

“Time’s Arrow Moves Forward”: Coping with Change in the Elk River Valley

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“I’ll die on this mountain, this mountain is my home”

– Levon Helm, “The Mountain”, 2007.

Introduction

July 21st, 2023 seemed to be nothing other than a typical workday at first. It was a hot summer afternoon, perfect for tourists and locals alike to have a beer on the Bridge Bistro's riverside patio. But up the valley a dry lightning storm had rolled through, sparking a fire on the ridge west of Sparwood. As I drove home that night, a small flame glowed on the ridge, just barely big enough to notice in contrast to the night sky. Over the next few weeks, however, the fire would grow out of control, spreading northward to threaten the Sparwood Heights neighbourhood. For almost a month, every time I left home for work, I brought a suitcase full of my belongings in case my family was evacuated.



Figure 1: Author's photo of the 2023 Sparwood wildfire, captured on July 24th.

In hindsight, the fire was quite the spectacle; mother nature's wrath blitzed down the mountainside as it rained ashes from the sky. At the time, however, all I felt was fear. With the Lytton wildfire still fresh in the minds of many British Columbia residents, the tension in the air was as palpable as the ash. Although Sparwood was ultimately spared, anxieties around wildfires remain sky-high. And with good reason: the Elk Valley is no stranger to fiery catastrophe. Fernie has famously faced two great fires in 1904 and 1908 respectively, with the latter burning most of the city to the ground. The increase in logging in the area, which has contributed to windier conditions in the Elk Valley, and the hesitancy to use controlled burns to clear the forests of excess fuel, make it easy to imagine a similar worst-case scenario playing out in the modern day – especially since much of Jasper, Alberta burned down in the summer of 2024. Hotter and drier summers will only increase the chance of such a disaster taking place, which should lead the residents of the Elk Valley to ask some tough questions.



The Elk Valley is an isolated region in the southeastern corner of British Columbia, nestled in the heart of the Canadian Rockies. Today, the communities of Fernie, Hosmer, Sparwood, and Elkford call this valley home. Beginning in the Middle Jurassic, plate tectonics kicked off a long process that formed the Rocky Mountains.¹ During the Quaternary glaciation, the most recent and ongoing ice age, glaciers cyclically expanded and shrunk across the Canadian Rockies, giving them their jagged appearance.² The Last Glacial Maximum came to an end sometime between 26,000 and

¹ Sydney Cannings, JoAnne Nelson, and Richard Cannings, *Geology of British Columbia*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books Ltd., 2011), 9-29.

² Simon L. Ommanney, "Glaciers of Canada: Glaciers of the Canadian Rockies," US Geological Survey, Paper 1386, 7 March 2002, J200, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/pp/p1386j/canadianrockies/canrock-lores.pdf>.

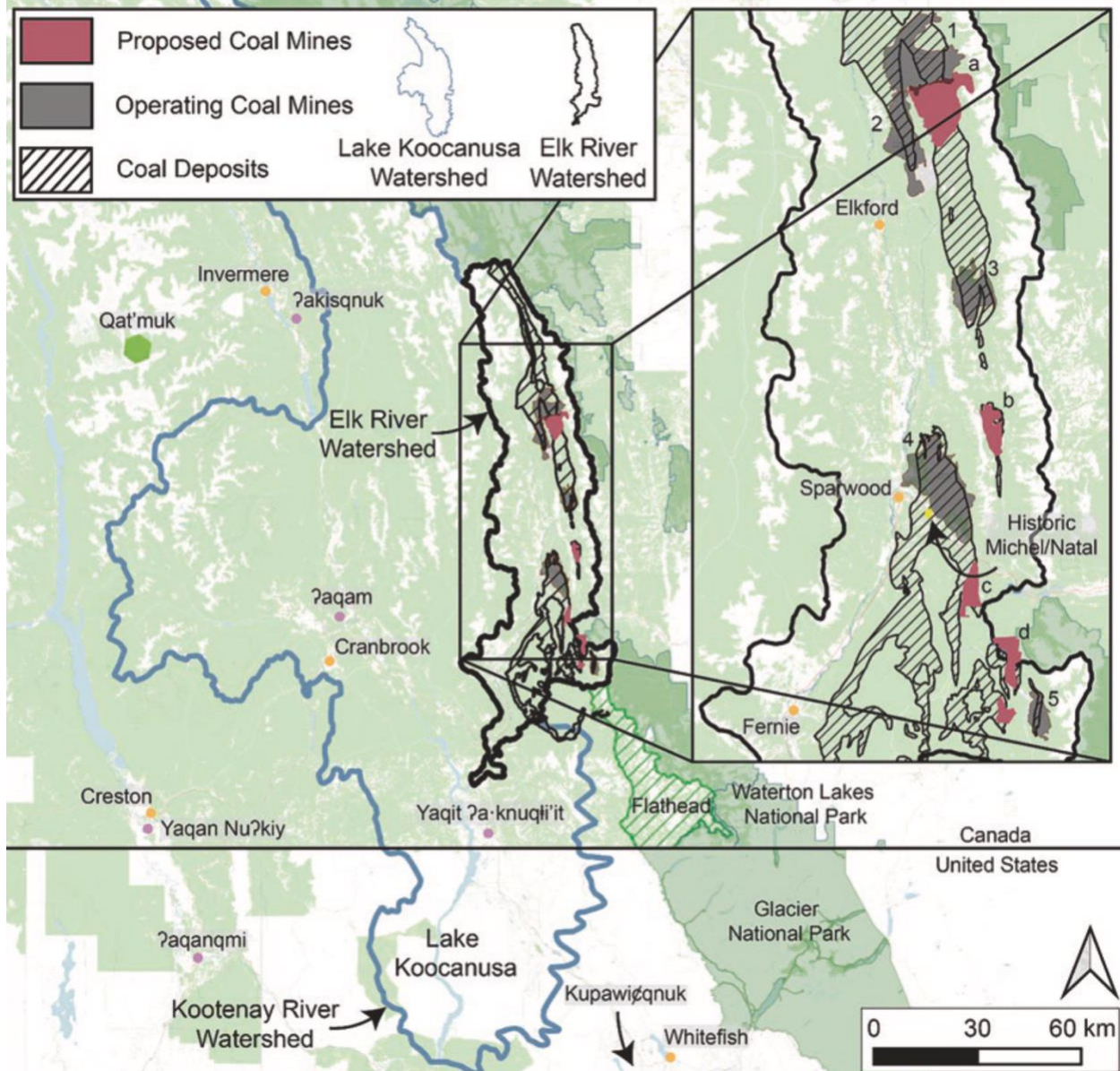


Figure 2: A map of the Elk Valley and the Elk River Watershed, found in Wyatt Petryshen, Paul S. Ciccantell, and Tom Langford, "The Elk Valley, Canada," in Sustainable Development and Rural Public Health, edited by Michael Hendryx, 53. Unpublished.

20,000 years ago, with the glaciers receding and opening the gateway to the North American continent once again.

It was through either this opening in the glaciers or along the Pacific Coast that humans first penetrated the continent.³ Either way, the likely pull factor in this migration was what had long driven human migration: big game. Expanding outwards from Africa, a noticeable pattern emerges. Extinction rates among large megafauna increased the further humans travelled from Africa, providing evidence that paleolithic humans were drawn to new lands to sustain themselves.⁴ Perhaps our excitement got the best of us. Of the roughly 40 species of mammals over 100 pounds that called North America home, only about a dozen remain.⁵ Many of the once dominant animals of the North American wilderness were only survived by populations that dwelled in the safety of the Rocky Mountains.⁶

This deep history set the stage for the modern Elk Valley. The Rocky Mountain landscape has shaped its inhabitants, and its inhabitants have shaped it. As historian J. R. McNeill argues, “humankind and nature make their own history together, but neither can make it as they please.”⁷ Indeed, the Elk Valley has served as a refuge for nature throughout its history, which has drawn tourists and migrants alike. But increasing human activity in the Elk Valley has transformed the region in drastic ways. Contrary to popular assumptions, an urban environment is not distinct from the natural world, but rather a part of it.⁸ The communities of the Elk Valley function much like a new human-created biome, distinct ecosystems within the region’s greater ecology. Surrounded by towering mountains and a vast wilderness, it is impossible to deny this relationship between

³ Pekka Hämäläinen, *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America* (New York: Liveright, 2022), 5-7.

⁴ Stephen Brusatte, *The Rise and Reign of the Mammals: A New History from the Shadow of the Dinosaurs to Us* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022), 393-397.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 393-394.

⁶ Dan Flores, *American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 168.

⁷ J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.

⁸ Dan Flores, *Coyote America: A Natural & Supernatural History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 193, 204-205.

humans and nature in a place like the Elk Valley. As our towns grow, so too do these urban ecosystems, which encroach on the natural world of the Elk Valley.

But no history of the Elk Valley would be complete without its other defining feature: coal. Like the state of Montana to its south, the Elk Valley is transitioning into a post-industrial economy as it slowly pivots away from coal and toward tourism.⁹ Coal has been the driving force for much of the Elk Valley's history, but relying on such a powerful resource came with plenty of risks. As with other coal mining regions of the Rockies, this black gold helped the settlers of the Elk Valley overcome the restraints of geographic isolation and aridity that stifled economic development, but it made these people dependant on a powerful resource "over which they had little control."¹⁰

Coal has been the Elk Valley's defining feature throughout its history, with its origins dating to the Jurassic period. Over 150 million years ago, the Elk Valley was drowned by an inland sea known as the North American Interior Seaway, which cut across the North American continent. Its shores were home to tropical swamps and peat bogs, and as time went on, layers of mud and sand would weigh down on this accumulation of dead plant life.¹¹ Millions of years of pressure and heat transformed dead organic matter into the valuable resource that forms the backbone of the Elk Valley's economy to this day.

The residents of the Elk Valley extracted this carbon buried deep in the Rocky Mountains, and were in turn shaped by the rock's amazing power.¹² Over a century of coal mining transformed

⁹ Dan Flores, *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 162.

¹⁰ Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 15-16.

¹¹ "Laying the Foundation for Coal," Fernie Museum, Fernie, British Columbia.

¹² Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2023), 7.

the people of the Elk Valley – in both a figurative and literal sense – into “coal people.”¹³ Following this, the distinction between the human and the natural, between the residents of the Elk Valley and the Rocky Mountain wilderness itself, becomes incredibly blurred. As philosopher Jane Bennett described, “it is futile to seek a pure nature unpolluted by humanity, and it is foolish to define the self as something purely human.”¹⁴ Perhaps, as historian Timothy LeCain argues, “the earth is not in our hands – we are in its.”¹⁵ Watching that wildfire creep closer to my home that July, I couldn’t help but feel the same.



After environmental history crashed down on Sparwood that summer, I started to ask deeper questions about the Elk Valley’s past. I had always been familiar with our history through the stories my dad and grandma told me, but these tales always felt like something was missing. As I had grown up surrounded by the majestic mountains and pristine wildlife of the Elk Valley, I simply could not understand how our connection to this land went overlooked. How has this crucial piece of the Elk Valley’s culture been missed, how are we connected to this land, and what can this connection reveal about the region’s history?

So, I set out to look for answers. For the last 18 months, I have researched the Elk Valley’s history, studied the region’s historiography and explored the archives. And this past summer, I was blessed with the opportunity to sit down with thirteen locals to discuss their experiences living in the Elk Valley. Through their voices, a compelling story of hardship, change, and resilience emerged. Locals have persisted through natural and economic disaster as well as significant

¹³ Timothy J. LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 323.

¹⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 116.

¹⁵ LeCain, *The Matter of History*, 21.

cultural and demographic change; these communities still stand strong to this day. Indeed, it was this very sense of community and connection to the land itself that propelled the communities of the Elk Valley through these difficult times.

That this study comes now is timely. On top of the mounting ecological challenges, the Elk Valley's coal mines have changed ownership just as the future of coal looks less certain every day. As coal prices rise and the environmental impacts of mining accumulate, the region is transitioning to a new economy, one based on the tourist industry that has capitalized on all the natural wonders the Elk Valley has to offer. Destinations such as Fernie Alpine Resort, an internationally renowned ski resort, have fueled the dynamic rise of the region's tourist industry. Tourism is primed to become the new dominant force in the Elk Valley's history, but everything comes with consequences. What will this new regime bring?

Time's arrow is moving forward with cruel indifference, and big things are on the horizon for the Elk Valley.

Chapter 1: Moving Mountains

In 2025, the Elk Valley has several challenges looming on the horizon. From schools overflowing with children to an affordability crisis, there are challenges people in the Elk Valley must face every single day. But there are also less tangible issues that are difficult to see day-to-day. Whether it comes from concerns about our tenuous relationship with the local ecology or fears about the increasingly devastating wildfire seasons we have been seeing across the world, many of these problems go unnoticed until we face the brutal consequences that come with them. To properly confront these issues, we must first understand how they came to be.

What is the price we have to pay?



The Elk Valley is an Eden for nature itself. As a crucial genetic link in the Yukon-to-Yellowstone corridor, the Elk Valley hosts some of the most incredible plant and animal life the Rocky Mountain ecosystem has to offer. Isolated from much of the world around it and distant from major urban centres, the Elk Valley's natural environment has been able to avoid the most catastrophic consequences that typically come with human settlement. In fact, from the perspective of an urban visitor, the Elk Valley may seem like an idyllic corner of the world where humans have been able to find balance between people and the environment. Drive from one end of the Elk Valley to the other and you'll come across clear rivers, vast forests, and, if you are lucky, a bounty of wildlife that will strike you with awe. Herds of majestic elk, imposing grizzly bears, and soaring eagles are just a few wonderful inhabitants of the Elk Valley that you may come across.

But looks can certainly be deceiving, as ecological challenges are mounting in the region. Taking a closer look at the landscape, bare patches in the forests appear, the scars of logging and wildfire. Talk with a longtime local and you may be disappointed to hear that certain animals have been declining in population. Or, worse, you may come across the carcass of a dead deer or elk on the side of the road yourself. Dare to drink water straight from the clear waters of the Elk River and risk suffering from selenium toxicity. And, of course, the mountains that have been steadily mined down for decades now serve as a disturbing reminder of our own destructive capacity.

Perhaps because of the close connection that Elk Valley residents have with their land, most locals hold some kind of environmentalist sentiment. Whether it comes from skiers who are worried about the sporadic snowfall of recent years, or hunters who are concerned with a massive decrease in the elk population, almost any variety of resident in the Elk Valley can find something to worry about environmentally. “Dave and I did an eight-kilometre trip on his quad one day,” recalls Barbara Endicott, describing a ride the couple took just north of Sparwood, “we picked up 250 cans.” “They don’t respect the environment,” her husband David chimes in. “Drives me bananas.”¹⁶

Over the century and a half that has passed since Europeans first came to the Elk Valley, the region has undergone a tremendous ecological transformation. In the blink of an eye in geological terms, this land went from entirely uninhabited by humans, to mediated by humans, to dominated by humans. From the first bounties of big game that drew Indigenous Peoples deeper into the heart of the American continent, the Elk Valley, like the rest of the world, has been drastically shaped by us, *Homo sapiens*. But one thing that is relatively unique about the Elk Valley

¹⁶ Author interview with B. & E. Endicott, August 22nd, 2024. The interviews conducted for this thesis were approved by the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria, under the protocol number 24-0247.



Figure 3: Fernie in 1898 at what is now 2nd Avenue, from Bruce Ramsey, 100 Years of Coal Mining: The Elk River Valley (Sparwood, BC: Ramsey Publications, 1997), 58.

is how late it was industrialized compared to other places on the planet. Although far from being untouched land prior to the arrival of Europeans, colonization and industrialization have turned a stewarded land into an industrial one, all within a few generations.

The fact that the Elk Valley's most recent transformation happened within the last 150 years allowed this remarkable transformation to be captured photographically. Archival photos show Fernie before its construction in 1898, with a dense forest covering the land rather than the historic downtown that sits on the site now. In his 1914 survey of the Flathead Valley and surrounding area, surveyor Albert Campbell Termain Sheppard captured a similar image of what is now Elkford forested with some sparse pockets of grassland. Surveyor A. C. Tuttle captured a



Figure 4: Mountain Legacy Project (hereinafter MLP), Albert Campbell Termain Shepherd, Flathead, Elkford, 75, Survey photo of the future Elkford townsite, 1914.

remarkable image of what is now Sparwood in his 1931 survey of the Elk Valley, showing a prairie engulfing the Elk River with the early development of farmlands visible as well.

Like the rest of the Rocky Mountains, the Elk Valley was one of the last frontiers of settlement for Canadians of European origin. This late expansion – which coincided with the development of the coal fields – came with a lack of environmental protection. But compared to its Rocky Mountain neighbors Jasper and Banff in Alberta the Elk Valley has no national park to protect its ecology, with the only protections coming from small provincial or regional parks scattered around the region.



Figure 5: MLP, A. C. Tuttle, Flathead, Station 3, 14, Survey photo of the future Sparwood townsite, 1931.

Coming to such a region that had long been untouched by Europeans, it was inevitable that European-Canadian settlements in the Elk Valley increased tensions with the environment, particularly with its wildlife. Soon after their arrival, settlers capitalized on the bountiful wildlife that called the Elk Valley home. Hunting, fishing, and foraging became a regular part of life in the region, as many locals would use these activities to sustain most of their diets, especially during the winter months. With the low pay many miners received, many locals used these activities as a strategy to help save money. “He’d hunt every fall,” said Lorraine Will, discussing her father’s annual hunting trip. “He usually caught one every year, a deer or something. And especially if you

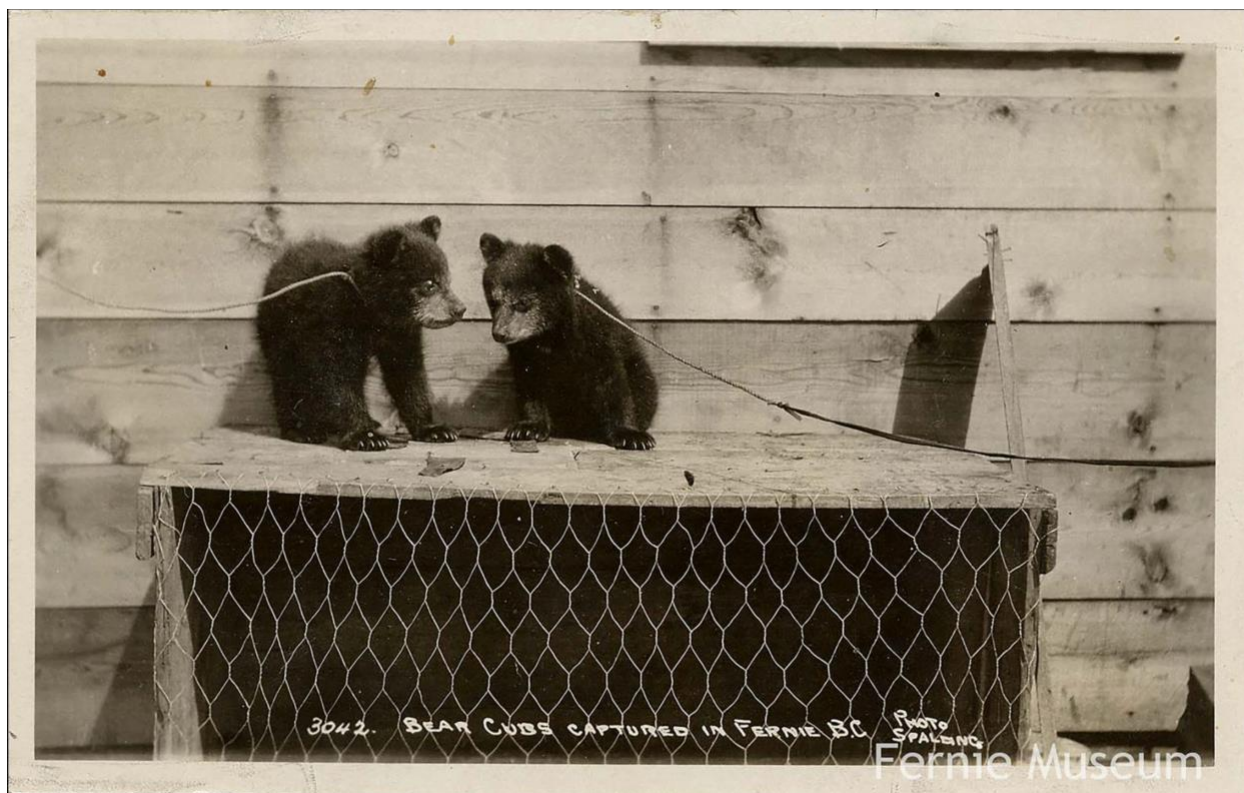


Figure 6: BC Regional Digital History Archive (hereafter BCDHA), Fernie & District Historical Society Photograph Collection, FMP_00519, Joseph Frederick Spalding, Photo of chained bear cubs in Fernie, n.d.

were sharing with someone else [a hunting partner] ...if they caught it, you didn't both have to catch one.”¹⁷

In Elko and Fernie, black bear cubs were chained and supposedly “tamed.” These displays of human domination would often carry late into the bears’ adult lives.¹⁸ “Humans,” writes historian Jon T. Coleman, “are the only creatures on the planet with the neural capacity and gall to imagine themselves superior to other organisms.”¹⁹ To capture and chain such a powerful animal

¹⁷ Author interview with L. & R. Will, July 31st, 2024.

¹⁸ Sparwood Museum (hereafter SM), Hunting/Fishing 8 binder, “Frank Ingram with tamed bear in Elko,” Photo, 1940.

¹⁹ Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 152.

like a black bear is a frightening display of the power that we humans hold over nature. Fables of bloodthirsty wolves and monstrous bears often make us assume that we are the prey.²⁰ For this perceived threat, we have enacted a sick revenge on these animals.



As humans encroached on the Elk Valley's wilderness, human-animal contact became more frequent and more problematic. Some areas, such as the dumps, were popular spots for wildlife to feed. "Oh, the whole town would show up in there," Darren Will reminisces about watching the bears that would come to the Fernie dump, "and we'd show up in our trucks and cars, and we would...everyone would just sit in their vehicles and watch the bears. It would be like twenty, thirty bears in the dump, going through the garbage."²¹

While watching bears feeding at a dump may seem like innocent fun, the ramifications of such a phenomenon can easily turn tragic. As bears and other animals become more accustomed to humans – and especially our trash as a source of food – they become more likely to venture into town. As spectacular as it can be to see wildlife wandering the streets, it also serves as a sad reminder of how much we have invaded their habitat. The safety of bears is also threatened when they become accustomed to human interaction. In 2021 alone, twelve black bears and two grizzlies were put down in the Fernie area, with another seventeen killed in and around Sparwood. While some bears had been put down because of injuries related to being struck by a vehicle, the majority were killed because they had become comfortable around humans and posed a danger to the public.²²

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Author interview with D. Will, August 1st, 2024.

²² Ryan Gordon, "Bear Deaths Worst in Years," *fernie.com*, December 13, 2021, <https://fernie.com/blog/bear-deaths-worst-in-years/>.



Figure 7: SM, Natal binder, Photo of black bears at the Sparwood dump, n.d.

As the tourism industry grows and demand for outdoor activities such as mountain biking, hiking, and skiing increase, the trail networks around Fernie, Sparwood, and Elkford have encroached further into wildlife corridors.²³ But so, too, does the network of roads, both paved and unpaved roads like backcountry and resource roads, which helps facilitate the use of these trails. One study conducted in the Elk Valley showed that nearly half of the elk mortalities in the region

²³ Amelia Caddy, "How Does Mountain Biking Affect Wildlife in the Elk Valley?" *Wildsight*, July 11, 2024, <https://wildsight.ca/2024/07/11/how-does-mountain-biking-affect-wildlife-in-the-elk-valley/>.

came from human-related causes such as vehicle and train collisions.²⁴ Similarly, high road density has been tied to an increase in grizzly bear mortality rates due to factors such as collisions and poaching.²⁵ The Elk Valley's road network – which spans an estimated 6,790 kilometres, or roughly the distance it takes to drive from Whitehorse to Halifax – has contributed to the spread of invasive plant species, an increase sedimentation into streams, and the alteration of the hydrological process.²⁶ In the Elk Valley, 91% of watersheds are rated as high hazard for road density near streams.²⁷

Fortunately, a significant response to the effects of our expanding trail network has emerged. Recreational ecology, an ecological approach focused on “the environmental consequences of outdoor recreation/nature-based tourism activities and their effective management,” has been growing off the back of ecologists such as local researcher Dr. Clayton Lamb.²⁸ The development of new trails is now conducted with ecological concerns in mind, with a greater emphasis on reducing traffic on the trails in seasons where wildlife is more active.

²⁴ Kim G. Poole et al., “Migration, Movements, and Survival in a Partially Migratory Elk (*Cervus canadensis*) Population,” *Conservation Science and Practice* 6, no.e13128 (April 2024): 8-12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.13128>.

²⁵ Bruce McLellan, Garth Mowat, and Clayton Lamb, “Estimating Unrecorded Human-Caused Mortalities of Grizzly Bears in the Flathead Valley, British Columbia, Canada,” *PeerJ* 6, no. e5781 (October 2018): 20-33, <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.5781>, and Bruce McLellan, *Grizzly Bear Science: Forty Years of Research in the Flathead Valley* (Calgary, AB: Rocky Mountain Books, 2023), 162-191.

²⁶ Randal Macnair, “Making the Road Less Travelled,” Wildsight, <https://wildsight.ca/2020/09/23/making-the-road-less-traveled/#:~:text=These%20hydrological%20changes%20can%20result,actions%20to%20address%20cumulative%20effects> (accessed February 18th, 2025).

²⁷ Aquatic Ecosystems Expert Team, “Aquatic Ecosystems Cumulative Effects Report,” Elk Valley Cumulative Effects Management Framework, 18 July 2018, 31, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/cumulative-effects/kootenay-boundary-region/elk-valley/final_ev_cemf_aquatic_ecosystems_cea_report_24072018.pdf.

²⁸ Evgeni Matveev and Clayton Lamb, “Wild Spaces Recreation Dialogues: How Mountain Biking Affects Wildlife in the Elk Valley,” Wildsight, July 9, 2024, video, 56:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0hbsm0FjtI&t=980s>.

Still, the trail network and tourism are only pieces of our gargantuan ecological footprint. There is a much greater ecological challenge facing the Elk Valley today, a familiar driving force of our history that still shapes our lives in tremendous ways to this day.



When Kaiser Steel, a California-based mining company, first came to the Elk Valley in the late 1960s, environmental problems were already present in the region. The residents of Michel-Natal had raised their concerns about the coal dust that had become so pervasive. But others were concerned with Kaiser's plan to begin open-pit mining in the area. At the time, most of these concerns had to do with encroachment on wildlife habitat, as the original Kaiser developments took place in high-elevation habitats perfect for the likes of Rocky Mountain goats.²⁹

No one at the time could have predicted the scale of destruction that open-pit mining would bring. In comparing photos from A. C. Tuttle's 1931 survey and modern photos of the Natal Ridge, which is home to the Elkview mine, the consequences of open-pit mining come into full view. In just over half a century, humans had literally reduced a majority of a mountain ridge to dust, reversing hundreds of million years of geological processes in just over fifty years.

But the less noticeable impacts of open-pit mining have been the most consequential. Increasing selenium levels in the Elk River were noticed for the first time in 1995, with further research showing that this change was the result of waste rock from the mines.³⁰ In 2013, Teck was ordered by the BC Minister of Environment to address the issue. Despite implementing an

²⁹ Michael Scott, "That's the Price," National Film Board of Canada, 1970, video, 40:50. https://www.nfb.ca/film/thats_the_price/.

³⁰ Meryl B. Storb et al., "Growth of Coal Mining Operations in the Elk River Valley (Canada) Linked to Increasing Solute Transport of Se, NO₃⁻, and SO₄²⁻ into the Transboundary Koocanusa Reservoir (USA-Canada)," *Environmental Science & Technology*, 57 (2023): 17465-17466, <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.3c05090>.



Figure 8: MLP, A. C. Tuttle, Station 26 Sparwood Ridge, 138, Survey photo of the future Elkview mine site, 1931.

active water treatment facility at Line Creek in 2015 and a saturated rock fill at Elkview in 2018, water pollution continues to be a problem in the watershed.³¹ One 2024 study found that selenium levels at the site closest to the mines were 23 times higher than at the control site north of the mines.³² Selenium levels at study sites in the Elk Valley have regularly exceeded the BC Drinking Water Guideline (10 µg/L) since 2008, when Teck Resources, a Canadian resources company,

³¹ Elk Valley Water Quality Hub, “History and Timeline,” Government of British Columbia, <https://elkvalleywaterquality.gov.bc.ca/water-quality-area-based-management/history-and-timeline/> (accessed February 19th, 2025).

³² Madison J. Foster et al., “Evidence of Long-Range Transport of Selenium Downstream of Coal Mining Operations in the Elk River Valley, Canada,” *Environmental Science & Technology Letters*, 11 (2024): 856-860, <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.estlett.4c00222>.



Figure 9: The Elkview mine site as captured in 2021 by Vern Dewit, “Sparwood Ridge (Natal Lookout),” explor8ion.com, <https://www.explor8ion.com/2021/04/02/sparwood-ridge-natal-lookout/> (accessed March 14th, 2025).

took full ownership of the mines in the region.³³ In April 2023, the City of Fernie was forced to continue the use of its Fairy Creek for its water supply despite high turbidity (an increase in murkiness) because the alternative well in James White Park exceeded 12 µg/L.³⁴

Selenium pollution in the Elk River has also caused deformities in its fish, with west coast cutthroat trout being found with missing gills and spinal-skeletal and cranial-facial deformities.³⁵ With the Elk River serving as a significant contributor to the Kootenay River, and as a result the Columbia River as well, ecosystems and communities downstream of these mines also have to deal with the pollution from the Elk Valley’s mines. The issue has become so urgent that the

³³ “Selenium and the Elk River Watershed,” Elk River Alliance, <https://elkriveralliance.ca/selenium/> (accessed February 20th, 2025).

³⁴ “City of Fernie Annual Drinking Water Report 2023,” City of Fernie, 2023, 9, <https://ferniefire.civicweb.net/filepro/documents/106341/?preview=170211>.

³⁵ A. Dennis Lemly, “Review of Environment Canada’s Teck Coal Environmental Assessment and Evaluation of Selenium Toxicology Tests on Westslope Cutthroat Trout in the Elk and Fording Rivers in Southeastern British Columbia,” Environment Canada Enforcement Division, Pacific and Yukon Region, 25 September 2014, 53-62, https://www.teck.com/media/2014-Water-review_environment_canada-T3.2.3.2.1.pdf.

International Joint Commission, a bi-national organization run by Canada and the United States, launched an investigation into the Elk River's pollution in 2024 after years of fighting with the Canadian government over the river.³⁶

Airborne pollution has become another prominent issue stemming from mining in the Elk Valley. Contaminants from the mines have been found in snowpack samples as far as Calgary and Lethbridge.³⁷ One 2023 study also identified uranium, germanium, and vanadium as potentially toxic elements that are more prominent closer to coal mining sites, raising the risk for negative health outcomes for communities in the area.³⁸

And with the regular dispersal of coal dust, a highly flammable substance, the Elk Valley presumably becomes a powder keg. One which is becoming more likely to be set off.



Since 1880 – just before settlers first arrived in the Elk Valley – the average global temperature has risen by about 1.1° Celsius.³⁹ In the Columbia Basin, the greater river basin which the Elk Valley is situated in, the average temperature has increased by about 1.6°C over the last century, with current climate models projecting this increase to be between 2.5°C and 3.5°C by 2050.⁴⁰ The

³⁶ Wyatt Petryshen, “Canada-US Transborder Political Dispute Looms over Water Pollution Crisis in BC’s Elk Valley,” Wildsight, <https://wildsight.ca/2022/06/28/canada-us-transborder-political-dispute-looms-over-water-pollution-crisis-in-bcs-elk-valley/> (accessed February 20th, 2025).

³⁷ Colin A. Cooke et al., “Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining Contaminates Snowpack across a Broad Region,” *Environmental Science & Technology*, 58 (2024): 11724-11725, <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.4c02596>.

³⁸ Wyatt Petryshen, “Spatial Distribution of Selenium and Other Potentially Toxic Elements Surrounding Mountaintop Coal Mines in the Elk Valley, British Columbia, Canada,” *Heliyon* 9, no. e17242 (2023): 7-8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e17242>.

³⁹ “World of Change: Global Temperatures,” NASA, [https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/world-of-change/global-temperatures#:~:text=According%20to%20an%20ongoing%20temperature,1.9%C2%B0%20Fahrenheit\)%20since%201880](https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/world-of-change/global-temperatures#:~:text=According%20to%20an%20ongoing%20temperature,1.9%C2%B0%20Fahrenheit)%20since%201880) (accessed February 20th, 2025).

⁴⁰ “Community Climate Change Profile,” Columbia Basin Trust, https://basinclimatesource.ca/profiles/climateprofile_sparwood.pdf (accessed February 20th, 2024).

undeniable reality is that this increase in temperature has been driven by human activity, primarily by our use of fossil fuels.

In the Elk Valley, the consequences of our fossil fuels are, for the most part, out of sight. Because the valley's coal is shipped out by train to markets in Asia, we do not get to witness the release of carbon into the atmosphere first-hand. But we still experience the consequences of this carbon.

Ask an Elk Valley resident about the role that the region's coal plays in climate change, and you will almost certainly hear one response: "our coal is metallurgical," a grade of coal used for steelmaking. It is true that at present we still need metallurgical coal to produce steel, but alternatives are fast on the rise. Steelmaking companies such as Sweden's SSAB are leading the charge to wean out metallurgical coal from their production process, aiming to be entirely fossil fuel-free by 2030.⁴¹⁴² As alternatives develop and become more commonplace, the demand for coal *will* drop.

So, too, will the Elk Valley's seams eventually run dry. Most of the mines in the region are expected to run for another two to three decades. And while some proposed expansions at the Fording River site could extend this window to 2070, that still only extends the lifespan of mining in the Elk Valley for a little over two generations.⁴³ Either by technological innovation or by the

⁴¹ "Fossil-Free Steel," SSAB, https://www.ssab.com/en-ca/fossil-free-steel/ssab-zero?_gl=1*1y7z0zf*_up*MQ.*_ga*NTgwNTUwNzY5LjE3NDA2MjcyODE.*_ga_1SF6K3BNKE*MTc0MDYyNzI4MS4xLjAuMTc0MDYyNzY0MDI4wLjAuMTUzNTg3ODExNQ (accessed February 21st, 2025).

⁴² Sharon J. Riley, "The End of an Era: How the Global Steel Industry Is Cutting Out Coal," *The Narwhal*, May 1, 2021, <https://thenarwhal.ca/steel-coal-mining-hydrogen/>.

⁴³ "An Overview of Coal Mining in the Elk Valley," Wildsight, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/bfee6762969143289fec4cfd97ac012b#> (accessed October 23rd, 2024).

exhaustion of our coal deposits, the Elk Valley will one day see a time where coal is no longer king – whether we like it or not.

For centuries people have come to the Elk Valley to use this black gold, a product of the earth that has shaped the region in unfathomable ways. And it may be gone within many of our lifetimes.

Chapter II: Coal People

For now, however, coal remains king in the Elk Valley. Coal has not only shaped the valley economically, but also socially, culturally, and politically. Anyone visiting the Elk Valley can immediately sense this reality. Upon entering Sparwood from the east, several large warehouses for mining equipment greet travellers alongside the entrance to the Elkview mine, which looms over the town. Drive further and the massive Terex 33-19 “Titan” mining truck comes into view, which once carried coal at Elkview before its retirement. Today, the “big green truck” serves as Sparwood’s key landmark, and may be the only reason most people know of the town at all. Next to the Titan stands a statue commemorating the hundreds of miners who have been killed by underground mining across the Elk Valley. When looking around town, more signs of the mines become noticeable, from the workers and trucks covered in coal dust to the murals dedicated to old coal miners.

It is obvious why culture in the Elk Valley, especially the industrial towns of Sparwood and Elkford, revolve around mining: coal drives the region’s economy. According to its website, Elk Valley Resources – the current owner of the Elk Valley’s mines and a subsidiary of Glencore, an Anglo-Swiss mining company – employs over 5,000 people, which does not include employees from any businesses or private contractors that support the mines’ operations.⁴⁴ In 2022, the Elk Valley’s coal industry accounted for roughly 80% of the region’s gross domestic product (GDP)

⁴⁴ “EVR – Elk Valley Resources,” Glencore Canada, <https://www.glencore.ca/en/evr/> (accessed February 10th, 2025).

and contributed \$6.3 billion to Canada's GDP.⁴⁵ Not only has coal mining produced bountiful economic opportunities for the Elk Valley, the region's communities have also benefited from the influx of money coming from the several companies who have owned the mines. Also in 2022, Teck contributed about \$600 million dollars in local supplier payments in Fernie, Sparwood, and Elkford.⁴⁶ "When you hear that train whistle going through town, you know things are good," explains Rosanne Anselmo, a longtime Elk Valley resident and musician who grew up in Natal: "But listen—you take away those mines and we're going to be hooped."⁴⁷

Hence the reason one of the Elk Valley's nicknames is "Coal Valley," which has been adopted by several businesses in the region in the past and present. And, pedantic as it may seem, there is a very real environmental reason for this nickname: coal is everywhere. Whether walking the trails around Coal Creek or exploring the banks of the Elk River, you will have no troubles finding coal around here. And Canadians were far from the first peoples to find use for this rock. There is a mountain of evidence that several Indigenous Peoples have used Elk Valley coal for millennia, including the Ktunaxa, the original settlers of this region who have never renounced their claim to it.⁴⁸

The first European to visit the Elk Valley was David Thompson, who navigated the Elk River (which he called the "Stag River") in 1811. It was not until 1845, however, that the Elk Valley was truly put on the map, with Father Pierre-Jean De Smet's expedition through the region.

⁴⁵ "Economic Contribution Analysis of Mining Operations in the Elk Valley: Prepared for the BC Chamber of Commerce," Deloitte LLP, <https://www.glencore.ca/rest/api/v1/documents/74b8199b011c160268753d8b34817ccb/EV-Mining-Operations-Economic-Contribution-Study-2022.pdf> (accessed February 10th, 2025): 10.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁷ Author interview with Anselmo, October 16th, 2024.

⁴⁸ Ktunaxa Nation, *Qapkit* (Cranbrook, BC: Traditional Knowledge and Language Enrichment Society, 2024), 124, and Wyatt Petryshen, Paul S. Ciccantell, and Tom Langford, "The Elk Valley, Canada," in *Sustainable Development and Rural Public Health*, edited by Michael Hendryx, 52-54. Unpublished.

“The quarries and forest appear inexhaustible,” De Smet wrote on his experience in the Elk Valley, “and having remarked large pieces of coal along the river, I am convinced that this fossil could be abundantly procured.”⁴⁹

But the Elk Valley was not unpopulated when Europeans first arrived; indeed, the Ktunaxa lived prosperous lives in the Elk Valley prior to European-Canadian colonization. But a series of smallpox epidemics prior to the early expeditions into the region devastated the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountains, meaning that the Indigenous population was dramatically thinned by the time the Elk Valley was colonized. European colonizers forced the Ktunaxa onto small reservations, barring them from the Elk Valley and some of their most important settlements, such as *K'aqawakanmituk*, located near modern-day Sparwood.⁵⁰

The race for the Elk Valley had begun, all because of this fruit of the earth that has enamored humans for millennia. Coal has shaped the fate of the Elk Valley since time immemorial; there was no reason to assume it would not continue to do so going into the twentieth century.



By the turn of the century, the extraction of coal from the land was in full swing, with Coal Creek mining over 10,000 tons of coal in 1898 alone.⁵¹ But although coal mining allowed many young men to make a living, it took a toll on the communities of the Elk Valley. Several deadly mining disasters struck the Elk Valley in the early twentieth century, the worst of which was at Coal Creek

⁴⁹ Francis P. Harper, eds., *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J. 1801-1878* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1905), 493.

⁵⁰ “*Hu Sukit'qunata?ni Kin Wakit ?amak?is Ktunaxa*”, Fernie Museum, Fernie, British Columbia, and Patrick Lozar, ‘My Home Is on Both Sides’: Indigenous Communities and the US-Canadian Border on the Columbian Plateau, 1880s-1910s,” *Ethnohistory* 65, no. 3 (July 2018): 397-408, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-4451374>.

⁵¹ “History of Coal in the Valley”, Sparwood Museum, Sparwood, British Columbia.

in 1902, when a massive explosion claimed the lives of at least 128 miners.⁵² Such dangerous working conditions fostered a labour radicalism nearly unrivalled in North America. In 1911, more than 6,000 miners went on strike for over eight months but ultimately returned to work for less pay than they had before the strike.⁵³ These economic hardships were exacerbated by the Home Bank of Canada's collapse in 1923, which many Fernie residents relied on, and the closing of the Coal Creek mines in 1958, which left over 400 people unemployed.⁵⁴ Coal Creek was soon abandoned, with few signs that it ever existed remaining today.

The late 1960s were the capstone to the Elk Valley's troubles. On April 3rd, 1967, Michel's Balmer North Mine exploded, killing fifteen men and injuring ten others. Wendy Allen, whose father was killed in the accident, sees the Balmer North explosion as a turning point in the Elk Valley's history:

I think that the Balmer North tragedy and other mining things that happened around here kind of...it made people aware of how dangerous the mining was and what the methane does do. Like, it's very volatile, and I think that's part of the reason that they quit underground mining around in this area, was because of that.⁵⁵

⁵² Wayne Norton and Tom Langford, *A World Apart: The Crowsnest Communities of Alberta and British Columbia* (Kamloops, BC: Plateau Press, 2002), 178-179. The 1902 Coal Creek disaster remains the second deadliest mining disaster in Canadian history.

⁵³ "1911 Big Strike at Elk Valley Mines", Fernie Museum, Fernie, British Columbia. Perhaps the best example of this sense of labour radicalism could be seen in the Fernie electoral riding, which voted socialist Tom Uphill to the provincial legislature in Victoria from 1921-1960. For more on Tom Uphill, see Wayne Norton. *Beneath the Coal Dust: Historical Journeys Through the Elk Valley and Crowsnest Pass* (Qualicum Beach, BC: Caitlin Press Inc., 2022), 149-157. Labour radicalism in the region would subside with the advent of the Cold War, which is discussed further in Tom Langford and Chris Frazer, "The Cold War and Working-Class Politics in the Coal Mining Communities of the Crowsnest Pass, 1945-1958," *Labour*, 49 (Spring 2002): 71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25149213>.

⁵⁴ Norton, *Beneath the Coal Dust*, 107-108. As a result of the Home Bank of Canada collapse, Fernie entered a trusteeship with the provincial government in 1935, which greatly reduced the city's economic independence. For more on this, see Norton and Langford, *A World Apart*, 137-145, and Fernie and District Historical Society, *Fernie: A Celebration of 100 Years* (Fernie, BC: The Rockies Network, 2003), 67-70. Between the closing of the Coal Creek mines and Interior Breweries' decision to move its Fernie brewery to nearby Creston, many people simply opted to leave the Elk Valley to find employment elsewhere.

⁵⁵ Author interview with Allen & Halko, August 21st, 2024.



Figure 10: Fernie Museum Archives (hereafter FMA), FS.159.48, FDHS 5573, Loretta Mangan Collection, “Customs: Funeral”, Photo of the funeral for the victims of the Balmer North explosion, 1967.

The communities of Michel and Natal grieved for months following the disaster, but a pivot away from underground mining was easier said than done. Michel and Natal’s economies had become entirely dependent on the practice and the Crowsnest Pass Coal Company was financially incapable of overhauling its mining practices.⁵⁶

Balmer North was the last underground mine open in British Columbia. It closed in 1986.⁵⁷

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⁵⁶ Alex Hanson, “Balmer North: 50 Years Later,” USW9346, July 13, 2017, video, 47:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lppnz85LDTw>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Kaiser Steel purchased the mining rights from the Crowsnest Pass Coal Company in 1968, just one year following the Balmer North tragedy. The new job opportunities at Kaiser attracted a variety of new people to the Elk Valley, transforming the region's demographics. The influx of unfamiliar faces alienated many locals.⁵⁸ Kaiser also introduced open-pit mining to the Elk Valley, which opened the flood gates for the expansion of mining Elk Valley. New companies such as Fording Coal Ltd. and Shell Canada entered the Elk Valley coal sweepstakes, setting up their own open-pit mines to compete with Kaiser. Fernie and the new communities of Sparwood and Elkford developed in parallel to the expansion of open-pit mining, with the labour coming from these towns driving these mines and the money from the companies that owned them facilitating the growth of the towns. Kaiser heavily financed the creation of the Sparwood Recreation and Leisure Centre and several housing projects for its workers. One such development was "Ferne 2000", which created Fernie's Ridgemont subdivision.⁵⁹

But Kaiser's arrival did not come without drawbacks. Years prior, the Crowsnest Pass Coal Company and the provincial government decided that Michel-Natal was to be demolished and that its residents were to be relocated to Sparwood. Many locals were initially enthusiastic about this move, typically due to the prospect of better housing or being fed up with the pollution in the industrial towns. "I was kind of excited actually, as we were going to a newer house," recalls Lorraine Will, who grew up in Michel and was relocated to Sparwood. "It wasn't new, but it had an indoor bathroom."⁶⁰ Indeed, for many residents of Michel-Natal the move seemed to provide an opportunity to drastically improve their standards of living in a new, modernized community.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Fernie and District Historical Society, *Ferne: A Celebration of 100 Years*, 83; 87-88.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁰ Author interview with L. & R. Will, July 31st, 2024.

⁶¹ Scott, "That's the Price."

But troubles with relocation soon developed. Continuous delays and intensifying air pollution from Kaiser's development of the new open-pit mines soured many locals against the relocation. The British Columbian government was eager to beautify the southeastern gateway to the province, with the industrial coal towns of Michel-Natal seen as eye sores for tourists.⁶² While many locals did indeed move to Fernie or Sparwood, many simply left the Elk Valley altogether. Today, barely any trace of Michel-Natal remains where it used to stand, barring a set of interpretive panels where the Michel Hotel used to stand.

In 2025, hundreds of travellers drive through this site every day, probably with little idea that the warehouses and stacks of timber were preceded by a vibrant community.



Kaiser would soon sell the shares to its coal assets, including the mine in Sparwood, to the British Columbia Resources Investment Corporation (BCRIC), but not before it significantly reoriented life in the Elk Valley. The company had integrated the Elk Valley into the global economy by signing contracts with Japanese steelmaking companies to buy their coal.⁶³ Capitalizing on this success, BCRIC – which rebranded to Westar Group Ltd. in 1983 – opened a new open-pit mine, Greenhills, north of Elkford.

But Japan plunged into an economic recession in the 1980s, drastically reducing the demand for coal.⁶⁴ Prices dropped as a result, and soon Westar started to struggle, owing its

⁶² Tom Langford, "Class and Environmental Justice Politics in the Demolition of Natal and Michel, 1964-1978," *BC Studies*, no.189 (Spring 2016): 37-38.

⁶³ Glenbow Library and Archives (hereafter GLA), Box 41, M6000, UMWA District 18, File 588, Newspaper clipping of negotiations between Kaiser and the Japanese steel industry, 21 November 1968.

⁶⁴ Urszula Ozga-Blashke, "Dynamics of Coking Coal Prices in International Trade in 1980-2020," *Mineral Resources Management* 37, no. 3 (2021): 126, <https://doi.org/10.24425/gsm.2021.138656>.

creditors some \$400 million.⁶⁵ The results were disastrous. Not only were over 1,300 people working at the company's Balmer operation, but many Westar's retirees lost their pensions. "It was very tough," reflects David Endicott, a former Kaiser and Westar employee and longtime president of the Sparwood Curling Club. "I remember when they went bankrupt, I had transferred from Greenhills down to the Balmer operation, and I lost all my seniority in that because Fording kept on running Greenhills at the time."⁶⁶

The bankruptcy had such a drastic effect that many sports and other recreational activities shut down—a devastation to the Elk Valley, which holds a deep love for its recreation.⁶⁷ "And then Westar bankruptcy as well, like, recreational opportunities in the valley," continues David, "my particular personal experiences, we lost curling for a year. Curling club was shut down." Danny Mercereau, another longtime Sparwood local whose father lost his pension in the bankruptcy, relates a similar experience. "Yeah, I remember, just for an example, the membership at the Sparwood Golf Club was...I forget how many members we had, I can't remember exactly. But we used to get between 90 and 100 people playing on a men's night," he notes, "and then when the mine went bankrupt, that basically stopped."⁶⁸

The Westar bankruptcy set the stage for a tumultuous decade, a period of hardship capped off by the closure of several schools in the Elk Valley in the early 2000s. With residents leaving the Elk Valley *en masse*, the schools lost many of their students. School District 5 – the new school district that the Elk Valley had been folded into – was centred in nearby Cranbrook, which was not

⁶⁵ FMA, MSS 504, Box 11, Series 1, File 1, Bruce Ramsey Fonds, Fax from the Industrial Relations Council to regarding the negotiations between the United Mine Workers of America and Westar Mining Ltd., 23 July 1992. "Fernie through Time," Fernie Museum, Fernie, British Columbia.

⁶⁶ Author interview with B. & E. Endicott, August 22nd, 2024.

⁶⁷ For more on this, see Wayne Norton. *Beneath the Coal Dust: Historical Journeys Through the Elk Valley and Crowsnest Pass* (Qualicum Beach, BC: Caitlin Press Inc., 2022), 13-37.

⁶⁸ Author interview with Mercereau, August 6th, 2024.

eager to close its own schools. “One closed in Cranbrook and it was one that was going to be condemned within a few years anyway,” John Mill, a former high-school teacher and basketball coach in Fernie, tells me as we talk over beers in the Fernie Taphouse:

That’s all they ever closed . . . well, and some administrators were trying to convince the school district management that they were looking at all the strollers around town and birth rates and they knew that things were going to pick up. And they weren't listened to and then, sure enough, that's exactly what happened.⁶⁹

Over the course of a decade, the Elk Valley lost four of its seven elementary schools. Ridgmont Elementary closed in 2002; Max Turyk Elementary closed in 2007, although it would eventually become the Elk Valley’s only francophone school, École Sophie Morigeau); Sparwood and Elkford each lost one of their two elementary schools in the early 2000s.⁷⁰⁷¹

The closure of these schools has backfired tremendously. Today, elementary schools throughout the Elk Valley are overfilled, with Fernie’s École Isabella Dicken Elementary School hosting over 570 students in 2023.⁷² This number shot up from 410 students in 2017, which was already considered to be over capacity back then.⁷³ The government of British Columbia finally approved a new 300 student school for Fernie in August 2024 after years of stalled discussions.⁷⁴

In response to the Westar bankruptcy, many Elk Valley residents pushed for a diversification of the region’s economy. Relying so heavily on coal had been disastrous on too

⁶⁹ Author interview with Mill, August 19th, 2024.

⁷⁰ Black Press Media Staff, “Isabella Dicken Elementary School Gets Creative,” *Fernie Free Press*, September 27, 2017, Community section, <https://www.thefreepress.ca/community/isabella-dicken-elementary-gets-creative-5100585>

⁷¹ Author interview with Cervo, August 6th, 2024.

⁷² École Isabella Dicken Elementary School, “École Isabella Dicken Elementary School Handbook,” 2023, 3, <https://media.sd5.bc.ca/media/Default/medialib/eides-school-handbook-january-15-2024.52d30e10122.pdf> (accessed February 12th, 2025).

⁷³ Phil McLachlan, “City Explores Options for Isabella Dicken Elementary,” *Fernie Free Press*, March 24, 2017, <https://www.thefreepress.ca/news/city-explores-options-for-isabella-dicken-elementary-5092362>.

⁷⁴ Government of British Columbia, “New School Coming to Fernie,” Education and Childcare, <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2024ECC0094-001250> (accessed February 12th, 2025).

many occasions, and many people desired a more stable economy. But while people left the Elk Valley for new opportunities and schools closed, another one of Fernie's industries was developing from a small recreational market to an international phenomenon.



Following Westar's bankruptcy, Teck Resources, a Vancouver based mining company, took control of the Balmer and Greenhills mining operations. By 2008, Teck had gained full ownership of the five mines in the Elk Valley. Just as when Kaiser swept into the Elk Valley, Teck's takeover brought significant changes to local life.

The most obvious shift was the company's increasing financial contributions to the region's communities, but there was another subtler change. Many of Teck's jobs operated on a four-on-four-off schedule. This not only gave Teck employees in the Elk Valley more freedom on their days off, but it also allowed people not based in the Elk Valley to work for the company. Many Teck workers simply stayed in hotels for their set, while others bought apartments for part-time accommodation. "When they had the four-on-four-off shift, all of a sudden there was people from Crowsnest Pass, and Cranbrook and Creston and Calgary that all worked at the mine because they could just do the four days on," explains Terry Nelson, who came to Fernie when he was a teenager. "So that changed how everything worked."⁷⁵

Teck's job opportunities, particularly attractive because of their high salaries, brought people from all over British Columbia and Alberta to the Elk Valley, right at the time when the region's tourism industry was taking off. The company's economic contributions to the

⁷⁵ Author interview with Nelson, August 22nd, 2024.

communities in the region allowed them to capitalize on the moment, investing in a turn towards tourism. It was a perfect storm, one which would explode in the coming years.

Chapter III: “We’re Not As Important As the Tourists”

Despite the critical role coal has played in shaping the Elk Valley’s trajectory, focusing solely on this rock would be akin to missing the forest for the trees. The reality is that the land itself, of which coal constitutes a small yet significant part, has been the real driving force in the region’s history.

Just like the rest of the majestic Rocky Mountains, the landscape of the Elk Valley is breathtaking and brimming with personality. In a 1919 letter to the *Fernie Free Press*, local photographer Joseph Frederick Spalding made a dramatic claim about the beauty of this land:

My recent trip of well over 12,000 miles through the states of Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California as far south as Mexico, and my previous trip of 23,000 miles in which I covered the whole of Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia, have convinced me more firmly than ever of the correctness of my oft made assertion that in this district and within a radius of 50 miles from Fernie, we have absolutely the finest scenery there is in the whole of the North American continent.⁷⁶

While many people prefer to relax on the banks of the Elk River and soak up the summer sun or adventure into the region’s vast forests, most, from locals to tourists, will cite one iconic feature of the Elk Valley as their favourite: the snow. The abundance of snow in the Elk Valley is why the region has earned its other nickname: “Snow Valley”. In particular, the Lizard Range, the host of Fernie Alpine Resort, receives world-renowned powder that has launched the Elk Valley’s premier ski hill into the limelight in past decades. Situated in a unique geographic position, the Lizard Range sees storms from both the north-west axis of the southern Elk Valley and the east-

⁷⁶ British Columbia Digitized History (hereafter BCDH), Newspaper clipping of Joseph Frederick Spalding’s letter to the *Fernie Free Press*, 9 May 1919, <https://bcdh.ca/islandora/object/kcnews%3A11250#page/2/mode/2up>.

west axis of the valley running up to Island Lake.⁷⁷ Fernie annually receives around 29 feet of snow, making it an ideal location for snow sports like downhill skiing, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling.⁷⁸

As such, the development of Fernie's tourist industry naturally centred around its abundance of snow, particularly for downhill skiing. Fernie got its first ski hill with the opening of the Mount Proctor Ski Hill in 1955, nestled between the Three Sisters, Mt. Fernie, and its namesake, Mt. Proctor.⁷⁹ The major turning point for the Elk Valley's ski industry came with Fernie's bid to host the 1968 Winter Olympic Games. Although the bid ultimately fell short, it was successful in its creation of Fernie Snow Valley Ski Resort, the predecessor to Fernie Alpine Resort, in 1963.⁸⁰ This new location, located in the optimal location for snowfall, started off small but would soon blossom into one of Western Canada's finest ski resorts.

Enter Linda and Heiko Socher, two avid skiers who came to Fernie in 1966. Recruited to help manage the area's forests, Heiko was thrilled to discover that Fernie was in the process of expanding its ski industry. Linda established a ski school for the hill in 1967, and through the following decades the ski hill grew from a few T-bar lifts to having several chairlifts in operation.⁸¹ This development in the Cedar and Lizard Bowls, known by locals today as "the old side," was later complemented by new chairlifts on "the new side" of the hill in the early nineties, giving skiers and snowboarders access to high elevation shredding in the Siberia, Timber, and Currie Bowls.

⁷⁷ "The Story of Fernie Alpine Resort," fernie.com, <https://fernie.com/things-to-do/fernie-alpine-resort/the-story-of-fernie-alpine-resort/> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

⁷⁸ "Mountain Statistics," Fernie Alpine Resort, <https://skifernie.com/discover-fernie/mountain-stats/> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

⁷⁹ "Mt. Proctor and the Snow Valley Ski Association," Fernie Museum, Fernie, British Columbia.

⁸⁰ "The Olympic Bid – and Snow Valley Ski Development," Fernie Museum, Fernie, British Columbia.

⁸¹ "1966-1997 Fernie Snow Valley – The Socher Years," Fernie Museum, Fernie, British Columbia.

The coal industry facilitated this expansion, in ways both visible and invisible. Direct financial contributions from Kaiser enabled much of this growth at the ski hill, but so, too, did the dollars coming from locals who earned their living at the mines.⁸² Other important fossil fuels were also a contributing factor to the ski hill's massive success. Oil and gas money not only gave many Albertans the means to travel to Fernie, which in the nineties was still the "hidden gem of the Rockies," but also to eventually buy homes in the city.⁸³

Leading this charge to expanding the ski hill's appeal outside of the Elk Valley was Resorts of the Canadian Rockies (RCR), which purchased Fernie's ski hill in 1997. The Calgary-based company launched a massive advertising campaign across southern Alberta, attracting many new visitors to the Elk Valley.⁸⁴ Charmed by Fernie's tight-knit community and natural beauty, many visiting Albertans decided to stay - sometimes permanently - buying houses in Fernie during the dip in the city's real estate market. This particular time of economic struggle, caused by low coal prices and massive layoffs at the mines, was another turning point for tourism in the Elk Valley. Facing such difficult economic hardships because of the Elk Valley's dependence on coal, many locals believed that they needed to diversify their economy. For many, tourism was the obvious answer.



At the same time as RCR pushed an intensive advertising campaign outside of the Elk Valley, a new front for tourism was opened within it. While Fernie had hitherto been known as a winter

⁸² "Skiing in Fernie: The Early Years, Pioneers, and Passions," Tourism Fernie, <https://tourismfernie.com/blog/the-early-years-pioneers-and-passions> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

⁸³ Petryshen, Ciccantell, and Langford, "The Elk Valley, Canada," 56-58.

⁸⁴ Fernie and District Historical Society, *Fernie: A Celebration of 100*, 97-104.



Figure 11: MLP, Arthur Oliver Wheeler, Crowsnest Survey, Fernie Ridge #4, 55, Survey photo of Fernie from Heaven's Gate, 1900.

wonderland, locals had always known the wonders that summer brought. Whether playing golf, hiking, or fishing, summertime still provided many wonders for lovers of the outdoors but had yet to be capitalized on by the tourism industry. This changed in the nineties, as mountain biking took off as a favorite local pastime and the trail network around Fernie started to expand. Beginning with trails in Mt. Fernie Provincial Park such as Mushroom Head in the mid-eighties, Fernie's trail network would soon explode into one of North America's finest. In 1990, Fernie Snow Valley Ski Resort had welded hooks onto its Elk Chairlift to accommodate downhill mountain biking in the



Figure 12: Photo of Fernie from Heaven’s Gate, captured in 2023, “Fernie Ridge Trail,” Tourism Fernie, <https://tourismfernie.com/activities/hiking-trails/FernieRidge> (accessed March 28th, 2025).

summer.⁸⁵ This shift towards an all-season tourism – rather than the winter-centric tourism that Fernie had been developing – laid the foundation for a larger change across the Elk Valley.

⁸⁵ “Hiking and Biking in Fernie,” Fernie Museum, Fernie, British Columbia.

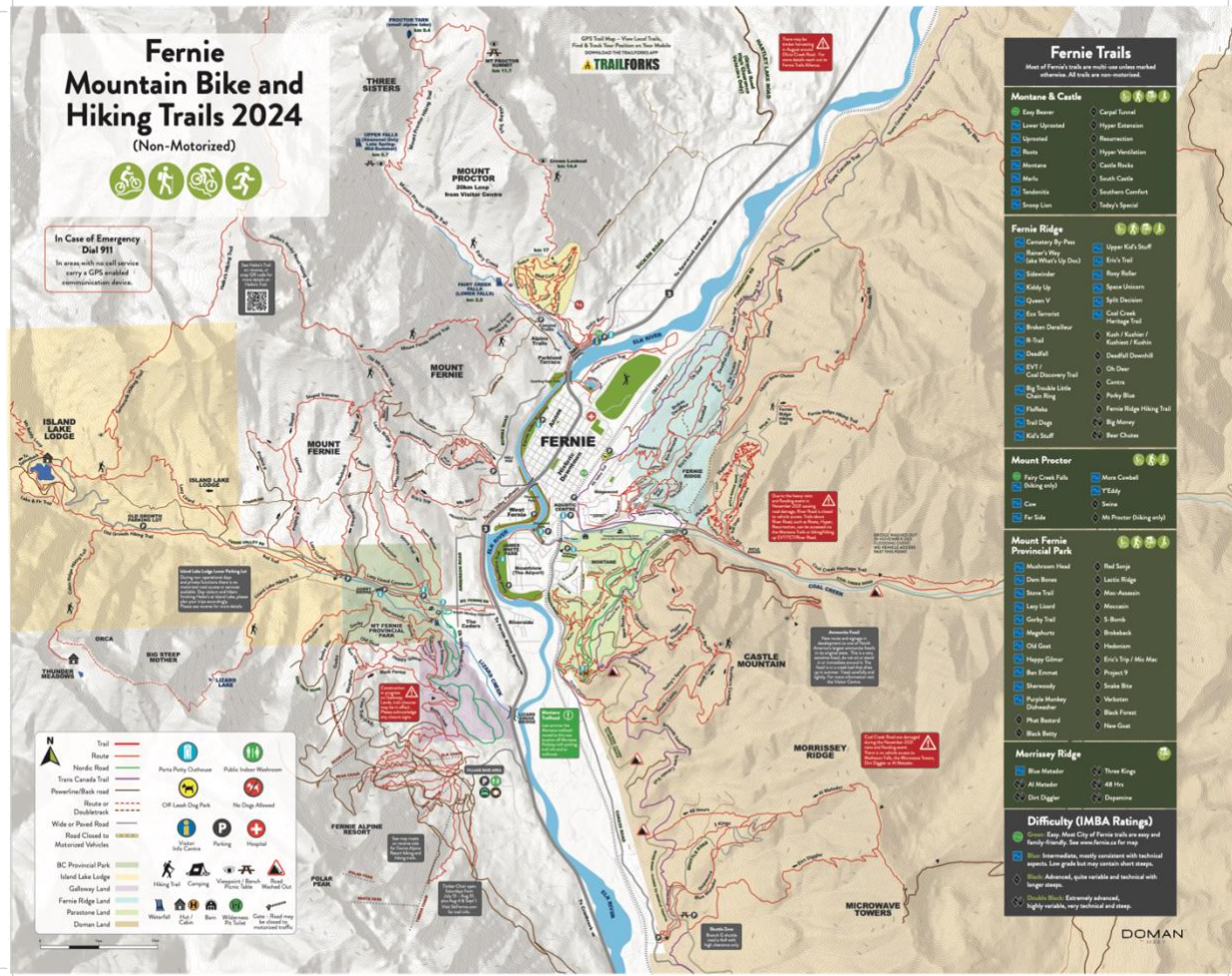


Figure 13: A 2024 map of Fernie’s summertime trail system, “Fernie Summer Trail Map 2024,” Fernie Fix, <https://www.ferniefix.com/sites/default/files/uploads/ferniefix-trail-map-summer2024.pdf> (accessed March 28th, 2025). Note how wide the trail system spans across the valley.

To manage this ever-expanding trail network, the Fernie Trails Alliance (FTA) was established in 1998.⁸⁶ Conflicting interests in the trails played a key role in the group’s formation, with mountain bikers, hikers, and dirt bikers all having different visions for the future of Fernie’s trails. The FTA expanded Fernie’s existing trail network around the city, building new trails in

⁸⁶ Terry Nelson, “Fernie Valley Pathway,” *Fernie Fix*, April 13, 2024, Community section, <https://www.ferniefix.com/article/community/ferniefix-valley-pathway-0>.

Ridgemont, Mt. Proctor, and eventually Montane. In these early days, much of this expansion was unregulated, simply building off old game and hunting trails without much consideration of the environmental impact of the construction of trails. Fernie's trails were expanding, but this expansion, it appeared, had a price attached.



Fernie, for decades considered the “hidden gem of the Rockies,” was slowly discovered by the rest of the world. RCR's advertising campaign had proved wildly successful, and soon Fernie Alpine Resort was attracting more than just locals and Albertans in on the secret. The hill and its employment opportunities attracted many people from abroad, predominantly Australians, New Zealanders, and Germans. These were the first signs that the city was about to go through another period of significant demographic and cultural change.

Soon, these new arrivals, whether permanent or temporary, succumbed to the allure of the beauty of the Rocky Mountains. An article published in 1997 by *Fly Fisher Magazine*, a popular magazine among anglers, raved about Fernie's wonders and drew a massive amount of attention to the previously obscure and unknown mining town. In 1994, the number of reported guided angler days was 81; six years later, this number jumped to 1,458 (which only included guided anglers, not anglers fishing independently).⁸⁷

But many Fernie residents, who had already seen much of their community change so drastically through the years, were weary of this influx of newcomers. “It was a time when everybody knew everybody,” explains Darren Will, a parts specialist who has spent his entire life in the Elk Valley, about what Fernie was like before the influx of tourists. “It's not like that

⁸⁷ Fernie and District Historical Society, *Fernie: A Celebration of 100 Years*, 98-99.

anymore.” Darren, like many former Fernie residents, has moved up the Valley to avoid the hustle and bustle that tourism has brought to Fernie. Speaking with him on our back patio in Sparwood on a warm summer day, with the sound of cars racing down the highway to get to Fernie for the weekend in the distance, this conversation was especially resonant. “And with our parents being there their whole lives, everybody knew who we were and that too,” he tells me. “It’s very close-knit, but it’s definitely...it’s changed over the years with tourism.”⁸⁸

Frustrations with the increase of people and traffic to the region have become more common. “To be honest, I don’t fish the Elk River anymore,” admits Danny Mercereau, also an avid hunter. “The people going down on the boats and stuff piss me off.”⁸⁹ Indeed, for many residents of the Elk Valley, some of their favourite spots suddenly became swarmed and overwhelmed by unfamiliar faces. “It’s kind of annoying as a valley resident,” confesses David Endicott, another hunter. He and his wife Barbara, a retired teacher and another integral member of the Sparwood community, vent to me about tourism over morning coffee at their house. “It’s kind of annoying because where you want to go...if there’s people there, it’s like, what the hell?” David explains with frustration, “I thought I had this all to myself.”⁹⁰

Perhaps the most infamous example of this is Silver Springs, a gorgeous chain of lakes near Elko which used to be a hidden spot for local youth to go cliff jumping. Today, during the peak summer season, crowds gather at this spot, much to the frustration of locals. One online survey conducted by the Elk River Watershed Alliance in 2014 found that 63% of Elk Valley locals supported leaving the trailhead to Silver Springs unmarked and that many locals had been visiting the lakes less frequently. A major sore spot for locals came from not just an increase in traffic tied

⁸⁸ Author interview with D. Will, August 1st, 2024.

⁸⁹ Author interview with Mercereau, August 6th, 2024.

⁹⁰ Author interview with B. & E. Endicott, August 22nd, 2024.

to tourism, but also a noticeable decline in the lake's environmental quality over the years. 87% of locals believed that the protection and management of Silver Springs needed improving, with 94% supporting seasonal cleanups of the site.⁹¹

Sitting in an important wildlife corridor wrapping around Mt. Broadwood, Silver Springs is also situated in a gorge that serves as an important winter-feeding range for ungulates like elk and bighorn sheep. With crystal clear water and trees sprawling up the surrounding gorge, it is easy to understand why Silver Springs has become such a popular destination for locals and tourists alike. But regardless of whether the people visiting are locals or tourists, the fact remains that more people coming to this site has brought our role in this ecosystem into question.

The price was rising.



In 2001, Charlie Locke, the owner of RCR, declared bankruptcy. With much of the development of housing at Fernie Alpine Resort financed by Locke, such a move left many contractors without pay. Shortly after, Locke would be bailed out by N. Murray Edwards, an oil sands financier and billionaire based in Calgary.⁹² Having such a high-profile and detached businessman like Edwards take control of RCR was a far cry from the Socher years, in which a diehard skier directly oversaw the development of Fernie's ski hill. Gone were the days of a locally run ski hill focused on the dreams and desires of Fernie's skiers and snowboarders. Big business was in town.

⁹¹ Le-Anne Walker, "Silver Springs Stewardship Solutions Report," Elk River Watershed Alliance, 7 July 2024, 7, <https://elkriveralliance.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/SSSSFfinalReport.pdf>.

⁹² "Resorts of the Canadian Rockies Rescued by Alberta Oilman," *Pique Newsmagazine*, June 14, 2001, Whistler section, <https://www.piquenewsmagazine.com/whistler-news/resorts-of-the-canadian-rockies-rescued-by-albertan-oilman-2459877>.

Edwards' business-like approach to Fernie Alpine Resort was a sharp departure from what many Elk Valley locals were used to under the Sochers. "I think that's, for most people I talk to, that's sort of what's missing," suggests Terry Nelson, also the president of the FTA and one of the truest outdoorsmen Fernie has to offer. Terry has always been a passionate skier, even working alongside the Sochers at the ski hill for many years. Sitting with him in his living room on a beautiful August afternoon, he recalls to me his experience with the change in ownership at the ski hill:

When it was Heiko Socher, he would go skiing every day. He had a genuine interest in the quality of work. And whereas the long-distance owner, yeah, they're just like, they got a bookkeeper, and they look at the financials, and that's sort of...that's all it's about.⁹³

For Terry and many other skiers, RCR's takeover signalled much more than a change in ownership; it also meant a change in the values of the ski hill itself.

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, Fernie continued to diversify its economy from mining to focus more on tourism. Tourism Fernie was established in 2007 to allow local businesses to collaborate in marketing Fernie as an international tourist destination.⁹⁴ The group marketed Fernie in its "Fernie Travel Planner," which circulated in magazines such as *Ski Canada* and in Australia's ski show circuit, with over 40 000 copies printed and distributed in 2012.⁹⁵ This campaign saw almost immediate results. Between 2010 and 2018, summer lodging revenue in Fernie increased

⁹³ Author interview with Nelson, August 22nd, 2024.

⁹⁴ "About Tourism Fernie," Tourism Fernie, <https://tourismfernie.com/stakeholders/about-tourism-fernie> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

⁹⁵ "2012-2013 Annual Report," Tourism Fernie, 19 June 2013, 10, https://www.tourismfernie.com/uploads/documents/4/Annual_Report_2013-final-lowres.pdf (accessed February 14th, 2025).

86%; winter lodging revenue saw an 18% increase, while shoulder season room revenue increased by 48%.⁹⁶

This meteoric growth continued even as the world shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Fernie was certainly affected by the effects of the pandemic, the city's accommodation revenues in 2020 were only down 26% compared to the year before, with Fernie managing to outcompete most tourist destinations in BC that year.⁹⁷ One reason for this is Fernie's proximity to Alberta. With international travel essentially coming to a halt and the threat of a deadly virus making travel to urban centres less desirable, many Canadians opted for rural retreats closer to home. With COVID restrictions, specifically interprovincial travel restrictions, easing in the summer of 2020, towns such as Fernie became an obvious vacation destination for Canadians tired of being cooped up in their homes for the previous months.⁹⁸ Fernie, a small town buried deep in the Rocky Mountain wilderness, isolated from major urban centres and relatively low-traffic compared to destinations such as Whistler and Banff, fit the COVID-19 travel bill to a tee.

Because of the global pandemic, the growth was not immediately obvious. But the signs were showing. In 2020, Tourism Fernie's website dedicated to local COVID and travel updates received over 35,000 hits, with another 880,080 views on its main website, the most the website had seen in a single year up to that point.⁹⁹ Tourism Fernie saw this opportunity to expand its regional appeal and ran with it, launching a massive "Welcome Back" campaign on all fronts.

⁹⁶ "2019 Fiscal Report," Tourism Fernie, 30 September 2020, 10, <https://tourismfernie.com/uploads/listings/92/2019AnnualReportFINAL-web.pdf> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

⁹⁷ "2020 Fiscal Report," Tourism Fernie, 31 March 2021, 13, <https://tourismfernie.com/uploads/listings/92/2020Web-TourismFerneAnnualReport.pdf> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

⁹⁸ See one of many examples here, powdermatt, "Five Places to Escape the Crowds for Winter Play Withing a Half-Day Drive from Calgary," *Calgary Herald*, September 24, 2020, Ski and Snowboard section, <https://calgaryherald.com/life/five-places-to-escape-the-crowds-for-winter-play-within-a-half-day-drive-from-calgary>.

⁹⁹ "2020 Fiscal Report," Tourism Fernie, 15-21.

Travel guides, promotional videos, social media posts, and online articles all welcomed people to Fernie with open arms. Fernie's accommodation revenues in 2023 shot up 53% from 2019, with spring and fall room revenues increasing 68% and 85% respectively.¹⁰⁰

The growth in tourism also coincided with a growth in Fernie's population. From 2016 to 2021, Fernie's population grew from 5,396 to 6,320, a 17% increase.¹⁰¹ Many second homeowners who came to Fernie during the pandemic to escape city life never left. With an estimated 34%-50% of homes in the Fernie area owned by non-residents, it is clear what drove this meteoric growth.¹⁰²

But this rise of tourism also brought a massive shift in everyday life for many locals. One of the most pressing concerns is housing prices, which have shot up in recent years. "I'm thinking about doing my nursing next fall. If I do that, there's potential that there's a nice signing bonus to come back. But my thing would be, would I have to live with my parents?" worries Kyra Corrigan, a Fernie local who wishes to return home once she is finished her university education. "Because I can't afford a place."¹⁰³ Indeed, in 2010, the average single-family dwelling in Fernie sold for \$386,100.¹⁰⁴ By 2024, the average price had increased to \$856,000.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ "2023 Fiscal Report," Tourism Fernie, 4 April 2024, 13, <https://tourismfernie.com/uploads/documents/5/2023TourismFerneAnnualReportFINALWEB.pdf> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

¹⁰¹ "Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population: Fernie, City," Statistics Canada, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/Page.cfm?lang=e&topic=1&dguid=2021A00055901012> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

¹⁰² "Is the 2nd Homeowner Part of Fernie's Tourism Economy?" Tourism Fernie, <https://tourismfernie.com/news/2nd-homeowners> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

¹⁰³ Author interview with Corrigan, August 10th, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Phil Gadd, "Fernie Bucks the BC Housing Trend," philgadd.com, <https://philgadd.com/fernie-bucks-the-bc-housing-trend/> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

¹⁰⁵ "Southern Interior 2025 Property Assessments Announced," BC Assessment, <https://info.bcassessment.ca/news/Pages/Southern-Interior-2025-Property-Assessments-Announced.aspx> (accessed February 14th, 2025).

Another major shift has come with the sense of community being lost for many local residents. With an such a dramatic influx of unfamiliar faces, many locals feel left behind. “It's a huge part of our economy. I get that,” former teacher Sandy Cervo explains as we sit in a packed café in downtown Fernie, surrounded by unfamiliar faces:

But the biggest comment I heard, like with people, like you said, moving out, the locals, saying that the shift is going from, “I'm a local and I don't matter”...the shift from, “we are people that have made this our home, but we're not as important as the tourists.”¹⁰⁶

Rosanne Anselmo reflects a similar feeling herself: “and, but, you know, it's not the small community for sure that it used to be, that we knew everybody, you know? Now when you go down the street, you don't...you don't know a lot of people.”¹⁰⁷ This sentiment even extends up the Elk Valley, where the effects of tourism are less felt. “Like I said, I’m not a fan,” asserts Danny Mercereau. “I don’t benefit from it...so, it's just...it's an inconvenience for me.”¹⁰⁸



While tourism has undoubtedly helped the Elk Valley diversify its economy and afforded many people here great lives, we must stop to consider the negative consequences of tourism. In times as good as they are now, especially economically for many local business owners, it can be difficult to pump the brakes and ask how far we are willing to let tourism go. Just like the coal sector, tourism has not just affected the towns and people of the Elk Valley, but its surrounding area and *other* residents as well. As humans, we share this region with a multitude of other animals, trees, plants, rivers, and creeks that call this place home. And, as the demand for tourism rises and our mining efforts continue, we encroach further and further on our Elk Valley neighbours.

¹⁰⁶ Author interview with Cervo, August 6th, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Author interview with Anselmo, October 16th, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Author interview with Mercereau, August 6th, 2024.

The price keeps rising; what we will have to pay, we have yet to see.

Conclusion

As I sat on my couch back home in Sparwood this past February, writing this thesis, my mom noticed something strange going on outside. “Why is the snow so dirty?” she asked. We went outside to investigate further. The answer, as it turned out, was coal dust. A strong wind from the southeast was carrying coal particles north and scattering across the fresh snow that had fallen



Figure 14: Author’s photo of the coal dust from the Elkview mine settling on the fresh snow, taken on February 19th, 2025.

earlier that week. While this is not an uncommon sight in the Elk Valley, the char black coal dust resting on the freshly fallen snow created a stunning visual contrast. This rock, which had shaped so much of our lives living in the Elk Valley, and its presence on the snow that day raised a simple

question for my mother, one which was surely being asked by many other locals. “How will Glencore react to this?”

Given how drastically a change in mine ownership has impacted the Elk Valley in the past, questions regarding how Glencore’s acquisition of Elk Valley Resources in 2024 will impact the region have understandably been swirling. Will Glencore give back to the communities as much as Teck did? Will the company treat its workers differently? Will it take responsibility for its environmental impacts? Questions like these have been voiced by many locals since Glencore’s acquisition, hinting at the anxiety the community feels regarding this massive change.

Glencore’s track record has made an already shaky welcome even less enthusiastic. Glencore acquired Elk Valley Resources from Teck in 2024 after attempting a \$25 billion hostile takeover the year before. Glencore’s environmental track record is less than stellar. In 2012, a BBC investigation found that Glencore was dumping acid into a river its Tilwezembe mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹⁰⁹ Zambia closed one of Glencore’s copper treatment plants in its country in the same year, citing pollution violations.¹¹⁰ In Australia, Glencore has come under fire for underreporting its methane emissions at its Hail Creek coal mine.¹¹¹ The Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, which is dedicated to advance human rights in business and tracks the

¹⁰⁹ “Glencore Linked to Acid Waterfall in DR Congo,” *BBC*, April 16, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/business-17726865>.

¹¹⁰ “Zambia Shuts Polluting Glencore Copper Plant,” *Reuters*, March 5, 2012, [https://www.reuters.com/article/business/finance/zambia-shuts-polluting-glencore-copper-plant-idUSJOE82405O/#:~:text=LUSAKA%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20Zambia%20has%20closed%20a,International's%20Mopani%20Copper%20Mines%20for%20pollution%20violations](https://www.reuters.com/article/business/finance/zambia-shuts-polluting-glencore-copper-plant-idUSJOE82405O/#:~:text=LUSAKA%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20Zambia%20has%20closed%20a,International's%20Mopani%20Copper%20Mines%20for%20pollution%20violations).

¹¹¹ “Queensland Coal Mine Suspected of Emitting A Year’s Worth of Methane in 16 Days,” Australian Conservation Foundation, <https://www.acf.org.au/qld-coal-mine-suspected-of-emitting-a-years-worth-of-methane-in-16-days#:~:text=16%20April%202024-.Queensland%20coal%20mine%20suspected%20of%20emitting%20a%20year's%20worth%20of,reported%20for%20a%20full%20year> (accessed February 21st, 2025).

conduct of over 10,000 companies, has gathered 70 allegations against Glencore relating to various environmental, corruption, and human rights issues.¹¹²

“As a result of the Glencore and Teck transaction,” declared federal Industry Minister François-Phillipe Champagne in response to Glencore’s acquisition of the Elk Valley’s mines, “we are supporting a Canadian champion to lead the transition from coal to critical minerals.”¹¹³ But while Champagne was busy celebrating a move away from fossil fuels, the very real material reality in the Elk Valley went completely overlooked. Canada may be shifting away from fossil fuels, but the Elk Valley will continue to depend on coal, at least in the short-term. And given the sharp turn against fossil fuels, the region will likely have to do so on its own accord, with provincial and federal governments likely to be hesitant to get involved in the region’s mining.

Uncertainty abounds. The transition from Teck to Glencore is just one of the many challenges the Elk Valley will have to face in its future. The end of coal mining, the tourist boom that threatens to make the Elk Valley unaffordable for many locals, and the increasing environmental threats will make the 21st century a challenging time for the Elk Valley. But the region has faced a tremendous amount of change and hardship throughout its history, which has fostered a strong sense of community and perseverance in its residents.

This sense of community is something I have strongly felt in my life. The Sparwood Curling Club and the Fernie Community Choir are just a couple of examples of strong and interconnected community organizations that help make the Elk Valley special in a way that is impossible to convey in writing. For a long time, I pondered how to convey this sense of

¹¹² “Glencore,” Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/companies/glencore/#associated_allegations (accessed February 21st, 2025).

¹¹³ Darryl Dyck, “Sale of Teck’s Steelmaking Coal Business to Glencore Approved,” *CBC*, July 6, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/teck-glencore-sale-approved-1.7256358>

community, before I realized that *I* can't. Only the people of the Elk Valley can do this. So in the spirit of celebrating my community, I close this study by letting their voices speak to how they want others to understand about this region.

"Well, it's a nice place to live," Marjorie Halko states plainly. "Yeah. 'Cause we would've left," agrees her sister, Wendy Allen, before they both burst out into laughter. "Maybe," replies Marjorie. "Maybe."¹¹⁴

"Fernie is in the Rocky Mountains, it is a four-season town, you know?" reflects Rosanne Anselmo. "You swim the lakes in the summer, you ski and skate in the winter, we are close to the American border, and close to the Alberta border, and it's a special...it's a special place."¹¹⁵

"When I touch on the traveling through Natal-Michel and seeing how people lived . . . they really did not want to lose their community," explains Sandy Cervo. "All this coal dust, you'd be thinking...you'd be hitting the hills as fast as you could. But that's not the case. They love their community, coal dust and all."¹¹⁶

"I know a lot of people who just drive through Fernie and think, 'oh, it's just a little rural community,' and they don't even come down to our main street," Kyra Corrigan tells me. "They don't even realize that, like, we have a little paradise here that's absolutely amazing."¹¹⁷

"For newcomers, I would get involved in the fabric of the community, right? Volunteer," suggests David Endicott. "Because what we offer as a community keeps residents here, right?" "And the whole history of this valley," chimes in his wife Barbara, "like...the hospital being built

¹¹⁴ Author interview with Allen & Halko, August 21st, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Author interview with Anselmo, October 16th, 2024.

¹¹⁶ Author interview with Cervo, August 6th, 2024.

¹¹⁷ Author interview with Corrigan, August 10th, 2024.

here from Michel and moving here was because of a hospital board that was volunteer, right? The rec centre, the seniors drop-in, all of that was on the backs of volunteers.”¹¹⁸

“I’d like to see more of the Natal-Michel bit of town history come to Sparwood,” wishes Danny Mercereau. “It’s kind of, to me, it’s...I know there’s the museum there, but...those people are leaving us...Michel and Natal is going to be a lost memory. And I think that is a shame.”¹¹⁹

“Oh, I guess remembering that it’s a very old town with lots of locals that...actually, I think they’re very welcoming,” proposes John Mill, “but...just remember that they’re going to have their own ways and be patient with that.”¹²⁰

“I think about that quite a bit, about what...and I don’t really want to get on the path of, like, Remembrance Day and all that shit, but just, like, what people sacrificed,” Terry Nelson tells me, “you know, and those sacrifices were, could be as simple as, you know, working in a mine, underground...worked hard. Built a community. You know? Like, I’m proud of that.”¹²¹

“Oh, I think...if anything, I think the people are, like, the greatest asset,” Darren Will proudly asserts. “Like, everyone is so friendly in all the different communities here, like, it’s just...like Sparwood, it was just...it was easy for us to, ‘cause we worked here, we curled here, and yeah...the people are just amazing.”¹²²

¹¹⁸ Author interview with B. & E. Endicott, August 22nd, 2024.

¹¹⁹ Author interview with Mercereau, August 6th, 2024.

¹²⁰ Author interview with Mill, August 19th, 2024.

¹²¹ Author interview with Nelson, August 22nd, 2024.

¹²² Author interview with D. Will, August 1st, 2024.

“Well, I’d show them that picture of where we used to live,” explains Lorraine Will, referring to a photo of the house she keeps on her wall at her new home. “Yeah? Just to show what used to be there, or?” I asked. “Yeah. Yeah.”¹²³

Of course, Grandma. Let’s show them what used to be. Let’s keep the memory alive.

The history of the Elk Valley has been defined by hardship, and this theme will surely continue in the coming decades. But reflecting on our past not only allows us to “know the heaven and earth that was, but experience the world that is.”¹²⁴ Only through the past can we saw how far we have come – and what we have lost – but plenty more challenges await us on the horizon.

Will we be prepared?



Figure 15

¹²³ Author interview with L. & R. Will, July 31st, 2024

¹²⁴ Dan Flores, *Wild New World: The Epic Story of Animals and People in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 398.

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While it has been difficult being so far from home, I have been able to appreciate the Elk Valley far more since I have left. Absence indeed makes the heart grow fonder. I was admittedly nervous to embark on this journey, as I knew that this project would represent my community. Thankfully, I had several mentors who helped shape this project into something that I – and

hopefully, the rest of the Elk Valley – can be proud of. Dr. Jason Colby has been a continuous and impactful presence during my tenure at UVic. His influence has not just shaped me as a researcher and historian, but as a person as well. I owe much of my academic success to your wisdom and guidance. Wayne Norton helped frame this project in immeasurable ways, as our coffee shop discussions always provided a much needed break from reading and writing. Mr. Norton's vast knowledge of the Elk Valley's history proved invaluable. Likewise, Dr. Tom Langford of the University of Calgary was kind enough to meet with me and discuss my project, who himself has made significant contributions to the Elk Valley's historiography. I cannot thank you two enough for helping to preserve the Elk Valley's history. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Dan Flores of the University of Montana and Dr. Jon Coleman of the University of Notre Dame, who helped me find my bearings in writing animal history. Thank you for lending your ear to a young Canadian researcher from the sticks.

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