to Glacier National Park since they (together with the Blackfeet) reached out to the superintendent to get the Park on board with the Initiative. Part of this comes from Aune’s past work experience with individuals from the National Park Service and State of Montana. A formal MOU between WCS and the Blackfeet Nation was established in 2017 that outlines a five-year general agreement and annual task agreements with budgets and work plans (personal communication 2018).

*Glacier National Park (USA)* has a direct connection to Iinnii because they support the biocultural element of bringing bison back to the landscape, particularly the relation that the Blackfeet have with the bison. The “Home on the Range” National Park Service mandate outlines goals for National Parks to partner with/support Native American Tribes in their efforts to restore bison to the landscape (NPS 2016). They also have a direct connection to the Blackfeet Nation given the colonial history of the Park’s establishment. Glacier has an indirect relationship with WCS as mentioned above. *Waterton Lakes National Park* has a direct interest in Iinnii for purposes of restoring ecological integrity as per their park management plan (2010). Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks have a close, working relationship due to their designation as an International Peace Park (IPP).

*Other Environmental Non-Government Organizations (ENGOs)* like The Nature Conservancy, Roundtable on the Crown of the Continent, Yellowstone to Yukon, and others work on conservation issues in the region. They are respectful to the tribe and communicate on shared interests and issues, but do not play any direct role in the reintroduction of bison.

*Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP)* has an indirect connection to Iinnii, in that they manage wildlife in the state (outside the Reservation boundary) and play a role in state legislation. They appear supportive and attend the Iinnii Working Group meetings, but not necessarily on the front lines like WCS or the Blackfeet. Their role will become more prominent for redesigning a state wildlife management plan for bison and once bison are on the ground and potentially roam outside of certain jurisdictions (WCS 1 interview July 2017). The *United States*
Forest Service (USFS) manages the National Forest south of Glacier National Park and west of the Blackfeet Reservation where bison could potentially roam.

Alberta Environment & Parks (AEP) is peripherally connected to Iinnii. Reintroducing bison to Alberta is not a primary concern for the province; however, they have been informed of what is occurring, are supportive of the efforts happening on the Blackfeet Reservation, and recognize the larger cultural significance of restoring bison to Blackfoot land. As of now, they are not taking a firm stance, or taking any actions to promote or further the initiative. However, they recommend that the Blackfeet engage with local landowners (i.e. ranchers) that live along the Alberta-U.S. border (AEP interview October 2017). AEP may play a more critical role in the future if the designation of plains bison changes to wildlife and could be a source for information dissemination on legislation/management logistics.

Nature Conservancy Canada (NCC), Waterton Biosphere Reserve Association (WBRA), and local ranchers are grouped together because they share a similar level of connection to Iinnii and overlap in their community participation. A number of Albertan ranchers are part of the WBRA or the Waterton Front Project – a co-managed working landscape between ranchers and the NCC. Similarly, the NCC and WBRA as organizations currently have no direct involvement in the Iinnii Initiative but manage land that is potentially implicated in the plan to reintroduce free-roaming bison. They are identified here because of their future potential, elaborated on in Chapter 4.

3.4.3 Critical Factors for Collaboration

Amongst the themes listed in Table 3.1, two emerged as the most prominent themes directly relevant to collaboration between actors: 1) individual attributes 2) organizational philosophies. After discussing these, I will discuss key factors that are emerging or might emerge as challenges or threats to successful collaboration. While transparency in communication was considered an important attribute, it was also identified as a potential challenge. All of the themes have an influence on how actors work together and many of them overlap and interact with one another.
3.4.3.1 Individual Attributes

Coding the 107 references of the ‘Individual Attributes’ node resulted in 10 specific attributes that shape collaboration between individuals (Fig. 3.3). The three most prominent attributes include: 1) the ability to recognize the unique skillsets, values, and authority of each collaborator; 2) boundary breaking thinking; and 3) maintaining a holistic perspective and approach to conservation. While transparency and communication were identified as important, they were also identified as primary challenges, which I will elaborate on in the next section. This appears to suggest that the top three sub-themes are collectively the most important individual attributes for collaboration. However, simple quantitative analysis cannot explicate or determine the full level of importance for each attribute, as they all play a role in how individuals think and act with one another. For the sake of this paper, I will unpack the top three attributes in depth while briefly referencing some of the other attributes.

![Frequency of "Individual Attributes" graph](image)

Figure 3.3 The number of times each Individual Attribute for collaboration was identified through NVivo coding analysis. Sources are the interviews while References refer to quotations from individuals that demonstrated the different attributes. Brackets separate sub-groupings of attributes that appeared to have a difference in how often they were referenced in analysis.
Recognizing the skills and values of others

The ability to recognize the unique skillsets, values, and authority of each collaborator was the most prominent attribute for collaboration, identified in 31 different quotations across 10 sources. This mindset manifested itself in quotations where people would explicitly identify the skills, contributions, legal authority, and roles of individual actors, and how those were beneficial for the progress of the initiative.

“Well, one of the big things is it’s really good working along with [Aune] – he could talk all about the history from their side in terms of annihilating the early population of buffalo, and a lot of the science side of it. I talked about how Tribal people have lost so many things throughout the years, our culture, our language, our way of religion, and buffalo too being a big part of our culture and spirituality… and I’m thankful to [Aune] and WCS for having those connections with a lot of those people, being there and being able to communicate with them, and bring them together to communicate with us, it just made it a lot easier.” – Ervin Carlson, Director of Blackfeet Buffalo Program/President of ITBC

“In terms of replicating this sort of effort elsewhere, I think it’s important to note that the Tribe had the cultural and legal authority, but not the money or expertise, and we had completely the opposite. That kind of yin and yang is really important.” – Keith Aune, previous director of WCS North American Bison Program

Their reflections on the partnership between the Blackfeet Nation and WCS document the importance of recognizing each other’s strengths for effective collaboration. Aune’s statement that recognizes the tribe’s legal and cultural authority is particularly significant, especially if considering how such collaborative conservation partnerships could form elsewhere.

Recognizing and respecting Blackfeet authority and not trying to undermine it is critical for maintaining a cooperative and respectful relationship and creating ethical space, and although it seems like common sense, such mentalities and practice have not always been demonstrated in Western conservation. The current North American Bison Program director for WCS, makes a similar acknowledgment:

“One of the things that I think is a potential issue in this sort of situation is, are we being super pushy as the Western scientists and trying to get the Tribe to do something that maybe they’re not inclined to do. But they’re using us. It’s not using, it’s just leveraging and recognizing that you guys are good for this and that can help us be persuasive in this way. That makes it collaborative; that, I think is often lost in the narrative in Indigenous conservation. They are fully formed functional actors themselves who make independent decisions without us anyway. Being respectful of that is what makes it successful.” – Kelly Stoner, WCS Bison Program Director

The relationship between the Blackfeet and WCS is arguably the strongest relationship in the entire initiative compared to any other actors, and recognizing and respecting each other’s
autonomy, agency, and authority is critical. Recognizing this autonomy and authority of Indigenous communities has not been – and is often still not – the norm. Coulthard (2014) and others argue that the politics of recognition can be just as colonial, particularly when instituted by the State. However, this demonstration of recognition differs in that it is first of all not by the State, and has developed out of a close, working relationship with Indigenous partners in which each actor has dedicated significant time and effort. Aune directly refers to the Blackfeet Nation as a “sovereign nation”, rather than identifying the Federal Government as the decision-making body over the Blackfeet, when discussing the challenges of creating easements for bison habitat on the reservation and navigating various legal and jurisdictional complexities (WCS 1 interview July 2017). Such recognition functions more like a realization or reflection that supports Blackfeet self-determination, rather than a top-down recognition that functions to paternalistically offer the Blackfeet special privileges or accommodations.

**Boundary-breaking thought & holistic perspectives of conservation**

Boundary breaking thinking was the second most prominent attribute that was identified in 28 different quotations across 9 sources. Having a holistic perspective of conservation was the third most prominent attribute that was identified in 26 quotations across 7 sources. These attributes are closely related as ‘holistic’ inherently thinks across boundaries, however, they are separate attributes as boundary breaking thought included ideas beyond the focus of conservation. Boundary breaking thinking was illustrated by statements that explored the ideas of overcoming physical, mental, socio-political, and cultural boundaries. Some statements were focused on transcending boundaries that held various forms. Park, international, and reservation boundaries are physical in the sense that fences, signs, or entrances designate where one ends and where one begins, and they are documented on physical maps. However, these boundaries are simultaneously geo-political, socio-cultural and mental in that they were constructed by colonial governments, they separate very distinct groups of people and types of land use that are often practiced differently by different cultures, and produce socially constructed identities, in addition to psychological perceptions and barriers that often become self-imposed and self-limiting.

For example, the Blackfeet reservation was created by the U.S. government with the specific purpose to contain and determine the lifestyle and culture of the Blackfeet Nation. It is
separated from Glacier National Park, and the rest of the state of Montana. There may be an overlap of ranching culture and practice between the land designated within the boundaries of the reservation and the land that is ‘non-Blackfeet land’ outside of the reservation, but the traditional and ceremonial lifestyles and practices of the Blackfeet tend to be contained to the Reservation boundaries. A Piikani traditional knowledge holder explained that reservation boundaries have ingrained in people a way of thinking that limits their ability to look past the reservation and its individual Tribe, making it difficult to conceptualize Blackfoot people, efforts, and practice in terms of the Confederacy (personal communication Sept. 2017). Glacier National Park has traditionally remained distinct from the reservation and was originally constructed as a place for nature protection and for wealthy white individuals to visit. Blackfeet practices were not allowed here, despite being traditional territory, and some practices are still restricted today. Similar distinctions exist for the Kainai and Piikani Reserves, Waterton Lakes National Park, and the Province of Alberta.

However, boundary breaking thinking recognizes that such boundaries are not static, that people, animals, culture and practices move across such boundaries, and that these borders and the restrictions that they carry can be overcome. Despite Glacier National Park’s ‘no grazing’ policy, cattle still cross over from the reservation and regularly roam and graze within the eastern boundaries of the park. Blackfeet individuals are allowed to come into the park and practice certain traditional gathering and have been part of Park educational and cultural programs that share Blackfeet stories and culture, maintaining their presence on that land (GNP 1 interview July 2017; GNP 2 interview Nov. 2017). When bison are restored to the landscape, the intent is for them to be free-roaming; they will not adhere to geo-political and social boundaries. Further, bison may transcend different social, cultural, and mental boundaries of how they have been categorized, complicating and reshaping various perceptions of them. Bison may be used culturally for Blackfoot ceremonies; they may be recognized as both wildlife and livestock and used for food, conservation and economic development accordingly; and they may cross over ranch borders and interact with cattle in ways that may prove or disprove fears of various individuals. All of this has the ability to challenge the bounded ways in which people categorize or think about bison, forcing them to break down and broaden those constrained ways of thinking and potentially cultivating more collaborative and diverse perspectives and people.
Individuals who demonstrated a boundary breaking mentality also talked about the initiative and other efforts in terms of transboundary collaboration. At times this would manifest itself by referencing the role and efforts of the International Peace Park rather than separate National Parks (GNP 2 interview Nov. 2017), the Blackfoot Confederacy over individual tribes, or the Iinnii Initiative over individuals. Other times, this manifested itself in conversations about future projects between actors in ways that could “blur boundaries” such as stronger and more fluid collaborations between the Blackfeet and Glacier NP, or a Blackfoot National Park that would overlap the Blackfeet Reservation, Glacier NP, and State land (GNP 2 Interview Jan. 2018; BFT 1 Interview Sept. 2017).

“Quite honestly, most of those people have no idea that they are not in Glacier National Park. I think that sort of speaks to the opportunity of what I like to call a seamless experience. How do we expand those kinds of seamless experiences that can have economic benefit to the Blackfeet?...that boundary is getting fuzzier and fuzzier all the time. We want it to be really fuzzy for our visitors so that ideally a visitor would spend just as much time on the Reservation as they do in the Park and they wouldn’t know any difference. I think bison are a part of that because they are a big charismatic megafauna.

Certainly, there is that conservation piece, but it’s a huge cultural initiative. I would say for Glacier National Park being supportive of this, it’s more a cultural conservation piece than it is an ecological piece. We are not in it just to bring bison back to Glacier, we are in it because it’s part of a bigger story here that is worth knowing.” – Jeff Mow, Superintendent of Glacier National Park

Here, the superintendent of Glacier National Park not only blurs the boundaries of the Park and the Reservation, but also fractures the preexisting structured frameworks and ways in which conservation has conventionally been understood. Physical borders are being broken down through the presence of bison that may enhance both visitor experience and Blackfeet – Park relations. Mental and philosophical boundaries are being broken by embracing and practicing conservation in a way that focuses on the cultural as much as the biological, thus supporting a holistic approach to conservation while challenging colonial singular views that have previously neglected and erased Indigenous culture and presence from the land.

The director of the Blackfeet Agricultural Resource Management Plan (ARMP), demonstrates an example of a boundary breaking mentality when discussing the potential ways in which bison habitat can be secured and how current geo-political boundaries can be blended or overcome to create a Blackfeet National Park that would culturally and economically benefit the Blackfeet Nation.

“What you could do is create a Blackfeet National Park, which would then serve also as buffalo habitat. If you think about the Iinnii Initiative and the reintroduction plan from the Blood Timber
Reserve all the way to Badger Two Medicine, naturally the Blackfeet’s portion would be a National Park. Now to ease some of [the] concerns...you could also still do a summer lease for cattle. I don’t think it’s going to take that much away from the landscape.

If we did create a National Park – because we do have 4 of the 5 entrances into Glacier National Park – and charged to get into Blackfeet National Park first, people are going to pay that...You can then weigh the potential revenue that that conservation would bring in versus the amount of revenue it would have brought in through range or leasing, through agricultural lease. Then you could probably easily make the argument that we are going to create a much larger revenue stream through the creation of a National Park that maybe limits cattle use and then creates that buffalo habitat.” – Loren BirdRattler, Director of Blackfeet ARMP

He also notes the potential role for the Blackfeet ARMP to be a vehicle for bison habitat acquisition and creation, essentially forming conservation set-asides (BFT 1 interview Sept. 2017). Blending agriculture and conservation is another way that boundaries are being broken, and although they have historically been at odds, their intertwining is becoming much more common as conservation is understood through more holistic lenses. Such lenses embrace the concept of Indigenous-led Tribal Parks that broaden the rather narrow ways in which current protected areas and National Parks are established and managed. The superintendent of Glacier NP also expressed his enthusiasm and support for this idea seeing it as an ideal opportunity for co-management of bison and blurring the boundaries between Glacier and the Reservation (GNP 2 interview Nov. 2017). Such a park would not only spread across various spatial borders, it would be centered and managed based on Blackfeet principles, holding various functions other than pure nature preservation, augmenting Blackfeet cultural practices and values, while offering new avenues for sustainable economic development. Further, the potential for bison and cattle to share such a landscape by allowing ranchers to hold grazing leases blurs the lines between strict preservationist management and a diverse working landscape approach to conservation.

Other social and cultural boundaries that are challenged with this mentality include the distinctions between Western-scientific knowledge, Indigenous knowledge systems, and other forms of local knowledge that guide the practice of conservation. Aune explained how the Initiative itself is driven by Blackfoot values, practices, needs, and the guidance of elders, and then complemented with Western scientific tools when requested.

"We started from the cultural perspective first, then adding in the Western science later, which is typically reverse of what I normally would have done years ago...We actually brought the science in as the cultural group kept saying ‘we have to do this, and we need this information’... I do have to tell you that a lot of the ideas of the Iinnii Initiative come from a lot of different members. There is no one or two that did this endeavor... These are group-think events. This is the key I want you to get...It’s these constant group things. You guys as young people get that a lot better than us old guys. We like to do our own thing. You grew up in a culture where collective thinking is standard. What that actually is, is the old way coming back again. That’s the resonance you get with the
elders in particular – this is how we do it, we group think. That’s the hardest part to explain to New York because they don’t get that. They need to know that group think surfaces these notions.”
– Keith Aune, previous director of WCS North American Bison Program

As stated, this way of thinking and doing conservation challenged a conventional, colonial approach where Western science came first, driven by an individual or an organization, rather than produced through a process where a group of individuals, including Blackfoot elders, came together to collectively envision and guide the Iinnii Initiative through Indigenous values and ideas. This boundary breaking mentality reinforces collaborative and holistic conservation approaches that then continue to work towards breaking down the boundaries between world views and conservation practices.

Transparent communication

The fourth most prominent attribute for effective collaboration was transparent communication, identified in 21 quotations across 10 sources. Transparent communication is not only critical between current collaborators, but even more critical for acquiring the support of cattle ranchers.

“Well, the biggest challenge is when you think about that capitalism component, many of our ranchers and farmers have been doing that since they introduced it to Blackfeet country. So, naturally there is going to be that agriculture versus wildlife controversy or clash, but I think that if we frame it correctly and actually operate in a very transparent manner, then we could dispel a lot of those fears.” – Loren BirdRattler, Director of Blackfeet ARMP

“We know that there are people out there, as usual, when there is pending change, people are always scared of how this is going to affect me? Negatively and otherwise. Of course, there are ranchers, there are farmers, there are fences, one of the boundaries that we have to deal with. But, the thing is, we realize it’s not a cake walk. And we respect people saying, “Hey, I’ve been ranching here for years and this is my source of livelihood.” We have to respect that. But, on the other hand, there are other issues, and can we cooperate? In other words, can we talk?” – Leroy Little Bear

Both of these individuals identify the importance of open and transparent communication especially with individuals such as ranchers who may hold opposing views or concerns about the restoration of bison (see Chapter 4). Transparent communication can dispel fears, create space for education and mutual understanding, which can ultimately strengthen relationships and cooperation. However, despite early social surveys, this transparency does not seem to currently be present to the extent that is required to reach potentially conflicting groups like ranchers. Figuring out how to frame bison restoration in a way that is accessible for others who may be opposed is also an important challenge to overcome. Open, often, and ongoing communication
was also practiced between WCS and Blackfoot elders in the early stages of the Initiative and still happens today to ensure the initiative is fulfilling community needs and that the elders are still actively engaged in guiding the process.

Another element of communication that was brought to attention was the importance of frequent and quality communication between the Parks and Blackfoot communities. Multiple individuals from Waterton and Glacier recognized that coming together and respectfully listening to one another to work towards finding common solutions was necessary piece of collaboration, and that overall, communication between Glacier, Waterton, and the Blackfeet was of considerable quality. However, despite present communication among *Iinnii Initiative* collaborators, overall communication and relationships between the Parks – particularly Waterton – and the Blackfoot Confederacy could be enhanced.

Barb Johnston, a senior scientist from Waterton Lakes NP who has been engaged in the *Iinnii Initiative* planning, pointed to the fact that the park could use a community liaison whose main focus is outreach and engagement with First Nations (WLNP 1 interview June 2017). She praised the current superintendent’s work experience in the Arctic with First Nation and Inuit communities that has informed his perspectives and approaches to working with Indigenous communities in Alberta. She also appreciated having a federal government that recognizes the importance of reconciliation but noted that such conversations and engagement need to be more prominent (WLNP 1 interview June 2017). Another Waterton scientist echoed these sentiments by critiquing both WLNP and the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) for not having enough communication with local First Nations and cultivating those relationships (WLNP 3 interview June 2017). These comments demonstrate that even though communication between conservation actors and the Blackfoot Confederacy may be good now, overall, communication and relationships with Blackfoot tribes require greater cultivation so that they become more frequent and profound.

### 3.4.3.2 Organizational Philosophies

Organizational philosophies refer to the policies, attitudes, mandates, and goals of state, provincial, and federal agencies, or non-government organizations. They underpin the way in which agencies and organizations function and engage with partners. Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks are individual parks, but both adhere to the US National Park Service and
Parks Canada strategic management plans and values respectively. These plans influence the ways in which each park manages its landscape and ecology, visitors, and engagement with local communities, especially First Nations and Native American Tribes. However, depending on individual Park leadership and management, the manifestation and prioritization of these goals and values will play out differently in each park.

The NPS for example appears to be guided by two primary documents, their NPS Management Policies (2006), and A Call to Action (2016) that functions as a set of guiding principles to achieve for “stewardship and engagement” over the next century. These documents were referenced multiple times in interviews with Glacier National Park administration and specific sections seem to influence their commitment to working with the Blackfeet and Innii Initiative. In A Call to Action, one goal calls for the restoration of three wild bison populations to the United States in conjunction with various constituents including Native American Tribes (NPS 2016, goal 26).

Other goals support the enhancement of participatory, historical education by engaging diverse groups of people, expanding and enhancing partnerships with local communities, and escalating ecological connectivity through large landscape conservation across private and public lands (NPS 2016, goals 3, 13, 22). Such a goal appears to support the engagement with the Blackfeet and Innii Initiative to restore bison across intact ecosystems (i.e. the Crown of the Continent) including the Blackfeet Reservation, Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Park. They also appear to value an openness to different perspectives, histories, cultures, and stories of people that are connected to the land. Other goals focus on enhancing the health of visitors and local economies of neighboring communities by acquiring locally and sustainably sourced food options (NPS 2016, goal 8). Such philosophies hint towards a holistic perspective of conservation. This could create avenues for working alongside the Blackfeet Nation and local ranchers to sell locally-sourced Blackfeet beef, or in the future, bison.

Waterton Lakes National Park’s management plan (2010) expresses values of connecting people, land and wildlife, maintaining ecological integrity, and preserving the park’s ecosystem for future generations. The management plan also recognizes a “shared boundary, history, and ecosystem with ranchers, the Kainai First Nation, Glacier National Park…” and other parks and
organizations (WLNP 2010). Recognizing their relationship with the Kainai, Waterton claims to want to enhance their relationships with “Aboriginal peoples to assist them in reconnection to their heritage and more fully participating in and benefiting from the park” (WLNP 2010). Another key strategy outlined in the Park’s management plan is to establish and consult with a formal Aboriginal advisory board to guide park management (WLNP 2010). While Waterton Lakes NP has been working closely with the Kainai and Piikani on the design of a new visitor center, no formal advisory board has been established – such a board and future collaborations are currently in discussion (personal communications 2018). While such discourse is consistent with recent federal rhetoric around reconciliation and seems to promote an interest in expanding collaborative partnerships, solely recognizing a relationship with Kainai (and not the other Blackfoot tribes) remains problematic in that it perpetuates National Parks’ historical behavior of erasing Indigenous presence from the land.

The Wildlife Conservation Society, in their 2020 Strategy, express a focus to conserve wild animals and wild places, with goals of collaborating with various government, private sector, and community partners (WCS 2018). Even though their species of primary interest do not include bison, the criteria for conserving these groups are relevant to bison conservation in the Rocky Mountain Region, which is one of their chief global regions of focus. The criteria for priority species conservation include: species that are deeply valued for themselves, critical to ecological functioning, threatened, and are flagships for conservation priority regions and address critical conservation issues (WCS 2018). These explain a focus on plains bison because they are valued as a charismatic species, they are the United States national mammal and an important Blackfoot relation, they enhance and maintain ecological integrity and functioning, are listed as near threatened on the IUCN Red List, and serve as a symbol for North American conservation given their near extinction in the late 1800s. Such organizational values seem appropriate and could explain the involvement of WCS in the Iinnii Initiative.

However, much of their strategic plan, policies, and goals are centered on western science, and at times reflect a paternalistic mentality. This type of organizational philosophy, though well-intentioned, can create challenges for individual collaborative projects on the

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13 The Park’s management plan on recognizes a formal relationship with the Kainai First Nation most likely because the Kainai Timber Limit is connected to the park. However, current park personnel do discuss collaborations and partnerships with the Piikani First Nation. Participant observation of cultural programs, such as storytelling, in the Park did reveal that some Piikani individuals take part in leading these events.
ground, particularly if these projects function through different worldviews and approaches to conservation. This demonstrates the importance of individuals, like those from WCS, who are on the ground working with the Blackfeet Nation and demonstrating attributes like holistic perspectives of conservation, embracing and adapting to uncertainty, and recognizing the unique skillsets and values of collaborators, to forward positive collaboration and create ethical space (ICE 2018), despite reported time, financial, and political pressures from WCS headquarters (WCS 1 and 2 interviews July 2017). Both Stoner and Aune from WCS explained how it is often difficult to translate to headquarters that something such as an all-day meeting with elders is progress, despite the lack of tangible decisions, proclamations, or actions (WCS 1 interview July 2017). Furthermore, Aune described WCS headquarters as risk averse, which creates challenges for inherently uncertain collaborative conservation endeavors (WCS 1 interview July 2017). I elaborate on the challenge of risk and uncertainty in the next section. It appears that while organizational philosophies can be beneficial in shaping larger visions and the mentalities of their employees, sometimes they can be limited in their application or create constraints on collaborative projects. Having determined individuals with the right attributes appears to be critical in forwarding collaborative efforts in the field.

### 3.4.4 Challenges

Coding the 62 references for ‘Challenges’ resulted in 10 specific challenges to effective collaboration among the current rights holders and stakeholders involved in the *Iinnii Initiative* (Fig. 3.4). The two most prominent challenges are communication and the histories and make-up of communities and organizations. This refers to the socio-political, cultural, and economic influences, identities and character of these communities, agencies, and organizations that are involved in or affected by the *Iinnii Initiative* and their historical interactions and behaviors.
Transparent Communication, Uncertainty, and Risk

The ability to coordinate schedules, communicate and work with people who hold different worldviews was noted as a challenge at times, but one that could be overcome and actually appeared to offer a learning experience and opportunity for personal growth. Communication is a critical factor that shapes collaboration, and thus was also identified as the most prominent challenge to collaboration. Most negative comments regarding the lack of communication and transparency of the Iinnii Initiative were from cattle ranchers (the subject of the next chapter) who have not yet been actively involved in the conversations. However, a few individuals in the working group recognized some shortcomings of the Initiative as a whole with regard to transparency and communication:

“...we have a real problem with just communicating with our neighbors – meaning us as the Blackfeet government and also the Blackfeet Iinnii program. If we would just communicate with people and just tell them our intentions of what we really want to do, a lot of them really don’t have any problem whatsoever...I think that we are not informing the public enough. If it is a full initiative, we should be out there, and it should be one of our highlight topics that we are visiting the people about how important it is...To me, I also think that since it isn’t this big money maker, or big economic development scheme, or big land base compromise to the public that they don’t even care...there are some people here that their basic needs is all they are focusing on, just food, shelter, and clothing...Iinnii Initiative is really a self-actualized topic. It’s way at the high end of the pyramid of not worrying about the basic needs anymore. A lot of the public is not...they could not care less...because they are worried about if we are going to give a $75 per capita so they
Running Wolf is a traditional knowledge holder, who was on the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council (BTBC) and is on the Iinnii Initiative working group. His statement reflects how the challenges to the Initiative are multi-faceted. First of all, there is difficulty of communicating the Initiative’s goals and plans more broadly to the Blackfeet and outside communities. Second, he identifies the socio-economic and political reality in the Blackfeet community that most people are in a position where they are only concerned about their immediate needs for day-to-day survival, and expanding their thoughts and efforts to long-term, higher level philosophical concerns is a luxury that many cannot afford. One must be able to be in a stable position where they can think in the long-term and embrace uncertainty and risk; however, when people in the community are not in a secure state, uncertainty and risk become very real barriers. Thus, it becomes a necessary challenge to communicate to community members the various economic, cultural, and nutritional benefits of restoring buffalo in ways that can shift people’s perspectives to more long-term and holistic thinking. This type of communication that is necessary is also made more difficult by the fact that the different communities on the reservation are spatially distant from one another.

The challenges of communication and embracing risk and uncertainty are also reflected in the comments of the current and former North American Bison Program Directors of the Wildlife Conservation Society.

“I think part of the challenge with a big group project, and that’s really what this is, is the tragedy of the commons. No one is responsible for it particularly unless someone volunteers to be responsible for it. It can be difficult too if you don’t have a clear understanding of how the road gets from A to B. You don’t want to start down that road because you don’t know how it’s going to go.” – Kelly Stoner, Director of WCS North American Bison Program

“…part of the reason I get frustrated with New York right now is that they are so risk averse. And all of our business is all risk. You have to venture out there and try something to make it work. Sometimes it doesn’t. Even the Iinnii Initiative, not everything has worked, but certainly we’ve done better than average because we have relied on the collective wisdom of several groups of people: the elders and the technical wizards.” – Keith Aune, Previous Director of WCS North American Bison Program

Both of these statements illustrate how uncertainty and risk are crucial in influencing the devotion and action of conservation actors and the challenge of communicating the benefits of
the Initiative in ways that assuage these concerns. With collaborative projects like the *Innii Initiative*, even though it is Blackfoot-led, no one individual or organization is solely responsible for it, and when the future is unknown and communication about planning and future outcomes is unclear or infrequent, it is easy for individuals or organizations to not claim responsibility or fully commit their support and become hesitant to act. However, Aune’s comment about relying on the collective wisdom of different groups demonstrates the importance of recognizing the unique skillsets of each collaborator. By doing this, not only is communication enhanced, it also offers a more well-rounded approach to the project, engaging each group of collaborators equally in ways that garners their active participation and dedication.

Running Wolf identifies the issue of uncertainty and risk with regard to the effectiveness of collaboration in the future. While he recognizes how well each collaborator is cooperating at the moment, he considers how well everyone will work together once bison are on the ground and moving across jurisdictions.

“...I will talk about what's the key to success of the next movement of making these actors play a little bit...I think we are playing awesome...But, you can all play great because you're not doing anything on the landscape. We are not doing anything. So, what is really going to kick us in the ass to make it happen next is as soon as that first cow buffalo steps across into Badger Two Medicine, and when that next cow buffalo leading the whole herd steps into Glacier National Park, that is when we are going to see how good of partners we are. Or, when it steps across Canada. We have them all walking over here. They have none of them walking on their land. They think it's the greatest thing in the world. Okay, now let's see how good we are.” – Tyson Running Wolf, Blackfeet Knowledge Holder, Previous Member of BTBC

His comments demonstrate insight into one of the realities of collaborative conservation efforts: actors can effectively work together during the planning phases, but the real challenges come once concrete actions are taken – in this case, once bison are roaming across borders. Currently, all of the bison are on the Blackfeet Reservation in fenced pastures, but once they cross into Glacier or Waterton, that will force the hand of each park’s respective management teams to act and substantiate their claims of commitment to collaboration and supporting the *Innii Initiative*. This statement is not an accusatory statement, it merely demonstrates a realist perspective of the uncertainty and potential challenges of this collaborative effort.

Currently, Glacier NP and Waterton Lakes NP management hold the position of supporting the *Innii Initiative* and doing what they can to prepare for bison to enter their lands; however, they make clear that this is a Blackfoot-led endeavor. Thus, the weight of responsibility of decision-making and community/stakeholder outreach inevitably falls on the Blackfoot
Confederacy – primarily the Blackfeet Nation. There is an interesting tension that exists in the position of Park administration, and that is finding the balance between supporting an Indigenous-led initiative in a way that is genuine, helpful, and committed, without asserting control over the decision-making and putting the Waterton or Glacier stamp of leadership on it.

The three statements below by Waterton Lakes NP and Glacier NP management personnel who have been involved in the *Iinnii Initiative* demonstrate this complexity.

“...we are more saying “we support the idea. We are Parks Canada who supports restoration of ecological integrity and whatever species used to be here, but we aren’t the ones who are physically going to bring them here.” If they come here through another means we’ll do what we can to partner and to help, and we will at that point probably discuss with the stakeholders who will be affected, but because it’s a Blackfeet-run initiative, we are waiting to get the lead of how they’d like to do that consultation.” – Barb Johnston, WLNP Ecologist, Iinnii Working Group member

“It’s [the Blackfeet’s] project, they plan on moving ahead, and they are just consulting with us. In this case we are an interested stakeholder... We want to make sure that [ranchers] understand what’s going on and how we are managing it and so forth because they are our stakeholder. And we would encourage the Blackfeet, if that group wanted to speak, to come and speak to them because it is their project. But we are responsible for managing these animals once they end up on our landscape.” – Dennis Madsen, WLNP Resource Conservation Manager

“Yeah, not from the Park because it’s not our project. We just answer questions as people bring them up – what are you going to do? And we say it’s not our project, but we would be open with certain criteria being met to allow bison onto our lands.” – Mark Biel, GNP Natural Resources Program Manager

Each of these statements demonstrate the public position of the Parks to support the Blackfoot-led *Iinnii Initiative*, positioning each park as a stakeholder who is committed to preparing for bison to enter the park while being careful not to step on the toes of Blackfeet leadership. Such a position appears positive and promotes Indigenous-led conservation. It affirms that the Blackfoot are leading the initiative, reflecting a recognition of Blackfoot autonomy and authority instead of trying to keep control and power of the Initiative in the hands of Parks. It also reverses the previously normalized roles of state-led consultation to Indigenous-led consultation, which further demonstrate boundary-breaking mentalities.

However, despite the sense of positive support, these positions also give off a sense of passivity that relate to the concerns of the form member of the BTBC. Each collaborator is working well together at the moment, expressing positive support, but there is risk that this support will change once bison come into Park lands and perhaps cause conflict. Continued support would require Waterton Lakes NP and Glacier NP to take responsibility for bison and defend the efforts of the Initiative while handling complaints or challenges from Park residents,
visitors, or community members. However, the Parks could also continue to situate themselves as passive supporters and push the responsibility of handling conflict and potential negative externalities of bison onto the Blackfoot. The statements made by Waterton and Glacier management appear supportive, but they also seem to reflect a desire to maintain distance from responsibility so as not to receive the brunt of the potential negative repercussions and complaints from community members, residents, and park visitors. Uncertainty and risk, therefore, are influential factors for Waterton Lakes and Glacier National Parks.

Jeff Mow, the superintendent of Glacier NP, however, openly admitted the flaws in the way government agencies approach partnerships with a mindset that they do not need to make many sacrifices or compromises. Instead, he recognized the importance of building relationships of trust to overcome the challenges of uncertainty, making equal contributions and compromises throughout the partnership process (GNP 2 interview Nov. 2017). This demonstrates a grounded, humble, and cooperative perspective that is important in individual leadership in order to overcome institutional or agency barriers and continue forwarding positive collaboration on the ground.

Depending on how the Parks respond to potential conflicts will significantly reflect their position and dedication to their relationships with the Blackfoot and have implications for reconciliation more broadly between the Parks and First Nations, as well as between First Nations and society. If challenges arise and the Parks step up and maintain their active support, that would most likely strengthen the relationship between the Park and Blackfoot Confederacy while demonstrating each Park’s commitment to genuine reconciliation efforts. However, if the Parks were to stand by, letting the Blackfoot and other Initiative partners (i.e. WCS) handle conflicts with community members, that could not only set back relationships with the Parks, but also potentially increase the already existing tensions and conflict between settler community members and First Nations, making reconciliation between settler society and Indigenous communities more challenging. Aversion to risk and uncertainty, as demonstrated by the national parks and WCS headquarters, creates a challenge to collaboration. This requires the fostering of some of the attributes discussed earlier such as long-term and mutual thinking, transparency, boundary-breaking thought, and the willingness to invest time and money that will help to overcome such a barrier.
**Historical relations**

The other most prominent challenge to effective collaboration, identified in 21 references across 10 sources, was navigating the multi-faceted – and at times contentious – histories, historical interactions and behaviors of communities and organizations. The potential for behavioral conflict arises out of these realities. Such histories include the settler-colonial relationships and histories between the National Park Service (i.e. Glacier) and Parks Canada (i.e. Waterton), white ranching communities, and the Blackfoot communities. The make-up of the present-day Blackfeet Nation includes a mix of individuals, some who are strongly connected to traditional practices and values, and others who are not; diverse opinions about ranching and agriculture also exist on the reservation, and local politics are often changing.

Such changes in politics also occur in large organizations like WCS, the National Park Service, and Parks Canada, where organizational practices, and values often parallel those political changes. Keeping up with such changes and overcoming the internal politics of these large organizations was cited as a potential challenge, especially when these organizations normally function in a Western structure with strict deadlines and different measures of progress that do not necessarily align with Indigenous ways of being and doing.

Furthermore, the reality that bison have been removed from the landscape has strongly influenced the mindsets of individuals in both Blackfeet and non-Indigenous communities, to the point where bison are perceived as unfamiliar, foreign, and threatening, shaping the present-day mentalities and make-up of these communities. One individual who works for WLNP and is heavily involved in the WBRA noted that most ranchers in the region have a “no to bison and cows are where it’s at” mentality, and that because “they have been cattle ranchers for 100 years” and have developed a strong tie to the land and their traditions, no one would consider switching to bison ranching (WLNP 3 Interview 2017). Other individuals point to similar impacts of bison’s absence from the land:

“It took a few years, I guess back in those early years, you know buffalo being gone for so long for our people that it was a real trial and education to get our people back in to accepting buffalo back here.” – Ervin Carlson, Blackfeet Buffalo Program Director/President of ITBC

“Elk are grazers as well, they absolutely conflict, and they eat people’s haystacks. Grizzlies come and go and there’s definitely conflicts with them with agricultural industry. The difference I think with bison is the fact that they’ve been gone. There are multiple generations of ranchers, and many who have very deep roots here, their ancestors have never dealt with bison. And it’s
The statements that Carlson and Johnston make reflect a challenge of communication; moreover, they demonstrate the challenge of transcending the normalized mentalities that bison are not on the landscape and part of people’s lives, while grappling with the intricate socio-political and cultural histories and character of both Blackfeet and settler communities. The fact that wild bison have been gone from the landscape for such a long time has normalized their absence and their present identity as livestock animals in Alberta and parts of Montana. Relatedly, through the residential school system and other colonial policies, many individuals became estranged from their traditional ceremony, language and spirituality. Some individuals were able to safeguard their traditional ways and have been critical to its resurgence in Blackfoot communities, but many remain alienated from these traditional ways of being and doing. Overcoming the mental barriers to reconnect to Blackfoot traditions is also a necessary challenge, not only in everyday life, but also for restoring buffalo since the relationship between Blackfoot culture and the buffalo is inextricably linked. In order to reintroduce free-roaming bison and garner support of community members, learning how to embrace bison as wild animals appears necessary.

The historical relationships and settler-colonial history of Glacier NP with the Blackfeet creates another challenge. Such a conflicting context would be challenging for any collaboration, let alone one of this scale and significance. However, the Blackfeet Buffalo Program Director expressed that the Superintendent of Glacier NP is easy to work with, which helps make the relationship a lot better. This can be seen in some of the attributes that the superintendent demonstrated earlier such as boundary-breaking thought and supporting a holistic biocultural approach to conservation. Further, his experience working with small, Indigenous communities around Parks in Alaska and his knowledge of the colonial history of Glacier NP also appeared beneficial to overcoming the challenging historical relations between the Park and the Blackfeet.

Both national parks and WCS recognize the Iinnii Initiative as Blackfoot-led and have not been trying to assert their power over the Blackfoot or claim the initiative as their own. Additionally, some individuals within WCS have been integral in ensuring that the efforts are led by Blackfoot practices and values and educating WCS as an organization about this. I return to the challenges to collaborative governance identified by Reo, Whyte, McGregor, and others
(2017) that non-Indigenous actors often fail to recognize Indigenous actors as sovereign nations, and that collaborative efforts often remain bureaucratic and not centered on Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies due to lack of trust and the inability to navigate different world views. The continued dominance in power and resources (mainly financial and technical) by the Parks and WCS, the continued challenge of navigating different world views and work styles, and the uncertainty around how actors will work together once bison are on the ground and the level of power that the Blackfoot will maintain in their use and care of bison reflect some of these concerns.

3.5 Overcoming Challenges & Conclusion

From exploring the origins of the Innii Initiative and relationships between actors, it appears that this collaborative effort reflects important principles of engaging Indigenous peoples in environmental governance such as: the importance of respecting Indigenous knowledge systems, self-determination, engaging Indigenous actors early on, and maintaining cross-cultural education (Reo et al. 2017; Whyte et al. 2018). The Innii Initiative was created out of dialogues with elders, centered on Blackfoot values, practices, and ways of being. The early stages bridged Indigenous knowledge systems and western technical science in a way that brought people towards a more holistic understanding of and approach to bison reintroduction. A number of individual attributes and organizational philosophies positively shaped the early collaborative efforts of this initiative and continue to do so.

However, in a collaborative conservation effort of this scale with diverse actors who have different approaches to conservation and varying historical relations, challenges are inevitable. Organizational philosophies such as the management plans and guiding principles of Waterton Lakes NP and WCS can positively inform an organizations’ support for bison restoration and working with Indigenous Nations. Nevertheless, they can also become a hinderance to collaboration if not actively enforced by individuals or too narrowly created and interpreted, potentially resulting in limitations when collaborative efforts with Indigenous communities are based within a worldview or paradigm other than a Western scientific one. Maintaining transparent communication to all collaborators and stakeholders potentially impacted by the reintroduction of bison is also difficult, especially given the geographical distance between communities and actors, and limited finances and capacity. The uncertainty created by leadership
turnover and individual involvement and overall uncertainty of the reintroduction timeline, process, and consequences also create barriers to the Initiative and communicating to others. Furthermore, overcoming historical settler-colonial and Indigenous relations between actor groups such as the national parks and the Blackfoot Confederacy can create difficulties that require time, commitment to building trust, and open-mindedness to new ways of working together.

Ways in which these challenges can be overcome can be seen in the individual attributes identified as positively promoting collaboration. Some of these attributes, such as transparency, recognizing the unique values, skills, and authority of each collaborator, and the ability to adapt to uncertainty through building trust and thinking in the long-term align with attributes identified in the literature (Armitage 2005; Kretser, Beckmann & Berger 2018). Combining these attributes with the articulation of specific roles for individual actors and learning from mistakes can be beneficial for ensuring the strengths of different actors are complemented, maintaining flexibility (Kretser, Beckmann & Berger 2018), and overcoming challenges of communication, uncertainty, and risk. Boundary-breaking thought emerged as an important attribute that is less examined in the literature and can be helpful for transcending contentious historical relations that may still result in barriers of mistrust, rigid approaches to conservation and wildlife management, or passive commitment.

Boundary-breaking thought can take the form of blending and embracing different worldviews; working around organizational time and financial expectations; reimagining conservation in unique ways and for multiple purposes; deconstructing mental borders around what bison are and how they should be managed; and thinking past physical borders of protected areas, private property, reservations, and countries. It appears to be one of the most integral attributes for individuals to cultivate and it is through this attribute (alongside the other attributes identified) that individual actors may have a greater chance of embracing uncertainty, developing trust, and planning for long-term processes to overcome some of the barriers that hinder collaboration.

Ultimately, there is a delicate balance that exists in this collaborative conservation effort. It is relatively easy to have and advertise small educational Park programs, or broader scale endeavors like the Iinnii Initiative, that ‘engage’ with Blackfoot communities or claim them as partners. Still, to commit to the growth and strengthening of those relationships over time, to
share responsibility for potential conflict or failures once bison are reintroduced, and to remain
dedicated to the development and resurgence of Blackfoot political, cultural and political
strength that could potentially disrupt existing colonial power relations is a different story and
requires significant effort. The potential exists to cultivate these attributes in each of the *Iinnii
Initiative* collaborators to create such dedication and overcome the identified challenges –
something that is necessary before trying to approach other barriers from those who are less
involved such as ranchers (see Chapter 4).

Identifying individual attributes and learning how actors can cultivate them to support
these commitments, overcome challenges of communication, uncertainty, and historical
relations, and sustain collaboration in the long-term is an important lesson that the *Iinnii
Initiative* can teach other practitioners of collaborative conservation.
Chapter 4 Reconciling the “Colonial Cattle” and Working Towards Collaborative Conservation

Abstract:
Conservation in working landscapes necessitates collaborative forms of governance. Working landscapes have been effective for large landscape conservation, attending to the challenges of mobile flora and fauna and lands fragmented by jurisdictional boundaries. Paralleling this shift in thinking, ranchers have repositioned themselves from being antithetical to conservation to being mutually compatible with conservation goals. Therefore, it is important to take ranchers seriously as legitimate conservation actors. The Iinnii Initiative is a Blackfoot-led bison restoration endeavor in and around Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park in Montana and Alberta that engages a variety of rights holders and stakeholders. Ranch lands surround a large portion of the landscape identified for this reintroduction, and while local cattle ranchers have peripherally been considered by the Initiative, they have yet to be more seriously engaged as land managers. This might be due to a conventional notion that ranchers are not conservation allies and in part due to the settler-colonial history of cattle ranching in the region. This research explores the attitudes and concerns of ranchers regarding the reintroduction of bison in order to inform the Iinnii Initiative of potential barriers, engage ranchers as conservation actors, and identify and support collaborative conservation solutions. Multiple ranchers expressed concerns regarding the reintroduction of bison, including disease, property damage, and the lack of communication and engagement, which has led to feelings of frustration and marginalization. However, many ranchers also demonstrate a conservation ethic that aligns with a number of Iinnii Initiative goals. Given these realities, I argue that not engaging cattle ranchers in Alberta and on the Blackfeet Nation in Montana as legitimate conservation actors will present significant barriers for the reintroduction of free-roaming bison and that engaging with ranchers seriously also requires grappling with the settler-colonial legacy of ranching, which may have implications for reconciliation among and between Blackfoot and white settler communities.

4.1 Introduction

Conservation practice of late has been moving away from the top-down fortress conservation model and working towards more collaborative approaches such as community-based initiatives, co-management, and Indigenous Protected Areas, to the point where the collaborative multi-stakeholder approach has become a common aspirational goal in environmental management and conservation governance (Carroll 2014; Margerum 2008; Murray & King 2012; Olsson, Folke & Berkes 2004; Wyborn & Bixler 2013). The Iinnii Initiative is a Blackfoot-led collaborative conservation endeavor to bio-culturally restore wild, free-roaming plains bison (Iinnii15) to Blackfoot16 traditional territory in and around Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park in

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14 The Blackfoot Confederacy consists of four sister Nations that include the Blackfeet Nation in Montana, and Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika First Nations in southern Alberta. Although all of the Nations have been involved in the origins of the Iinnii Initiative, most of the logistics are managed through the Blackfeet Nation where the bison are currently kept, while the Kainai (Blood Tribe) also play a key role in leadership.
15 The Blackfoot word for bison. The Western scientific name under the Linnaean classification of species is Bison bison bison. Colloquially in Alberta and Montana they are often referred to as buffalo. Throughout this paper I use the terms bison, Iinnii, and buffalo interchangeably.
16 I use the word Blackfoot when referring more generally to the territory, culture, or collective peoples of the Blackfoot Confederacy. When referring more specifically to a particular Nation within the Confederacy (i.e. Blackfeet in Montana) I use their specific name.
Alberta and Montana. Bison are an ecological keystone species that enhance biodiversity and ecosystem functioning through grazing and wallowing behaviors (Knapp et al. 1999) and are an integral part of Blackfoot culture and being (Ladner 2003; personal communications 2017).

The *Iinnii Initiative* is a conservation effort that is born out of this understanding and seeks to restore bison to their ecological and historical range, while also rebuilding and healing broken relationships among the Blackfoot Confederacy and bison. It also creates the potential for healing relationships between the Blackfoot and national parks. The *Iinnii Initiative* is centered on Blackfoot values, practice, and needs, originating from dialogues with elders. Its efforts extend across reservation, private property, protected area, and international borders. Partnering with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), this initiative brings together actors such as the Waterton Lakes National Park (WLNP), Glacier National Park (GNP), the State of Montana, Province of Alberta, and other non-government organizations (NGOs). It, therefore, positions itself as a unique example of Indigenous-led, transboundary, collaborative conservation governance, coalescing a network of stakeholders and rights holders.

The landscape surrounding Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, where many ranchers live and operate, is important habitat for a plethora of species that find a safe haven in the National Parks but require more space than the Parks actually provide. In the United States, 80 percent of critical habitats for more than half of the species on the Endangered Species list exist outside federally protected areas (Rodriguez 1997 as cited in Nabhan, Knight & Charnley 2014). Landscapes like the Badger Two Medicine and Chief Mountain Region, which run along the eastern slopes of Glacier National Park on the western portion of the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana, and the Waterton Park Front, which is situated on the eastern slopes of Waterton Lakes National Park in southwestern Alberta fit this category. Over half of all the animal and plant species in Montana can be found on the Blackfeet Reservation (Luna 2012). Additionally, numerous wildlife species including elk, moose, grizzly bears, and black bears – highly charismatic species – are increasingly mobile outside the boundaries of Glacier National Park and Waterton Lakes National Park onto private and Tribal lands that are primarily used for ranching (personal communication with Park officials and landowners).

A number of ranchers who live on the border of Waterton Lakes National Park are also a part of the Nature Conservancy Canada’s Waterton Park Front Project, or members of the Waterton Biosphere Reserve Association. Both of these alliances engage local landowners in
conservation stewardship practices to help maintain the integrity of their land for generations to come. Importantly for the *Innii Initiative*, the majority of quality grassland habitat for bison is found in these spaces as well, on current working landscapes outside of federally protected areas (Bontrager 2013). Thus, the maintenance and care for these private and Tribal working landscapes through the involvement of the ranchers who use them is a necessity for environmental integrity and the provision of habitat for reintroduced bison.

The regions identified for the reintroduction are surrounded by private ranch lands and free-roaming bison would potentially move and graze near these lands. Ranchers have peripherally been considered by the *Innii Initiative* but have yet to be formally engaged as conservation actors in this endeavor. This might be due to a conventional notion that ranchers are antithetical to conservation goals and in part due to the settler-colonial history of cattle ranching in the region. The extermination of bison from the American plains in the late 1800s and the forced removal of the Blackfoot and other Plains First Nations to reserves opened up the region for cattle ranching (and ultimately the establishment of Waterton and Glacier National Parks). Today, many individuals in southwest Alberta and on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana are ranchers, and this has become a proud tradition and normal way of life for both Blackfoot and settler individuals alike.

A Blackfeet social survey was administered in August of 2014 by Keith Tatsey and students from the Blackfeet Community College to assess the Blackfeet Nation’s attitudes towards restoring bison. The overall results speak to a seemingly positive interest in restoring bison to the Blackfeet Nation. While 24% of respondents self-identified as livestock ranchers (Tatsey 2014), the survey and report did not break down the responses by occupation. Recognizing that ranchers are relevant stakeholders in the reintroduction of bison, it became important to explore and understand the concerns of Blackfeet and settler cattle ranchers with regard to the *Innii Initiative*.

4.2 Ranchers & Working Landscapes

One of the more recent developments in the evolving approaches to conservation, especially in the rural west, has been the establishment and maintenance of conservation projects on working landscapes particularly with and by ranchers, which has helped to overcome jurisdictional complexities and mobile wildlife and plants (Charnley, Sheridan & Nabhan 2014).
I use the term “working landscape” to describe a place, primarily rural or farther away from urban and suburban development, where individuals work and maintain their livelihoods off of the land on which they live. To use Sheridan, Sayre, and Seibert’s (2014) definition, it “implies an embodied sense of place, one that often reflects knowledge of local ecological processes that can only be accumulated through generations of daily experience with climate, water, plants, animals, and soil” (p.71). Working landscape conservation is an important focus of numerous community-based collaborative conservation groups (CBCCs) across the rural west (Sheridan, Sayre & Seibert 2014). Partnering with NGOs and occasionally state agencies, ranchers have been – and are – integral players in these collaborative endeavors, especially since much of the land on which they work and live is valuable for maintaining ecological integrity and biodiversity.

Yet, the current and past research on ranching has been limited to natural sciences and restricted to quantitative analysis, which has often uncritically and apolitically positioned ranchers as antithetical to biodiversity conservation goals (Sayre 2004, 2005). The socio-economic and political history of rural western landscapes has engendered and perpetuated an urban-rural divide that has also positioned ranchers and cattle as threats to environmental integrity, while simultaneously entertaining the environmental and recreational fancies of mobile urbanites (Sheridan & Sayre 2014). These approaches neglect the critical human dimensions of ranching and continue to reinforce ranching as a “detriment” to the local environment and ranchers as economically irrational (Sayre 2004, 2005). In the past, wildlife and environmental managers have disregarded local (rancher) knowledge as illegitimate “barstool biology”, further perpetuating the marginalization of the rural ‘Other’ in environmental management decisions (Robbins 2006). Nathan Sayre (2005) demonstrates how domestic livestock and their associated husbandry practices have been constructed as the cause for habitat degradation and species loss without any valid evidence to support such claims. The myopic focus of past research on ranching has also limited the engagement with other conceptualizations of what ranching is (Sayre 2005), leading Sayre (2004) to call for greater qualitative research and investigation of ranching as a livelihood strategy and practice.
Conceptual Framework: Political Ecology & the American West

Political ecology explores the intersections between ecology and political economy, with particular attention to marginalized people and social groups, and the interactions across scales from the individual and local, to the national and global (Blaikie & Brookfield 1987; Walker 2003). More specifically, it considers the social, political, cultural, economic and ecological facets of nature and conservation, in addition to the underlying power relations between actors (Roth 2015). Political ecology has also contributed to a greater understanding of the socio-political complexities of conservation in the American west. Some key examples include: the study of local knowledge production and marginalization in Yellowstone wildlife management (Robbins 2006); the analysis of the Wise Use Movement in the rural western United States (McCarthy 2002); Walker’s (2003) re-focusing on the ‘regional political ecology’ of socio-politics and environment relations in the rural American west; and the exploration of the production of ranching and conservation in the American southwest (Sayre 2005).

Political ecology has been integral in unpacking the socio-economic and political complexities that inform ranch management and decision making in addition to its ecological elements, which has helped to challenge some of the negative stereotypes of ranchers and reposition them as legitimate land managers and conservation actors (Sayre 2004, 2005; Sheridan & Sayre 2014). Many ranchers have always understood their role to be as stewards of their land; however, it has not been until recently that conservationists, scientists, and governments have begun to also identify ranchers as important to land conservation (Reid 2008; Sayre 2005; Sayre et al. 2012).

Given this repositioning and the value of working landscape conservation, it is important to take ranchers seriously as land managers and conservation actors. Collaborative working landscape conservation assists in overcoming the complexities of jurisdictional boundaries and wildlife mobility in large landscapes. Given the amount of private ranch lands surrounding the reintroduction regions of interest and ranchers’ role in maintaining landscape health, the fact that they have not been primary stakeholders in the Iinnii Initiative is noticeable, but not entirely surprising given the settler-colonial history and implications of ranching for the Blackfoot Confederacy.

Engaging with the settler-colonial legacy of ranching is one area where political ecology has fallen short, which is surprising given its focus on coloniality in other parts of the world.
While initially political ecology focused on the “Third World” (Bryant 1997), it became apparent that maintaining “Third” and “First World” binaries in political ecology was problematic; many “Third World” political ecology assumptions and issues are just as relevant in “First World” contexts, particularly in terms of environment and resource governance, and colonial legacies (Walker 2003). Contributions to this shift have focused on the disempowerment, marginalization, and erasure of Indigenous culture and peoples from land, resources, and relationships through the colonial establishment of protected areas and poor conservation governance (Stevens 2014b; Youdelis 2016). Given the lack of focus on ranching’s colonial legacy in the American west, a more nuanced interrogation of this reality is needed, with particular attention to its intersection with conservation and Indigenous-led wildlife restoration. Thus, a political ecology lens becomes valuable for investigating the multiple dimensions of Blackfoot-led bison restoration in the North American prairies.

Given the above context, I argue that not engaging cattle ranchers in Alberta and on the Blackfeet Nation in Montana as legitimate conservation actors will present significant barriers for the reintroduction of free-roaming bison and that engaging with ranchers seriously also requires grappling with the settler-colonial legacy of ranching, which may have implications for reconciliation among and between Blackfoot and white settler communities. This research adds to the work already done by Tatsey (2014) to specifically explore rancher concerns about bison reintroduction in order to illuminate potential barriers for the Iinnii Initiative. Knowing where potential barriers exist can lead to greater relationship building, the development of co-understanding, exploration of new avenues to mitigate specific concerns, while working towards greater reconciliation among social groups within society. It also informs the political ecology literature on the rural American west by interrogating the intersections between cattle ranching and Indigenous-led bison restoration.

4.4 Methodology

From May to September of 2017 I lived in Blackfoot territory. I spent time on both sides of the Canada-US border (Fig. 4.1), and with both Blackfoot and settler ranchers alike. This research included participant observation at events, meetings and Blackfoot ceremonies, as well as semi-structured interviews with ranchers, and literature and archival review to develop a history of settler-colonialism in the region. Topics discussed in interviews included ranching
experience and history, perception of bison and the *Iinnii Initiative*, perceptions of conservation, and relationships with surrounding stakeholders. Developing relations in the Waterton region and Blackfeet Reservation was crucial for recruiting participants. To select rancher participants, I utilized snowball and opportunistic sampling methods, contacting ranchers that other individuals mentioned, or from following new leads throughout the summer as the research continued (Stratford & Bradshaw 2016). I concentrated my effort on ranchers whose lands bordered on or were integral to the area identified as good buffalo habitat by the Iinnii initiative. From May to September, I interviewed 7 white Albertan ranchers around Waterton Lakes NP, and 8 Blackfeet ranchers on the Blackfeet Reservation in the Chief Mountain area and near the Badger Two Medicine region. I interview both white Albertan and Blackfeet ranchers because both groups of people have livelihoods that could be impacted by the reintroduction of bison.
Figure 4.1 Study location of research. Interviews with ranchers took place east of Waterton Lakes NP and on the Blackfeet Reservation.

Several of these ranchers held leadership roles in local ranching associations, conservation districts, the Waterton Front Park Project, or the Waterton Biosphere Reserve Association, so they were able to serve as true key informant interviews and comment on concerns and perspectives held by other ranchers in addition to their own. While the total number of interviews may appear small compared to quantitative methods that focus on representation and randomization, these interviews offered in-depth insight into the topics being explored, and by the seventh and 8th interviews, the same concerns were being shared and little new information or insights were being presented, demonstrating that I was reaching informational
saturation. I performed latent coding analysis (Neuman 2014) on these interviews, using NVivo software, to identify key themes related to rancher concerns, perceptions of land, and stakeholder relations (Dunn 2016).

4.5 Results

4.5.1 The Last Days of the Buffalo and the Introduction of Blackfoot Ranching

Ranching and agriculture were not part of Blackfoot life until after the first treaties were made with the U.S. and Canadian governments. The Lame Bull Treaty of 1855 was multifaceted in its purpose with varying outcomes. Contracted by Isaac Stevens, governor of the Washington Territory, it was intended to promote peace in the region between the Salish, Kootenai, Pend d’Oreille, and Nez Percé west of the Rockies; the Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, and Blackfeet of the Blackfoot Confederacy east of the Rockies; and two other Plains Tribes, the Cree and Assiniboine, by establishing the early outlines of reservation boundaries, with a focus on common access to a shared buffalo hunting ground in Blackfeet territory east of the Rockies (Farr 2001). However, the idea of a bounded hunting ground is problematic in itself because buffalo are migratory animals and do not stay in one place; therefore, the access to buffalo by all the Tribes involved remained uncertain (Farr 2001). The Lame Bull Treaty outlined “territories” for each tribe, and although they had freedom of movement for hunting, gathering, and trade outside of these boundaries, it was highly recommended to adhere to the boundaries as it would make intertribal peace easier to achieve (Farr 2001). Over the next 55 years, these “territories” would reduce in size through various other treaties, Acts of Congress, and the establishment of Glacier National Park in 1910 to eventually form the reservations that exist today.

It is clear, however, that the importance of maintaining peace between the tribes was not for the benefit of the tribes themselves. Rather, underlying motives for intertribal peace were the safety of settlers moving west and the construction of the Great Northern Railroad (Farr 2001). Furthermore, establishing this treaty was one step closer to settling the “warlike and nomadic” Blackfeet, and shifting their buffalo hunting livelihood to one of agriculture and ‘civilized’ life (Ewers 1983, p.214). Governor Stevens and other U.S. officials were not optimistic about the continued existence of the buffalo, so the legitimization of a common buffalo hunting ground was less an effort to preserve buffalo as a resource, and rather an immediate, yet temporary solution until more Blackfoot land could be acquired and a formal reservation established (Ewers
1983, Farr 2001). In fact, when the Tribes present at the Lame Bull treaty raised concerns about being displaced from land, Governor Stevens craftily assuaged their fears with promises that the land would forever be their homes, and that the U.S. government just wanted to assist their transition to agriculture and livestock so that they would not have to rely on “poor buffalo meat” (Ewers 1983, p.216), a clear indication that Governor Stevens must never have tasted buffalo meat, or had any understanding of the Blackfoot relationship with buffalo. However, by early 1880s the buffalo had been nearly exterminated, reduced to a few hundred animals, and the Blackfoot people tragically suffered through what is known as the “starvation winter” of 1883-84.

Similarly, on the other side of the border, Treaty 7, was signed between the Canadian government and the Blackfoot Confederacy, Sarcee, and Stoney First Nations in 1877. It is commonly understood by the First Nations elders of this treaty that the true intent was a peace treaty between First Nations and the Canadian government in an effort to share land and resources, not a surrender of land; such concepts as land “surrender” and “cession” were not translated or understood (First Rider et al. 1996). Indeed, previous friendly relations between the Blackfoot and MacLeod who, as commissioner of the Northwest Mounted Police had ridded the region of the whiskey trade in 1874, served as assurance to the Blackfoot that the Northwest Mounted Police had no intention of taking their land (First Rider et al. 1996).

However, the actual outcomes of the treaty were different and more detrimental to the Blackfoot and other First Nations. It outlined reservation boundaries to establish preemptory “peace” in the region between First Nations and between First Nations and settler society, opened up the region for settlement and surrendered land and rights of the First Nations involved, while promising goods, payments, cattle and other agricultural tools in return (Treaty 7, 1877). It is clear that this treaty was integral in clearing the plains of First Nations to make room for western settlement. After Treaty 7 with the Canadian government and two significant Acts of U.S. Congress in 1887 and 1895, the Blackfoot went from being a powerful people who traveled and lived with the buffalo across the open plains to being a shadow of their former selves: starved, restricted to reservations that are fractions of their traditional territory separated by an international boundary, and dependent upon the very colonial powers that put them there.

The oversimplification of buffalo behavior and their relationship with the Blackfoot are important assumptions that cannot be overlooked. Both the buffalo and Blackfoot were mobile,
each living and interacting with the other through a relational dance that existed since before European contact (Blackweasel et al. 2013; Bullchild 2005; personal communication 2017). Assuming that the buffalo would stay in some abstract hunting ground, and that the Blackfoot would simply switch to cattle once the buffalo were gone, disregards and limits a necessary understanding of Blackfoot worldview and way of life, thus making it easier to control, manipulate, and eventually dispossess the Blackfoot of more land. It also gives rise to a mindset that nature – specifically wildlife – and people’s relationships to it can be controlled by arbitrarily drawing borders and boundaries on a map. Such mindsets and practices of controlling of nature and producing “wilderness” through the manipulation of space, boundaries, people, and non-human bodies have been interrogated by scholars such as Neumann (1998), Cronon (1995), and Scott (1998).

These ideas still subtly permeate contemporary wildlife and border politics of Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, the Blackfoot reserves and reservations, and the 49th parallel. Buffalo do not recognize borders, nor did the Blackfoot, at least in the contemporary sense of political boundaries. The Blackfoot did, however, realize a sense of territory and resource use as they were strongly protective of the lands on which they lived and hunted buffalo. The Iinnii Initiative challenges an antiquated and colonial mindset by allowing buffalo and the Blackfoot to move freely together once again, not restricted by politically constructed borders and the interests of white settlers, while also demonstrating that the Blackfoot are still a sovereign and strong people. Restoring the relationship between the Blackfoot and buffalo additionally puts the current relationship between Blackfoot and cattle ranching under a more critical lens.

In Canada, Blackfoot country (now present-day southern Alberta) saw a large influx of cattlemen from the east after Treaty 7. A combination of socio-political and economic factors influenced the growth and establishment of cattle ranching in Alberta that include: government legislation and policy, capital investment from wealthy businesses back east, expanded beef markets to Britain, and socially constructed images and ideas of the “western frontier” (Evans 1987). The surge of cattle ranching in Canada paralleled that in the western United States, but for different reasons and in different ways. In Canada, individuals and companies could lease large tracts of grazing leases that would last for 21 years through the amendment of the Dominion Lands Act amended in 1881 (Evans 1987). And, as Evans (1987) further notes, those who leased grazing lands could comfortably “rely on the support of the North West Mounted Police, while
the Department of Agriculture was actively promoting the sale of [their] product in Great Britain” (p.74). All in all, cattle ranching garnered relatively large support from the government and was favored by local law enforcement. Cattle ranching was more consciously and actively pursued in what was then called the Northwest Territories of Canada than it was in the United States. During the last two decades of the 1800s in Canada, “cattlemen…successfully shouldered aside the Indians and replaced the indigenous buffalo with their own herds of cattle” (Evans 1987). Through different means, similar transitions were happening in the United States, as cattle ranching was supported to help replace the Native American, and specifically, Blackfeet way of life.

The reduction of the Blackfeet Reservation in the 1886 Act of Congress was partially influenced by the interests of white cattlemen in Blackfeet grasslands (Ewers 1983). In 1887, the General Allotment Act (or Dawes Act) was an important part of the U.S. assimilationist policy that also indirectly promoted livestock ranching. It provided for Blackfeet individuals to own land on the reservation and eventually become citizens of the United States, while any land not allotted to Blackfeet individuals would be opened up for homesteading by white settlers (Dawes Act 1887). Unsurprisingly, most of the non-Indigenous people who settled on this relinquished land were or became cattle ranchers. Further aiding the transition to livestock livelihoods was the fact that within these various aforementioned land cessions it was specifically outlined that certain sums of money that the Blackfeet received from the U.S. government for said land cessions were to be allocated for purchasing agricultural equipment and transitioning to livestock ranching (Ashby 1985). Cattle ranching also underpinned the rationale for the western strip of land on the Blackfeet Reservation in the 1895 Act of Congress that eventually became part of Glacier National Park in 1910. The Indian Agent at the time, George Steel, did not think it was fit land for cattle grazing, and that it should instead be sold and the Blackfeet credited funds (Ewers 1983). Within the conditions outlined in the 1895 Act of Congress, the Blackfeet sold this strip of land while maintaining rights for access, hunting, fishing, and harvesting (Craig et al. 2012). However, this ‘ceded strip’ later became part of Glacier National Park, and those previously agreed upon access and use rights were neglected. This is still a contentious part of Blackfeet and National Park relations today. It is clear that the extermination of the buffalo, acquisition of Blackfeet land, and development of cattle grazing in Blackfeet country are tightly intertwined.
More Plains Indians transitioned to ranching in order to survive in the wake of the loss of buffalo and through federal government support. For the U.S. government, it perpetuated assimilationist policies and ideologies of the time to “kill the Indian, and save the man”; others argue that it enabled the Plains Indians to continue practicing elements of traditional horse culture, and after the massive reductions of land and loss of the buffalo, it was the only viable lifestyle option with what land and resources they had left (Cross 2010). On the Blackfeet Reservation, government rations and resources were preferentially given to those who actively pursued agriculture and livestock raising lifestyles; therefore, by the mid-1890s Blackfeet ranching became firmly established, especially with the help of the Great Northern Railway to send Blackfeet beef to market (Ewers 1983). Controlling the source and flow of meat on the Blackfeet Reservation was a crucial part of the Office of Indian Affairs, as was turning the Blackfeet into colonial subject laborers through cattle ranching and beef production via the use of slaughterhouses (Wise 2011). Introducing slaughterhouses was another mechanism by which the Blackfoot way of relating to non-human relatives was violently destroyed, and replaced with a “civilized”, detached, and capitalist mode of production and being (Wise 2011). In 1886, just before the Dawes Act, the Blackfeet did not own a single head of cattle; however, by 1900, a total of 12,000 head of cattle were owned by Blackfeet individuals (Ewers 1983). With the buffalo gone and the relationship to it broken, cattle ranching took over, creating a new lifestyle that forwarded the colonial assimilationist project.

4.5.2 Rancher Concerns

Through the analysis, I identified 89 quotes commenting on rancher concerns. I grouped these concerns into six prominent themes (Dunn 2016; see Fig. 4.2). The most prominent concern was regarding communication and information dissemination, referenced 35 times. Concerns regarding the responsibility for and management of bison were referenced 23 times. The next two concerns about disease transmission and displacement and grazing competition were referenced 14 and 13 times respectively. The final primary concern was about property damage and the potential danger of bison, which was referenced 11 times.
These concerns were primarily focused on the lack of communication about the *Iinnii Initiative* to surrounding communities on the Blackfeet Reservation and in Alberta. Some targeted at the Blackfeet Tribe, Waterton Lakes National Park, or the *Iinnii Initiative* as an entity. Most ranchers felt uninformed about the logistics and management plan for the bison, bison behavior and disease, plans for land acquisition, and so on. Due to this lack of accurate information dissemination, most ranchers felt uncomfortable with the reintroduction, expressed frustration, and felt alienated from the process.

The Blackfeet Stock Growers Association (BSGA), for example, expressed various points of misunderstanding and confusion surrounding: which bison herd is going to be “reintroduced”; the purpose of each of the bison herds; the release location; the identification, prevention, and treatment of potentially threatening bovine diseases; the significance of Iinnii; and the overall management plan logistics including hunting, fencing, and business plans for bison (personal communication and participation). Much of the same lack of knowledge was present in Albertan ranchers as well indicating that this lack of communication is a trans-border issue. Most Blackfeet and Alberta ranchers were unaware of the *Iinnii Initiative*, or knew very
little about it, and explained to me that I was their first significant point of contact regarding the reintroduction of bison.

“I don’t think they do a really good job in having public meetings, and if they do have public meetings you never see any advertisement for them, so you don’t know they’re happening. And it would be nice to know what was happening right here. Just like this Initiative.” – Lila Evans, Blackfeet Rancher

“I think a lot of it is communication. They have to communicate with us. A lot of what we hear is just hearsay. We don’t know. Somebody will come up and want to spread a story, the council is doing this, or the buffalo program is doing this, but we don’t know. Nobody has ever said anything. So, right now, we are mad. We are going to say that someone has to do something, but nobody comes around us. If you hadn’t told us this part, we wouldn’t have known that.” – Gus Vaile & Bud Gray, Blackfeet Ranchers

“But no, there’s been no consultation. Rumors again, just like people hear rumors about NCC, there are rumors about this. And maybe it isn’t way worse than it really is, but they should come and have consultation, and have ranchers that are going to be their neighbors. But they’re not.” – Rancher / previous NCC employee

One Blackfeet rancher, Lila Evans, runs cattle and bison, and although she appreciates bison and would like to see more of them on the Reservation, she expressed similar concerns in terms of management and communication as other ranchers. Evans was almost entirely unaware of what the Iinnii Initiative was, who was involved, and its purpose. Two other Blackfeet ranchers, Vaile and Gray, expressed concern about being displaced from their land to make room for bison, but as demonstrated in the above quote, limited accurate information gets out their way. If there is a lack of advertising and active engagement with the community for public education about the Iinnii Initiative just within the immediate vicinity of Browning (the central community on the Blackfeet reservation), then it is likely that public engagement is even more limited 35 miles north to Babb (a community near the US-Canada border), or farther north to Alberta. One rancher who works with the NCC reflects the lack of communication with Alberta ranchers, and more importantly, the lack of accurate information. The more that false information spreads, the more backtracking and re-educating that will need to be done.

Individuals who have worked with bison either as wildlife biologist professionals or ranchers have explained to me some of the misunderstandings as discussed above. First of all, Evans, who owns bison and cattle, explained to me that their bison and cattle together in the same pastures, and the animals respectfully keep their distance from one another. They do not interbreed, the bulls do not get in fights, and she has never had a case of disease transmission between the two (BFR 6 interview 2017). While cattle hybridization with bison could be problematic for a purebred cattle operator, the threat is unfounded. Such concerns around cattle
and bison interbreeding comes from the fact that many bison contain cattle gene introgression from experiments of cross-breeding in the early 1900s, and in fact, artificial crossing is very difficult and there is no evidence that shows natural mating and cross-breeding between the two species (Hedrick 2009). Thus, the anxieties around genetic purity can remain a special point of debate among conservation bureaucrats and scientists.

Keith Aune, who was the previous bison program director with the Wildlife Conservation Society and has been working alongside the Blackfeet since the *Iinnii Initiative’s* conception, also explained to me that there has never been a case of bison transferring brucellosis to cattle. The probability, based on the necessary avenues of transmission from another animal to bison, and then to cattle, is so small that cattle are more likely to – and more often do – get it from elk (Aune Interview 2017). Wes Olson, who has been studying bison for 30 years, shared how bison have been in Grasslands National Park since 2005 and that conflict between bison and ranchers has been nonexistent and that bison respect fences as long as they have enough food and water resources (personal communication 2017). A lot of the concerns of ranchers tend to be based on misinformation. It appears that the key to developing a good relationship between ranchers and bison, according to Wes, is time and education.

Another concern that ranchers expressed that ties into the lack of communication and information dissemination, and which might lay the groundwork for future relationship building, is a feeling of alienation from the *Iinnii Initiative* decision making process and a desire to be more engaged in it. Some Alberta ranchers expressed a general feeling of socio-political alienation, in that the urban-rural divide has led to news media, the government, and society in general, often neglecting the impacts of policy decisions, and natural disasters like wildfires on ranchers’ livelihoods and their role in food production (WBRA 2 Interview 2017). A number of Blackfeet ranchers felt that their voice as ranchers was not always considered in Tribal matters, and particularly with regard to the *Iinnii Initiative*.

> "Communication with the tribe, to me, I think has been none. Like I said, you are the first guy who has come out here to even get our opinion, and the [tribal government] has all this in the works? Have they bothered to bring us in and say okay, we may not be coming through your area, or we may be coming through your area. This is our long-term plan, how is it affecting you and what can we do to compromise? Nothing has been said." – Gus Vaile, Blackfeet Rancher

Despite the early community survey efforts for the *Iinnii Initiative* in 2014, there appears to have been limited follow up and in-depth conversations with ranchers. These conversations may have occurred with other community members, but from my visits with ranchers, they feel
alienated from this process. Some demonstrate more negativity towards the Tribal government and the Buffalo Program than others, feeling that their opinion would not be considered even if they were engaged. This is one key distinction between Blackfeet and Alberta ranchers – a number of historical and present socio-political relations within the Tribe appears to influence the resentment towards the tribal government from Blackfeet ranchers and thus their resistance to the buffalo program. Alberta ranchers do not experience these specific intra-tribal relations; however, their experiences with provincial and park management of human-wildlife conflict does appear to breed feelings of resentment that also inform their resistance to buffalo.

Various Blackfeet ranchers expressed concern with the current buffalo management, claiming that those in the Buffalo Program are not managing the buffalo well and just in it for the paycheck. Some additionally made side comments in our conversations about other ranchers or people in the Buffalo Program not being “real” ranchers. The distinction between a “real” and “fake” rancher is not entirely clear, but it sheds light onto a sort of intra-community legitimization of knowledge and skill.¹⁷

One rancher and his partner, when asked if they would be open to meeting with the Iinnii Initiative said “no” because he felt that they would not really listen, and a meeting would not be worth the time and effort because they would just go on and make a decision and do what they wanted to anyway (BFR 4 Interview 2017). However, some others demonstrate a greater willingness and are open for discussion and compromise. Individuals at the BSGA meeting also expressed a willingness to have representatives from the Iinnii Initiative attend a stock growers’ meeting, present the plans for the reintroduction, and have a conversation about various issues of interest.

Most ranchers in Alberta tend to echo this sentiment. The majority of Albertan ranchers I interviewed demonstrated an understanding of the potential positives and cultural significance for the Blackfoot of bringing bison back to the landscape; however, they were still uncertain about many of the management logistics and tended to place the responsibility and their frustrations on the Iinnii Initiative in general, including the Blackfeet Tribe and Waterton Lakes National Park. Additionally, because of the potential future interactions with bison, and because these ranchers come from communities where communication and strong relationships are fundamental, they were surprised that a management plan was already drafted and felt that they

¹⁷ A deeper interrogation of this phenomenon, its origins, and implications is necessary, but is beyond the scope of this paper.
should have been engaged in the process much earlier on. An Albertan rancher of the Waterton Biosphere Reserve Association and the Waterton Park Front Project demonstrates these attitudes well:

“That’s where I look at the buffalo initiative, and I go…I get it. I’ll love it; that’s so cool. I also look at it, and I go, ‘guys this is headed for a train wreck.’ At its current trajectory in my ranching community, this is a train wreck. I don’t see how it turns around without some heavy-duty relationship building. I don’t. I don’t want it to be that. I want it to be hugely positive. And that’s the tricky part.” – WBRA Rancher 2

Disease transmission

This concern, though statistically deemed secondary to others, contained some of the most visceral and emotional responses from interviewees. Concerns about disease were centered on the potential of bison transmitting brucellosis, anthrax, bovine spongifor encephalitis (BSE), and other diseases to cattle, and the implications for cattle ranchers such if this were to occur. A number of ranchers who shared these concerns also shared stories about Yellowstone National Park, Wood Buffalo National Park, or other ranchers they personally knew who had to navigate the challenges of a diseased herd and the losses they incurred. Ranchers who expressed this concern also inquired about who would be responsible for compensating ranchers for herd losses due to disease.

Multiple ranchers brought up stories of brucellosis from the Yellowstone bison or from the herd in Wood Buffalo National Park in Alberta. It is clear that these were influential stories that informed their perspectives on bison as disease transmitters. Even though brucellosis transmission was the main concern, other diseases such as tuberculosis, bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE), and anthrax were also noted. One rancher, who also works for the Nature Conservancy Canada as a manager for the Waterton Park Front Project\textsuperscript{18}, expressed her concern about the political and economic implications for bovine diseases moving across the international border. Her concerns were centered on the possibility of bison acquiring disease from cattle in Montana or Alberta, and transferring it across the border, which could potentially lead to the shutting down of livestock trade between Alberta and the United States.

\textit{“Buffalo carry the same diseases that cattle – brucellosis, BSE...so tell me how those bison are going to come in from Montana, stay in Waterton Park – which is not fenced for bison – they’re going to wander out into all this NCC land with people’s cattle that don’t want them there, and then who is going to control where they go and their numbers? And then they’re going to walk back into the park and back into Montana. If the USDA ever got wind of that it would be an...”}

\textsuperscript{18} This individual worked for the NCC at the time of field work and the interview and has since retired from that position.
absolute disaster because these cattle could have contacted them. If they weren’t diseased coming into Canada, they are definitely going to be diseased coming out.” – NCC, Rancher 1

Another rancher who is a part of the Waterton Biosphere Reserve Association, and part of whose property borders the Blackfeet Nation, also expressed his concerns about the potential for disease transmission.

“But the bison eventually aren’t going to be disease free anymore. If they aren’t going to vaccinate for them or do nothing with them and just let them run wild, the chances are that they are going to pick up stuff. Either from my cattle, or someone else’s cattle, or whatever. They’re notorious for having brucellosis and TB, like the wild herd up in Wood Buffalo Park – it’s contagious. Every one of them has it, and then what do you do? Do you destroy them all to rid of the disease? Well they aren’t willing to do that, and there are too many of them up there to do that...So, that’s concerning to me.” – Shane Hansen, WBRA Rancher

These disease concerns come from a very real sense of fear for ranchers, as it is common practice to exterminate an entire herd if it acquires a disease like brucellosis or BSE (personal communication 2017). Therefore, although the Innii Initiative bison have been quarantined and are disease free, the probability of bison acquiring and transmitting disease to cattle is small and most brucellosis comes from elk (Aune Interview 2017), the potential consequences for ranchers are, in fact, quite large. These feelings of apprehension corroborate literature that recognizes ranchers’ fears that domestic cattle might be infected by Yellowstone bison that roam outside of park boundaries (Freese et al. 2007). Stories from Yellowstone or Wood Buffalo, though irrelevant to the case of the Blackfeet bison, are nonetheless influential in constructing and circulating discourses of fear around disease and transforming individuals’ realities and perceptions of bison. These discourses are powerful in that they can often override scientific evidence.

Property damage, danger, and displacement

With regard to fencing, property damage, and grazing competition, most ranchers interviewed were in opposition to the idea of free-roaming bison. This concern centered on the potential of bison damaging ranch fences, crops, buildings, eating hay stacks, interacting with or harming livestock, or injuring people. It also embodied a fear of being displaced from one's land, feeling as if one's livelihood was being threatened by bison, and a concern about bison outcompeting cattle for grazing land. If bison were going to be free-roaming, ranchers expressed

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19 This individual was on the board of the WBRA during the time of wild work and the interview and has now since stepped down from that position to take on more of a role an Albertan beef producing association
apprehension about them breaking through fences, interacting with cattle, and feeding on haystacks. Thus, the most common sentiment among ranchers with regard to the potential of free-roaming bison was that they wanted them to be fenced and managed.

One Blackfeet rancher, Mike Stone, who lives closer to the Badger Two Medicine area expressed how he would not mind seeing them reintroduced to the Chief Mountain area because the Tribe could lease the land, manage the herd, and keep them away from ranchers (BFR 4 Interview 2017). If they were down in his area, however, he would probably have to follow the buffalo around repairing his fences, and he does not think there is enough grass to share between bison and cattle. From conversations at the Blackfeet Stock Growers Association (BSGA) meeting, similar concerns were expressed. They feel the current fencing around the winter pasture for the Tribe’s commercial20 bison herd needs to be improved and some ranchers feel threatened by the idea of potentially having to compete with bison on a commercial production level. If cattle grazing land is going to be taken, they expect an alternative plan for its economic viability.

The concerns about fencing, property damage, and grazing competition also stem from already deep-seated frustrations with the current failures in how state and provincial agencies manage human wildlife conflict, in addition to the high prices of leasing land for grazing. Although many ranchers appreciate wildlife, the weak and inconsistent compensation programs for livestock predation, the increased prevalence of grain depredation by elk, and the continual stress that these experiences put on producers and their livestock has created exhaustion and cut patience short. Adding bison to the mix begins to tap into these sensitive topics and pique these emotions. Experiences with a past bison herd on the Blackfeet Reservation that was not fenced also seems to have a heavy influence on Blackfeet ranchers’ opinions of what “wild bison” means for them. One Blackfeet rancher who lives near the Badger Two Medicine area shared his insights on this perspective:

“I think with the wild herd, I think that was one of the troubles with people here on the reservation who owned leases and land and fenced them. [The bison] would always go through the fences and knocking the fences down just moving on their own. I think that is where a lot of the trouble came from was through the ranchers. They had to use their material and their manpower to put the fences back up...I thought maybe the Tribe could have pitched in or eat least helped out on it. That was one of the big concerns on that herd there.” – Daryl St. Goddard, Blackfeet Rancher

20 I use the term “commercial” here as it is a contained, domestic, and non-free-roaming herd of bison. The extent to which the Tribe sells or processes these bison for commercial purposes is uncertain.
This individual was one of the few Blackfeet ranchers who I spoke with that also considered himself a spiritual person and seemed to have a deeper understanding and respect for Blackfeet traditions, culture, and the bison themselves. He held a minority view compared to the other ranchers I interviewed in openly supporting the goals of the *Iinnii Initiative* and having bison be free-roaming along the mountain front from Badger Two Medicine to the Chief Mountain region and up into Waterton.

As can be seen, feelings of vexation and anxiety on both the Blackfeet Reservation and in Alberta are very real and should not be brushed aside lightly. However, despite these frustrations, there is a willingness by some to learn, engage, and hold dialogues with individuals in the *Iinnii Initiative*, which appears to be a crucial next step. Finding areas of similarity can be useful in establishing these relationships, forming alliances, and moving forward together.

4.5.3 Potential for Collaboration and Compromise: A Conservation Mindset

From 14 rancher interviews, 69 quotes were identified that were related to perceptions of land. From this node emerged multiple specific themes, of which the three most prominent were: 1) care and stewardship for the land, 2) ranching working landscapes 3) a place with greater than monetary value. These three themes explored ideas around conservation for ecological, practical and livelihood, and social reasons including: wildlife habitat, weed control, maintaining the land for future generations, maintaining grassland health for livestock grazing and production, and so on. Ideas around the balance between conservation and ranching, ranchers as original conservationists, land as holding an unnamable value or being of spiritual or sacred importance were also expressed. Collectively, these themes point towards a conservation or land ethic that underpins the mentalities and practices of most ranchers interviewed. This mentality is also one of the elements that informs the *Iinnii Initiative* and could be a potential entry point for constructive dialogue and alliances.

Two ranchers outside of Waterton Lakes NP reflect a sincere respect and appreciation for the work that they do, and the land on which they live. They recognize that the land is the foundation of their livelihood, and that without it, they would not be able to do the thing that they love – ranching. Therefore, maintaining the land becomes a necessity and primary interest.

“It’s a good place to raise your family, but it’s also rewarding when you raise good cattle and get good feedback on them. And it’s rewarding when you are managing the land well and you can see positive changes. And even things like the wildlife, although sometimes can be challenging to have...
on your place, it’s pretty neat to know that you are providing habitat. There’s all kinds of things, besides the beef that we raise, there is a lot of good that I think we do for society.” – Jeff Bectell, WBRA Rancher.

“It’s protected. That to me is more important than anything else. I don’t know how to articulate in words how important this piece of ground is to me. If I can leave one thing in my life it is this piece of ground intact...I’m passionate about this piece of earth...I’m not a particularly religious person. If there is a God who exists, then that’s fine...But, for me this is a profoundly religious place, it’s a profoundly spiritual place. It is a place where I believe in a greater being and a greater power, and in something that is bigger than myself. It at once makes me feel small but makes me feel huge as well.” – WBRA Rancher 2

It can also be seen that this conservation ethic extends to wildlife habitat. The first rancher is also heavily involved with a Carnivores and Communities Program through the WBRA that investigates novel ways of mitigating negative human-wildlife conflict, but still embraces the co-existence of humans, livestock, and large carnivores. Furthermore, the second individual expressed their connection to the land in a way that offers spiritual significance and deeper life meaning, garnering an even greater respect. This deeper level of spiritual engagement with the land was not a prominent feeling among most of the ranchers I interviewed, but a few individuals held similar views.

The mentality of land conservation is not lost on the Blackfeet Reservation either. One rancher often expressed concern about the current management of the buffalo, particularly in terms of grassland health (Stone personal communication 2017). Despite his, at times, critical views of the current bison management team, this concern for the grasslands demonstrates a broader concern for the continual integrity of the land. Two ranchers expressed their interest in conservation education, becoming better stewards of their land, and maintaining its health for future generations to use.

“To me, it’s taught me how to preserve for future generations, especially our kids. If they want to be ranchers, they still have something to. It’s not only preserving our land, but it’s preserving your lifestyle...But if we don’t take care of the lands, the grazing grasses and stuff that we’ve tried to preserve over the last 20 years, it’ll all be gone.” – Gus Vaile, Blackfeet Rancher

“...when I do quit, at least the ground will be good enough for somebody else and I hope that they preserve it as good as we did.” – Bud Gray, Blackfeet Rancher

Another Alberta rancher expressed her view of the land, and how ranching has influenced her relationship to nature.

“In ranching, your life depends on what happens with weather, with land, and you’re so connected to it because every day you ride your horse out...it’s hard to make your living, and you gain a huge respect for how powerful nature is, and how little power you have over it. It also gives you an appreciation for all the diversity; all the species of the land, animal and plant. It’s hard how you see how a wolf kills a steer, or an animal, it’s pretty cruel, but it’s part of life and you
learn that from an early age. It just gives you an appreciation for how important your relationship with nature is.” – Rancher / previous NCC employee

These values of ecological integrity, caring for the land and maintaining it for future generations underpin a common ethic among most ranchers I interviewed, and reflect some of the underlying ethics in the Innii Initiative. When talking with ranchers on both sides of the border, many shared a detailed, experiential, and nuanced knowledge and understanding of the land on which they ranched, the seasonal ecological cycles of plants and wildlife, and how their own animals behaved throughout the year.

“There is this thing that happens when you work on the land, and you work in a place...there are these cycles, and these things that you don’t notice and that you don’t see until you’ve seen them for 10 years. ...it’s like ‘oh, I haven’t seen the owl that nests in the valley yet this year. I haven’t seen the hawks that’s over that hill. The sand hill cranes came back this week.’ And the turning of the seasons, and the Fall and the things that happen...it’s like gaining fluency in a language. I think is a good way of putting it. You can study the language.” – WBRA Rancher 2

This locally and contextually situated knowledge is something that is often overlooked in conservation governance (Berkes 2012; Robbins 2006); therefore, taking the concerns and perspectives of ranchers seriously is necessary. It is valuable to collaborative conservation efforts, and meaningful in building trusting and lasting relationships. Not doing so could exacerbate the frustrations and feelings of marginalization that some ranchers are feeling, and by doing so, could potentially decrease rancher interest in engaging with the Initiative or conservation programs at large. It could also perpetuate the misperception that ranchers are of little value to or in opposition to conservation, while maintaining sole planning and decision-making power in the hands of NGOs or the state, potentially increasing the divide between ranchers and conservationists.

4.5.4 Spirituality and Ceremony, or a Colonial Disconnection from Bison?

The colonial repercussions of settlement and cattle ranching manifest themselves in a number of ways. Although not statistically significant, through participant observation, some interviews, and corroborative comments of others, and subsequent coding of interviews with NVivo, a possible trend began to emerge within Blackfeet ranchers. It appears that those who support the Innii Initiative are more engaged with Blackfoot traditional ways or are more attuned to their own sense of spirituality. On the other hand, those who are skeptical or oppose the initiative seem to lack this sense of spiritual engagement, and cultural understanding. Most of
the Blackfeet ranchers I interviewed demonstrated the latter, however, a few expressed the former. Such a trend was not observed in Albertan ranchers.

There appeared at first to be a division between individuals who considered themselves spiritual and participated in ceremony and who were also supportive of bison, and those who did not participate in ceremony and were less or not supportive of bison. However, upon further examination, the division was not so binary. Out of eight total ranchers interviewed, three individuals identified as spiritual or ceremonialist and were also supportive of bison reintroduction. One individual expressed skepticism of ceremonialists and was the least supportive of bison. In the middle of this spectrum were four ranchers who recognized the importance of bison culturally but were not ceremonially or traditionally involved themselves. Of these four, three were skeptical of some people who considered themselves ceremonialists and were open to compromise about bison reintroduction. The fourth was clearly in support of bison as this individual was also a bison rancher in addition to raising cattle.

It is clear that the perceived split around spirituality, ceremony, and bison is an ongoing repercussion of settler colonialism and its attempts to disconnect Blackfoot individuals from their human and non-human relatives and eliminate Blackfoot culture and spirituality through residential schools, reservations, and other assimilationist policies. Dr. Carol Murray is a Blackfeet rancher, who also works for the Blackfeet Community College, and is a respected ceremonialist and knowledge holder. She expressed the importance of increasing the presence of bison, and had numerous experiences with bison that positively influenced her understanding of them, her relationship with them, and her respect for them. Murray recognized that not many people have had these opportunities, which is why she believes it is important for more people to have exposure to bison as it may help to produce the same sort of realizations for others in their own time and own ways (BFR 8 Interview 2017). Running Wolf also expressed the importance of the spiritual connection to buffalo and the ceremony required to prepare and eat them so that their energy becomes embodied in one’s person. These individuals are strongly engaged in ceremony and firm supporters of the Iinnii Initiative. This way of understanding how people relate to and interact with their non-human animal relatives is an important part of Blackfoot ontology and epistemology. It also reaffirms the observed conflict between spiritual and non-
spiritual Blackfoot individuals and their respective support or lack thereof for bison and the *Iinnii Initiative*.\(^{21}\)

Such tensions brought on by settler-colonialism are further illustrated in a story shared with me by Murray. She shared how when her son was younger, he had received some bison meat from Yellowstone, and went around the Blackfeet community to share it with different elders. However, they were afraid of it because they had heard about brucellosis in the media and turned it down. As she explained, “our people are kind of a fear-based people in the last century” (BFR 8 interview 2017). Evans, the Blackfeet rancher who raises bison and cattle, does not try to sell bison meat at the local Indian Days celebration because, as was explained to me, no profit will be made. She expressed that very few people on the reservation eat bison meat. The fact that some of the Blackfeet community no longer eat, and are afraid of, bison meat – a traditional food source – demonstrates some of the repercussions of colonialism that still reverberate through the community today. This is not to take away from the positive livelihoods that many have made from cattle ranching, but this psychosocial barrier hinders efforts like the *Iinnii Initiative*, that can bring numerous environmental, cultural, nutrition, and economic benefits to the Blackfoot people.

Even though not many of the ranchers I interviewed were strongly engaged with traditional Blackfeet ways and ceremonies, tapping into a shared sense of ecological stewardship and creating more exposure to bison and ceremony, could foster stronger relationships, and biocultural awareness and understanding, thus enabling greater compromise and cooperation moving forward. This is a potential step in taking ranchers seriously as land managers and conservation actors. Furthermore, overcoming this disconnection from bison appears integral to facing and reconciling the colonial reality and impacts of cattle ranching in Blackfoot country.

### 4.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The sentiments expressed by a number of Alberta and Blackfeet ranchers demonstrate an expectation of consultation. The lack of consultation and engagement clearly results in a discomfort and frustration. Although the source was not specifically identified, this appears to

\(^{21}\) I cannot claim, however, that all spiritual Blackfoot people think and feel the same way. There are differently nuanced understandings and beliefs as there are in any worldview or community, but those intricacies were not the focus of this work.
parallel the “settled expectations” and “settler anxiety” that Mackey (2016) so insightfully unpacks. An ‘agrarian narrative’ that settler ranchers have lived on this land for multiple generations, put up fences, and manipulated and ‘improved’ the land with ranching and agriculture reinforces and legitimizes nation-state and settler property and land rights (Mackey 2016). Such a process also occurred on the Blackfeet Reservation as people shifted to cattle ranching to survive and assimilate into a “legitimate” society through ranching and legitimizing their claim to land.

There appears to be an unspoken, deeply-seated, and probably subconscious sense of entitlement by ranchers that this is their land and an expectation that they should be engaged in any decisions that may impact them, their land, or their livelihood. Anything that challenges this settled expectation, such as a sovereign, Indigenous-led bison reintroduction produces a deep sense of anxiety and fear. What was “given” becomes unsettled and people feel the need to defend it (Mackey 2016). However, this is not to position ranchers as malevolent pawns of a settler regime, but rather to interrogate the long-term processes that have shaped their reality and resistance to specific endeavors such as the Innii Initiative. Mackey (2016) reminds us that colonialism not only impacted Indigenous peoples negatively, but also impacted the mindsets and abilities of settler peoples to be able to look past their myopic field of view and rethink things in ways that decolonizes themselves – a major barrier to the decolonizing project overall.

A few Alberta ranchers share strong relationships with Blackfoot individuals, and one rancher was very forward with her recent anxieties and struggles of grappling with settler colonialism and her role in the process of reconciliation. These anxieties and feelings of discomfort are common in many settler persons who are trying to wrestle with their own personal compliance in a settler colonial society and how they can combat that. It is a discomfort that I felt as a settler, white, male researcher during this journey, and one with which I continue to struggle. This discomfort and uncertainty needs to be embraced, taken seriously, and supported in order to guide the process of reconciliation.

While on first glance it may appear that white Albertan ranchers are the main settler-colonial social ‘barrier’ to the Innii Initiative, this research demonstrates that the Initiative may find challenges on the Blackfeet Reservation itself. The impacts of settler-colonialism take many forms, some through more subtle and systematic methods than others that have become ingrained into the beings of individuals like Blackfeet cattle ranchers who demonstrate a disconnect from
Blackfoot culture and have embraced ranching as a livelihood. Cattle ranching in Blackfoot country has a deeply complex and multi-layered history. The extermination of the buffalo and slow, but steady, reduction in Blackfoot territory paralleled the increasing presence of livestock production and assimilation of Blackfoot people into “civilized” U.S. and Canadian society. Ridding the Blackfeet of bison and shifting their methods of meat processing from traditional and cultural practices to cattle and mechanistic slaughterhouses was a means of quickening the process of colonization and cleansing both the Blackfeet and the meat of its “predatory history” (Wise 2011). This process hastened the Blackfeet’s conformation to the “institution of wage labor and capitalism in northern Montana” (Wise 2011). Blackfeet ranchers complicate a simple “us” versus “them” narrative, demonstrating the complex heterogeneity of the Blackfeet Nation.

Cattle ranching is large part of Blackfoot life and the rural North American West today and is something that has instilled a great sense of pride and accomplishment in many, yet it is fraught with a complicated history that has shaped contemporary politics and social interactions. Historical processes deeply influence rancher attitudes, management systems, and their views on larger political issues (Sayre 2004). However, “there still remains relatively limited understanding about those rural areas that are shaped by historical depopulation and cultural marginalization” (Bryant, Paniagua & Kizos 2010, p.1). This research starts down a path of investigation that explores such rural regions and the historical processes of depopulation and cultural marginalization with regards to settler-colonialism that shaped those areas. I add to the political ecology literature by offering insight into how settler-colonial processes of displacement, marginalization, and cultural genocide shaped the current landscape and its people, engendering a ranching culture and society, and how Blackfoot-led bison reintroduction creates a friction with such a status quo. The processes of settler-colonialism that shaped this region also shaped how people think about land, wildlife, borders, and other people’s relationship to land. Clearing the plains of buffalo and First Nations people was an integral part in reshaping not just the landscape, but also the way in which mainstream society perceives the landscape. The development of an agricultural (specifically ranching) economy and the establishment of national parks further shapes physical and mental borders around the ways in which the land and animals are used and understood.

Decision-making power about, and access to, land no longer rested with the Blackfoot, but instead with cattle ranchers, western scientists, and bureaucrats. Contributing to political
ecology of the American west, this research demonstrates the importance of understanding how settler-colonial processes have shaped Albertan and Blackfeet ranchers’ relationships to and understanding of the land, each other, and bison, in order to reimagine these relationships in new ways. It further examines the ways in which socio-ecological, cultural and political interactions play out in the present, by exploring the attitudes and concerns of white Albertan and Blackfeet ranchers to bison reintroduction.

Ranchers on the Blackfeet Nation and in Alberta around Waterton Lakes National Park have various concerns, including concerns about lack of frequent and accurate communication and engagement, disease management, fencing and property damage, and grazing competition. However, the desire to be involved is not lost, and combined with other shared values can be used as a catalyst to build valuable relationships and propel the Iinmii Initiative forward. Ignoring these concerns would only exacerbate feelings of frustration and alienation. Therefore, it is important to take these concerns and ranchers seriously as valued conservation actors with legitimate forms of situated knowledge and skills that can support conservation goals.

Combining a shared sense of care for the landscape, and the interest of most ranchers to be engaged, share their concerns, and become properly informed of the Iinmii Initiative’s goals and plans, presents the space and opportunity for meaningful dialogue.

Furthermore, a more regular presence and education of bison – behavior, disease, and importance to Blackfoot culture – particularly with ranchers in the Blackfeet and Alberta communities, to help develop a greater understanding of the significance of bison and a relationship to it may be helpful. Working with ranchers to educate others on the importance of conserving the landscape, the history of the Blackfeet’s relationship to it, the role of bison in this relationship, and the role of ranchers in being stewards today may be a method for engaging ranchers in this process, offering them a new sense of meaning and participation, and working towards greater healing and reconciliation in society. Such collaboration with ranchers could create space for co-learning, cross-cultural dialogue, and innovative conservation solutions. But as was identified, transparent and ongoing communication is critical.

As a lesson for working landscape conservation, collaboration among all stakeholders and rightsholders is critical to overcoming challenges and creating novel conservation solutions. Furthermore, working landscapes have taken on a variety of strategies for ranchland conservation including “conservation easements, solar and wind power, raising diverse breeds of
livestock and marketing them in innovative ways, permaculture, engaging in environmental restoration and wildlife habitat protection, and promoting environmental and agricultural education” (Moroney 2014, p.227). This research demonstrates the need to engage with ranchers in collaborative conservation endeavors and determine how working landscapes may help promote conservation goals. The *Innii Initiative* offers an opportunity to navigate the frontiers of collaborative landscape, wildlife, and biocultural restoration through working landscapes.

This research encourages a reflection on the historical and contemporary complex realities of cattle ranching in Blackfoot country and how ranchers can be engaged as conservation actors in a contentious and complicated colonial context. Based on ranching's colonial legacy and the tensions that exist between it and Blackfoot bio-cultural restoration endeavors, this research, alongside the *Innii Initiative*, may offer the space for confronting these past and present colonial conflicts in order to overcome barriers for reintroducing bison and forward reconciliation within the Blackfeet Nation and between Blackfoot and settler individuals. Further exploration into what drives this “settler discomfort” that appears to underpin concerns and frustrations of ranchers, and how it can be embraced through dialogue and meaningful partnerships could be helpful to guide this process. The effort to reintroduce bison through the *Innii Initiative* to Blackfoot territory impacts various members of Blackfoot, U.S., and Canadian society, and vividly exposes this intricate settler colonial history, simultaneously engendering feelings of fear, confusion, and hope.
Chapter 5 Conclusion

This concluding chapter summarizes and connects main findings from chapters 3 and 4 to my research objectives and overarching aim while also outlining the main theoretical and practical contributions of this research to conservation literature and practitioners. This chapter concludes by exploring potential future directions for research in this field.

5.1 Summary of Critical Findings and Connections to Conservation Literature and Practice

Led by the Blackfoot Confederacy and centered on Blackfoot values and practice, the Innii Initiative brings together a veritable web of conservation actors across international borders as an extraordinary example of Indigenous-led collaborative conservation to restore one of North America’s most iconic megafauna, the plains bison, to Blackfoot traditional territory in and around the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park in Alberta and Montana. Plains bison are not only ecological keystone species (Knapp et al. 1999), they are culturally significant to the Blackfoot people having been a spiritual guide, source of food, and center of ceremony (Blackweasel et al. 2013; Ladner 2003; Schultz 2002; personal communications 2017). The near extermination of plains bison from the North American plains in the late 1800s upon western settlement (Ewers 1983) got rid of this ecological and cultural keystone from the landscape, severing important relationships between bison, Blackfoot, and the land. Restoring bison to this landscape will not only reestablish a vital element of the prairie ecosystem, it will renew a relationship and assist in the resurgence of Blackfoot culture and health.

There has been a recent shift in conservation over the past few decades from a state-led, colonial, Eurocentric, “Old Paradigm” to a “New Paradigm” that is trying to be more collaborative, holistic, and focused on the rights of Indigenous people (Carroll 2014; Margerum 2008; Murray & King 2012; Olsson, Folke & Berkes 2004; Reo, Whyte, McGregor et al. 2017; Stevens 2014; Wyborn & Bixler 2013). Following this shift and aligning with calls to forward reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenous self-determination (Corntassel et al. 2009; Coulthard 2014; ICE 2018; McGregor 2011; Snelgrove et al. 2014; Wilson 2008; von Der Porten & de Loë 2013), the Innii Initiative offers itself as a model of Indigenous-led collaborative conservation governance to explore that could offer insights for decolonizing conservation practice. With many government reports and recommendations for reconciliation and
decolonization not being used (Palmater 2017), it is even more important to identify and support grassroots initiatives that work towards the larger project of decolonization.

The *Iinnii Initiative* is portrayed as a successful example of Indigenous-led collaborative conservation that is hailed as successful through media, individual collaborators, and based on metrics of success from literature (Belton & Jackson-Smith 2010). It, therefore, presents an opportunity to explore the factors that shape and inform collaboration with specific focus on attributes of individuals, organizational philosophies, and factors that could be potential challenges. Given the region’s complex settler-colonial history and fragmentation due to private property (much of which is rangelands), cattle ranchers were identified as potential barriers and valuable actors with whom to engage more seriously. Understanding the collaborative interactions and potential challenges will not only support on-the-ground efforts of the Initiative but also offer an opportunity from which other conservation practitioners can learn.

The overarching aim of this research was to contribute to the development of decolonized conservation practice and research by 1) using a decolonized research methodology and 2) understanding the *Iinnii Initiative* as a potentially positive model for decolonized collaborative conservation. I identified three objectives in order to achieve this aim.

1) Identify the actors involved in the Initiative and how they interact

2) Determine the factors that are most critical for effective collaboration and the challenges that may hinder it

3) Investigate and understand concerns and potential barriers from local cattle ranchers

This research identified the actors involved in the *Iinnii Initiative*, how they interact, and what elements critically inform collaboration. It demonstrated that individual attributes such as the ability to recognize the unique skillsets, values, and authority of each collaborator, boundary breaking thought, and a holistic approach to conservation were helpful for collaboration between diverse rights holders and stakeholders. Communication and organizational philosophies are also important factors that shape collaboration efforts. Communication, in addition to the unique histories and make-up of communities and organizations, navigating different world views and work styles, and uncertainty, risk, and fear are all challenges to collaboration. Examining
individual attributes and challenges also offers insight into what may be important for
decolonizing conservation.

Previous literature on collaborative conservation has investigated the interrelationships of
conservation actors (Armitage 2005; Lauber et al. 2011), the functioning of large and local
collaborative conservation networks (Wyborn & Bixler 2013), and how the evolution and
devolution of social networks and relationships overtime influences collaborative conservation
endeavors (Crona & Bodin 2006; Nkhata, Breen, & Freimund 2008). While this scholarship is
valuable in understanding collaborative conservation at the organizational level, its exploration
of particular attributes of individual actors and how these influences interactions, individual roles
within the collaborative network, and efforts to work together, though existent, is limited
(Armitage 2005; Kretser, Beckmann & Berger 2018). This research offers insights into some of
the significant attributes demonstrated by individuals who are actively involved in the Iinnii
Initiative. In particular, the ability for non-Indigenous partners to respect and be open to different
worldviews; explore more holistic forms of conservation; think beyond physical, institutional,
and mental borders; and recognize the unique skills and authority of their Indigenous
collaborators reflects recognized principles of engaging Indigenous partners in collaborative
conservation (Reo, Whyte, McGregor et al. 2017; Whyte, Reo, McGregor et al. 2018).

Moreover, being able to explore the individual attributes of non-Indigenous partners from
the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Society, offers insight for other non-Indigenous
partners in this Initiative and in collaborative conservation efforts elsewhere. It suggests what
might be necessary for them to adjust their perspectives and work more respectfully and
effectively with Indigenous partners to create “ethical space” (ICE 2018). Furthermore, being
able to identify specific attributes, perspectives, and values of Blackfeet partners provides current
non-Indigenous collaborators in the Iinnii Initiative insight into how they may be able to
augment their own perspectives and practices to decolonize themselves and continue to work
together and support Blackfoot self-determination more effectively. Such findings from this
research not only assist the on-the-ground efforts of the Iinnii Initiative, they contribute to other
conversations and practice of collaborative conservation in North America where non-
Indigenous conservation practitioners are genuinely trying to work alongside Indigenous partners
to pursue collaborative conservation projects and solutions.
Wholeness, sharing, reciprocity, kindness, and noninterference are values in a Blackfoot worldview (Little Bear 2000; 2012). The *Iinnii Initiative* is built upon such values. By cultivating respectful and kind relationships between stakeholders, sharing knowledge and skills, and being driven by a Blackfoot holistic approach, this collaborative conservation endeavor affirms a Blackfoot way of being and doing while being complemented with Western scientific tools and thought. Affirming and working through Indigenous values and practice and collaborating *with* Western thought, instead of being dominated by it, demonstrates how conservation can create “ethical space” and work towards reconciliation (ICE 2018). Cultivating the individual attributes discussed above is important to embracing such a praxis.

Identifying that local Blackfeet and non-Indigenous cattle ranchers will be critical stakeholders in the future of this bison restoration, this research explored in greater depth the concerns of local ranchers and the challenges that such concerns might present the *Iinnii Initiative*. Main concerns revolved around disease transmission, fence damage, and unclear and infrequent communication and engagement, thus illuminating potential challenges to the Initiative. It also examined some of the underlying values, such as promoting biodiversity and ecosystem health for future generations, that appear to be held in common by many ranchers and the Initiative, thus exploring potential points of alliance. I further explored the tension that exists between the Blackfoot-led restoration of buffalo and the colonial history and reality of cattle ranching in the region. The findings from this chapter suggest the importance of a collective “grappling” with this tension to open up dialogue, engage with ranchers as conservation actors, find compromise, and work towards reconciliation within and between communities.

Current and past research, and environmentalists, have often positioned ranchers as antithetical to conservation goals and a detriment to ecological biodiversity (Sayre 2004, 2005). Combined with the recent increase in working landscape conservation that helps to overcome mobile flora and fauna and jurisdictional difficulties, political ecology has been helpful in interrogating the more complex socio-economic, political, and ecological dimensions that inform conservation management, ranching, and the livelihoods of those in the rural American west, thus helping to reposition ranchers and other local resource users (i.e. hunters) as legitimate conservation actors (McCarthy 2002; Robbins 2006; Sheridan & Sayre 2014). Political ecology of the American west, however, has neglected to engage critically with the colonial legacy of cattle ranching in the region and its intersection with conservation.
This research not only engaged with ranchers as legitimate conservation actors, but also by bringing the colonial reality of ranching to the fore, applied a more critical lens with a settler-colonial hue to a more classic political ecology interrogation. Explorations from this research contribute to the political ecology literature by unpacking how the colonial legacy of ranching shapes present-day communities and attitudes of white Albertan ranchers and Blackfeet ranchers in the rural American west, complicating a simple narrative of Indigenous versus settler. It also offers insight into how such realities shape ranchers’ perspectives of a bison and Blackfoot cultural restoration that challenges the colonial processes of bison and Blackfoot extermination and displacement. Engaging with ranchers in this research also adds to working landscape literature and practice by offering lessons for conservation practitioners in taking local resource users, particularly ranchers, seriously as valuable conservation actors with situated knowledge and skills to collectively work towards innovative conservation solutions. It also points to the importance for both settler communities and conservation practitioners who are working with or near Indigenous communities to learn the settler-colonial history of the region and begin respectful relationship building with their Indigenous neighbors.

5.2 Decolonizing Conservation

Indigenous scholars have identified important factors for engaging Indigenous partners in environmental governance initiatives that include: respect for Indigenous knowledges; control of knowledge mobilization; intergenerational involvement; self-determination; continuous cross-cultural education; and early involvement (Reo et al. 2017). The origins of the Iinnii Initiative and some of the individual attributes demonstrated by Initiative collaborators align with some of these principles. Having elders guide the Initiative from the beginning and youth be engaged in education about the buffalo demonstrates early and intergenerational involvement and a respect for Indigenous knowledges. Collaborative gathering, analyzing and sharing of data and design of management plans appears to reflect control of knowledge mobilization, while the attributes such as boundary-breaking thought, holistic approaches to conservation, and open-mindedness, and efforts by some individuals to learn more about Blackfoot culture and values demonstrates the principle of cross-cultural education. How often this occurs, and whether or not such education is reciprocal is uncertain. Furthermore, there remains the potential for this principle to extend to white Alberta and Blackfeet ranchers.
Central to colonization is the severed relationship between Indigenous people and land (Alfred 2017). Therefore, central to decolonization is confronting the violence that caused that separation and restoring that relationship between Indigenous people and land (Coulthard 2017). As Kepe (2018) explains, land is often connected to the identity of those who have been colonized and therefore the seizure of land results in a “social death”. Thus, the process of decolonization requires not only engaging with the idea of land, but also necessitates returning land (and the decision making about that land) to those who were colonized and from whom land had been taken (Kepe 2018). Others explain that decolonization means true partnerships and taking power back by and for Indigenous peoples (Jacobs 2017). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2008) specifically recognizes the right for Indigenous people to renew and practice their culture, the right to be involved in decision-making for matters that may impact their rights, the right to maintain and strengthen traditional (and contemporary) practices and relationships with the land and its resources, as well as the right to maintain relationships across international borders (Articles 11, 18, 20, 25-26, 29, 31, 36). It also establishes the necessity for states to consult and engage with Indigenous people (Article 19), positioning Indigenous people as sovereign collectives, thus putting the state in a consultative relationship with them (Nicol 2016). Both international law and the Innii Initiative appear to position the Blackfoot Confederacy as a sovereign collective consulting with National Parks and NGOs in Montana and Alberta, and creates the potential for the Blackfoot to reestablish, engage, and maintain their relationships with each other, bison and the land across international, protected area, and Reserve borders, reconnecting the once separated nations of the Blackfoot confederacy, and restoring their relations to Creation.

By restoring Innii to Blackfoot territory, the Innii Initiative has the potential to do just these things. It has the potential to reclaim a connection to bison and land and to educate others, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous ranchers, Initiative collaborators, youth, and so on, on the processes of colonization that resulted in such a disconnection and the importance of restoring those relationships. Being Blackfoot-led and having partners with NGOs and Federal Agencies, the Initiative has the potential to create true partnerships and take back decision making power with regard to land and wildlife management and care. Despite these positive aspects that seem to forward decolonizing efforts, some barriers such as feelings of uncertainty, risk, and “settler discomfort” from non-Indigenous collaborators and ranchers became clear.
The ability to embrace uncertainty and risk from both *Inni Initiative* actors and ranchers helps to “reimagine” uncertainty as something potentially positive and necessary for decolonization, which may lead to more “creative pursuits” (Mackey 2016, p.36). Indigenous resurgence and initiatives, particularly that involve land – like the *Inni Initiative* – disrupt the power and control of the state, “[indicating] that the settler colonial project is incomplete,” and demonstrate how what is ‘given’ becomes unsettled (Mackey 2016, p.36). Such an event disrupts previously unquestionable assumptions about “settler certainties” regarding land and property ownership, which become illuminated as “fantasies of entitlement”, and create in people a need to defend those assumptions (Mackey 2016, p.36). The addition of bison, a free-roaming large mammal that was locally extirpated from the landscape for the past 200 years and whose extirpation made way for cattle ranching, creates even more uncertainty, discomfort, risk, and fear. Challenging settler ways of being and knowing that are based on certainty, control, and entitlement requires humility and courage; it requires the ability to embrace and live within uncertainty that may lead to “settler discomfort” (Mackey 2016). The hesitation by some actors such as those from Waterton Lakes and Glacier National Parks to fully commit to the Initiative due to uncertainty and risk creates a barrier to developing truly equitable, long-lasting and strong partnerships. However, that “settler discomfort” needs to be “embraced instead of resisted in order for settlers to participate in the difficult work of decolonization” (Mackey 2016, p.38).

The examples of individuals from the National Park Service, Parks Canada, Wildlife Conservation Society, and Blackfoot Confederacy coming together to create “ethical space” (ICE 2018) and “reengage Blackfoot in relationships that have sustained [them] for millennia – with the land, the water, [their] people and [their] cultures” (Palmater 2017, p.77), and buffalo, can be added to the repertoire of Indigenous-led initiatives that promote decolonization and reconciliation through conservation. It is not without its challenges – the complexities with ranchers being one – but this Initiative offers other conservation practitioners much to consider and learn from when pursuing collaborative and innovative conservation projects and solutions. My methodological approach further offers insight and lessons for other researchers seeking to collaborate with Indigenous communities and compare their own methodologies.

The research presented in this thesis enabled me to fulfil my three objectives, therefore achieving the two overarching aims of my research, which was to 1) use a decolonized research methodology and 2) understand the *Inni Initiative* as a potentially positive model for
decolonized collaborative conservation. Having achieved this aim, this research supported the on-the-ground efforts of the *Innii Initiative* while also informing collaborative conservation approaches and research between Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors by documenting a model of Indigenous-led conservation that is working towards decolonization.

### 5.3 Limitations, Considerations, and Future Directions

Being a white, western, male from the upper-middle class, while offering me privilege, also creates a challenge to come into entirely different communities with different backgrounds. I have a limited knowledge of ranching operations and culture, and therefore needed to learn on the fly. My lack of experience in this science and livelihood may have limited my ability to fully comprehend the complexities of ranching and the severity of potential impacts of bison restoration. Coming into a Blackfoot world and trying to understand a Blackfoot context required rigorous participation and dedication of time and effort in ceremony and relationships building as I discussed in my Methodology chapter. While working with ranchers did not include ceremony and the same level of rigor in educating myself, the time and effort that went in to relationship building was not insignificant and was just as necessary.

This research revealed a number of possible threads of investigation, only some of which I was able to pursue. One left underexamined is the specific jurisdictional, legal, and mental challenges of borders and boundaries. More specifically, it would be valuable to investigate how reservations, protected areas, and the international border infringe upon or create barriers to the rights of the Blackfoot Confederacy as per the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) to maintain cultural, political, and economic relationships between individuals within the Confederacy, with the land and its resources, and what actions may be necessary to overcome such barriers. Furthermore, exploring more deeply the role of bison themselves as biopolitical animals, conservation actors, and persons with agency, could offer insight into the evolution of different groups of peoples’ relationships with bison over time, if and how those relationships were influenced by colonial mentalities and practices, and how reconceptualizing human’s relationships to non-human animals could change the way conservation is done.

Another thread of inquiry that could be further explored is how the reintroduction of bison may create room for, and instigate the creation of, genuine co-management arrangements of both Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks between the Blackfoot Confederacy and
Parks Canada. Some scholars have questioned whether this potential exists (Sholar 2004; Craig et al. 2012), but few have looked into this potential for Waterton Lakes NP. Such arrangements could expand genuine reclamation of decision-making power over traditional territory. Likewise, some individuals with the Blackfeet Nation and their university partners are exploring the potential for a Blackfoot Tribal Park across borders that would promote Blackfoot cultural and economic goals, while also supporting ecological integrity. Further research on the processes to establish such a park and how it could align with ICE (2018) recommendations for achieving Pathway to Canada 1 goals through IPCAs could be valuable.

Based on preliminary research follow-up, a final future direction could include follow up with ranchers in Alberta and on the Blackfeet reservation to determine what information they feel will be most valuable for easing their concerns, and to then subsequently gather and disseminate that information in appropriate and accessible ways. Such information could include bison behavior, diseases between bison and cattle and their potential for transmission, and the origins and importance of the Iinnii Initiative, in addition to overall transparent updates on the progress of the Initiative. More specifically in Alberta, part of this process should include information and education of the region with relation to settler-colonialism and what it means to live on Blackfoot traditional territory. Such education could be done in partner with the Kainai and Piikani Nations, Waterton Biosphere Reserve Association, and Waterton Lakes National Park. Such learning could be valuable for beginning the process of truth-telling, greater relationship building, and continuous cross-cultural exchange and understanding to promote healing between individuals and groups in society.

Ultimately, conservation continues to evolve, climate change continues to increase environmental uncertainty, and calls for decolonization and reconciliation continue to ring loud and clear. Given these facts, it is ever more imperative to continue cultivating collaborative, innovative, and adaptive approaches and solutions to environmental problems. Much of this can be done by bridging Western-scientific and Indigenous worldviews and practices, and by identifying and supporting community and Indigenous-led initiatives that promote environmental, social, cultural, and economic well-being. The Iinnii Initiative has the potential to do just these things, and thus has the potential to be a guiding model for other collaborative conservation initiatives elsewhere. It is not free of difficulties, and therefore beginning dialogues with ranchers may be a valuable next step for enhancing relationship building, cross-cultural
education, and promoting the ability to collectively embrace uncertainty and adapt to change. This research and the *Iinnii Initiative* illustrate some intricacies of the human dimensions of restoring wild animals to a complex landscape while also shedding light onto how decolonized conservation governance can be realized.
References


