

*By looking at the newspaper coverage of two fires in Minnesota that occurred more than one hundred years apart, the author—a former journalist and now a professor of communication and journalism—traces the evolution of news media coverage of the environment. He finds that not only did the style of coverage change, but the language of the reportage did as well.*

# THE NATURE OF MEDIA COVERAGE

## TWO MINNESOTA FIRES

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**N**ews media coverage of the environment has gone through at least two distinct stages in the past century or so.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the late nineteenth century, newspapers tended to cover stories about the environment as either breaking news or a component of government or corporate misdeeds. This

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was familiar ground for them, of course, since disasters and political scandal were common themes with familiar narratives for readers. Examples of breaking news included floods and earthquakes or workplace accidents, such as mine collapses. The misdeed story usually involved crooked politicians or robber barons. These narratives were typical of the way in which many environmental issues were covered through the 1950s in the mainstream press.

By the late 1960s, the environment had been added to big-city newsroom routines. Established as a beat, frequent and planned environmental coverage began appearing in newspapers. Scientists, policy makers, activists, and others in government, business, religion, and environmental groups became regular news sources. Stories moved beyond natural disasters or official wrongdoing to narratives about air pollution or exotic species or

lead poisoning or even the fate of the planet. More investigative stories were undertaken; some crusading editors made the environment a priority.

The reasons—cultural, social, and economic—for the environment's becoming a news beat are many. Those looking for an event that tipped the scales could find point to the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* in 1962, or the Apollo photographs of Earth from the moon, the Cuyahoga River fire in Ohio, the Santa Barbara oil spill, and the first Earth Day in 1970—the list can be long. At some point editors and other newsroom managers became aware that their readers or viewers were interested in environmental stories; to produce them on a regular basis would be not only part of the news media's social responsibility but also a way to increase their audience.

How were these stories covered? What did they read like

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BY MARK NEUZIL



COURTESY OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, LOC# SC4.2H1

*A view of Hinckley's main street the morning after the fire in 1894. Hinckley was one of several towns consumed in the fire and lost the most people. The railroad depot was quickly rebuilt and now houses the Hinckley Fire Museum.*

or look like? Among the ways to think about coverage is through what many scholars have called a “news frame.” A news frame is a way to categorize the content of the coverage. How is an issue defined? The concept originated with sociologist Irving Goffman, who postulated that individuals tend to respond to events through a particular interpretation, or frame, that is primary to them. Goffman argued, “A primary framework is one that is seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful,” and that “each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms.”<sup>2</sup> Who gets to define the frame? As various power groups struggle to control an issue or event to best suit their needs, a fight for control of the news frame commences.<sup>3</sup> Robert Entman, in refining Goffman’s idea, observed that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”<sup>4</sup> An example might be the controversy over factory farms: Provider of cheap food to feed the nation? Polluter? Abuser of animals? Bad neighbor?<sup>5</sup> As D. A. Scheufele, in distinguishing between media frames and audience frames, noted, “The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue.”<sup>6</sup> Who best manages the media frame often wins the power resource battle.

News media coverage of fires, a hardy perennial that spans both the older period of natural disaster news and the modern period of beat journalism, can be seen from a news frame perspective. How is an urban fire framed? Human tragedy? Heroic firefighters? Neighborhood in decay? Accident? What about the frame of a wildfire? Careless campers? Act of God? Part of nature’s wonder? To be stopped at all costs?

One place to look for a news frame is in the coverage of a fire in the wildland-urban interface, defined generally as the area where structures or other development meets or mixes with undeveloped wildlands. Although the term dates only to the 1980s, I am assuming that fires that fit its definition could have happened throughout history.

To take a look at the framing possibilities, I examined the newspaper coverage of two fires in Minnesota from very different periods, although the blazes could be considered wildland-urban interface fires. The first case was the 1894 fire in and around the town of Hinckley; the second was the Ham Lake Fire of 2007 along and across the Gunflint Trail wilderness at the Canadian border. My content analysis was crude, but it was not meant to be definitive, only to suggest some possible frames.

The Hinckley Fire would fit in the pre-1960s media coverage of an environmental story as a natural disaster. The Ham Lake Fire, of course, occurred after the environment became established as a newsroom beat. The two time periods provide an opportunity to see what, if anything, has changed in the coverage over the years.

COURTESY OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, LOC#SC4.2H P20



Reporters flocked to the area to report on the losses (above, searchers uncover the remains of a family), heroes, and the restoration of order (below, a Red Cross–built house for fire victims).

COURTESY OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, LOC#MP4.3



## THE HINCKLEY FIRE OF 1894<sup>7</sup>

On September 1, 1894, a fire roared through several communities in east-central Minnesota in about four hours, killing at least 436 people and burning 480 square miles (307,200 acres) in parts of five counties. Several communities were almost completely destroyed, including Quamba, Brook Park, Mission Creek, Sandstone, Partridge, Miller, Finlayson, Hell's Gate, and the largest town, Hinckley, where at least 248 deaths occurred.

Fires were a constant worry in Hinckley and Pine County. As is obvious by its name, Pine County was in Minnesota's forest ecosystem—indeed, large tracts of virgin white pine were burned—and the towns and villages served the lumber industry and James J. Hill's railroad empire. Minnesota lumber production was nearing its peak; seasonal loggers swelled Hinckley's population to more than twelve hundred.<sup>8</sup>

The summer of 1894 was the hottest and driest on record in Minnesota until at least 1976. Many communities in central Minnesota battled small fires all summer and contended with smoky skies, ash, and soot; some citizens had taken to plowing furrows around their homes to keep brush fires at bay.

Much of the landscape around Hinckley, which is halfway between St. Paul and Duluth, had already been logged, and the land was covered with dry fuel—pine slash, stumps, scrub, forest litter—left or exposed by the crews. Brennan Lumber Company was the town's largest employer, with three hundred to four hundred mostly seasonal workers, and it produced two hundred thousand board feet daily. At the time of the fire, Brennan had twenty-eight million feet of milled lumber awaiting shipment and another eight million feet in its holding pond, awaiting the saw. It all burned in a matter of minutes.

Two railroad lines, the St. Paul and Duluth and the Eastern Railway of Minnesota, served the town; the two fires that converged on Hinckley on the afternoon of September 1 traveled along the railways into town. One rolled up from the southwest along the St. Paul and Duluth tracks, through Brook Park (pop. one hundred fifty), where it killed at least twenty-eight. The second fire came from the south and east on the other railroad line, through Mission Creek. The fire tore through Hinckley and ran eight miles north into Sandstone (pop. five hundred), where another sixty-three people lost their lives. Railroad men raced two trains through the inferno and rescued dozens of citizens; a third train crashed off rails twisted by the heat. Among the dead were twenty-three Ojibwa Indians at a hunting camp and a lumber company watchman purported to be Boston Corbett, who supposedly fired the shot that killed John Wilkes Booth during the 1865 manhunt for President Abraham Lincoln's assassin.

Newspapers from far and near converged on the disaster over the next few days. Reporters pitched tents in Hinckley and strung telegraph wire along the railroad to Pine City. Boxcars were turned into telegraph offices. The most famous reporter of the era, twenty-six-year-old Nellie Bly of the *New York World*, was among those filing stories from Pine County, joining reporters from St. Paul, Minneapolis, Chicago, and elsewhere. Bly stayed at the hotel in Pine City and walked fifteen miles from Mission Creek to Skunk Lake to see and report on the devastation herself. She interviewed dozens of survivors.

Three main frames emerge from my reading of the work of the journalists. They are the frames of the forest fire, the hero, and order restoration.

## The Forest Fire

The forest fire frame is evident from the earliest coverage. In headlines and body copy, the fire is usually preceded by the adjective "forest" or the fire was described as taking place in the forests. For example, a St. Paul headline screamed, "Inferno in Forests." Overseas readers in London learned of "Great Forest Fires In America." The *New York Times*' headline read, "Hundreds Perish in Forest Fires." The villages and small towns appeared to be afterthoughts. "The vast valley between the Kettle River and Cross Lake, including several villages and settlements, is laid waste by forest fires," said the *Times* on September 3. "Besides the towns that were reduced to ashes, farms were swept clean by the flames. The forests are still burning fiercely, and rain is required to drown the fires that are sweeping over a vast region."<sup>9</sup> One possibility might be that "forest fire" was the newspapers' generic term for fire, whether it occurred in a forest or prairie or hayfield, or perhaps even if it occurred outside a city or in what we today would call a wildland-urban interface. In this case, most of the fire was in a former forest, the area having been logged a few years earlier (a distinction that may not have been obvious to the out-of-town, big-city journalists).

## The Hero

The story of the heroism of a railroad engineer and others fits with what journalism historian Jack Lule has called one of seven "master myths" of the news.<sup>10</sup> These narratives are found in news stories from the nineteenth century to the present. "The Hero may be humanity's most enduring archetype and the basis for its most pervasive myth," Lule wrote.<sup>11</sup>

In the Hinckley fire, the hero mentioned most often was an engineer named James Root, who ran Engine No. 69 on the St. Paul and Duluth line. On his regular southbound trip on September 1, the unsuspecting Root drove straight into the fire. He rescued one hundred fifty people, and then backed his burning train six miles to the relative safety of a small lake while bleeding from glass shards exploded from the engine's superheated window.

"His soul is the stuff of which heroes are made in this world—archangels in the world beyond," wrote a reporter for the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*. Root, who thirty years earlier had run General Sherman's advance train through Georgia, was praised in the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Post*, the *Syracuse Post*, and the *London Daily News*. An enterprising New York theater promoter ginned up a play starring Root, for which the engineer was paid \$500, but "The Ride for Life" closed after a week's run at the Grand Opera House.

Stories of heroism extended to others, including a black porter named John Blair, although the racial stereotypes of the day were prevalent in the narratives—Blair was "a credit to his race" and a "black man with a white heart," for example. Blair did not appear nearly as often in the national press as did Root, although the African-American community members of St. Paul awarded him with a dinner and a gold watch.

## Order Restoration

In the days following the fire, story after story looked at the relief efforts. Media coverage from Chicago to New York to London and elsewhere spurred a flood of donations to the area. The order restoration frame ranged from private groups sending clothing, blankets, tents, and food to the victims to a St. Paul paper's

advocating for a state forestry commission. The Montgomery Ward Catalogue Company, whose founder had lost his first inventory in the Great Chicago Fire twenty-three years prior, sent five hundred pairs of shoes.

The Rev. William Wilkinson of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Minneapolis was both relief giver and hero: He "fed the hungry, comforted the bereaved and the dying, dug graves for the dead, read the services over them, helped them build new houses, and did everything that could be done for the comfort of the living and gave Christian burial to the dead."<sup>12</sup>

Some of the stories about the aftermath, especially in the local newspapers, urged people to return and rebuild: "God made the world, but we built Hinckley," said one.<sup>13</sup> More than one hundred fifty relief homes were built. A few years later, those who survived formed a "fire survivors' association" and began meeting annually on the Sunday nearest the first of September.

Not only would order be restored, but the "forest" fires could have an upside. "The ground is almost ready for plow" after the countryside had been swept clean by the blaze, said a St. Paul paper.<sup>14</sup> The transition from forest to farm, in the minds of the newspapers, so prevalent in the experience of a settler, was firmly in place. The Hinckley paper said the "fire on September 1 did in 15 minutes what it would take the husbandman 15 years to accomplish. All nature is with us; it seemingly knew our needs, and came to clear the land."<sup>15</sup> Minnesota was once the nation's principal source of white pine; it would now be a part of the nation's breadbasket. The economic foundation of the community did not burn; it simply changed, and according to the local newspaper, for the better.<sup>16</sup>

## THE HAM LAKE FIRE OF 2007

From the beginning, the Hinckley Fire was consistently called a forest fire; the Ham Lake Fire of 2007, although it began and burned in the largest forest in the Upper Midwest, was never called a forest fire.<sup>17</sup> It was a "wildfire." It seems that the generic term forest fire had fallen out of use.

There were more significant differences in news frames. The hero myth was absent from the Ham Lake Fire, perhaps because no single person did something the news media could identify as heroic: no lives were saved, not even a family cat was rescued, at least according to the media. Only once in the stories were people called heroes: two men ran over to their neighbor's summer cabin and turned on his sprinkler system, preserving the structure. Not exactly the stuff that Broadway plays are made of.

The news frame of order restoration from the 1894 fire was present but not exactly in the same way as in the coverage of the Ham Lake Fire. One major new frame was the "problem" of the wildland-urban interface, broadly interpreted.

Fire officials in northern Minnesota were worried about "the big one" in the spring of 2007. A 370,000-acre timber blowdown in 1999, followed by several hot, dry summers and low-snowfall winters, had combined to make the extreme drought conditions just right for a major fire. A year earlier, a large blaze burned fifty square miles (32,000 acres) in the Cavity Lake region of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA).<sup>18</sup> By May 1, 2007, the state Department of Natural Resources reported 484 fires around the state in the previous four months, with more than 23,000 acres burned, one death, and five severe injuries.<sup>19</sup>

On Saturday morning, May 5, 2007, about thirty miles northwest of the town of Grand Marais, a campfire got out of control near a small body of water called Ham Lake. Winds gusting up to thirty-nine miles per hour from the southeast quickly pushed the flames across a narrow channel to Chub Lake and on toward the only road in the region, the two-lane, sixty-mile-long Gunflint Trail, which snakes from Grand Marais and dead-ends in the forest. As campers and homeowners were evacuated and county, state, and federal firefighters arrived, the blaze raced west along the Gunflint Trail for a few miles, and then turned slightly southwest into the BWCA, where it ran into the barren territory burned by the Cavity Lake Fire from the year before. Deprived of fuel at Cavity Lake, the Ham Lake Fire spun north and swept across the Gunflint Trail, burning or threatening residences, vacation homes, and outfitters before heading into Canada. Smoke reached the Twin Cities, hundreds of miles south, in six days. After traveling across the Canadian wilderness, the fire swept back south, jumped the trail again, was declared "contained" by May 20, and finally died in the BWCA by May 23. It was the largest wildfire in Minnesota in terms of cost, acres burned, and lost buildings since 1918.

In all, about 120 square miles (76,000 acres) burned, including sixty-three square miles in Canada over a two-week period. One hundred fifty-one structures were lost, nearly all on the U.S. side, including ten year-round residences and several commercial businesses worth a total of \$4 million. A Lutheran youth camp lost 40 structures alone. Firefighters working along the Gunflint Trail kept the flames away from 759 other structures worth \$42 million. No deaths were reported, but eleven persons were injured. At the fire's peak on May 15, more than 1,090 firefighters were in action, including the Minnesota National Guard; the total federal cost of fighting the blaze was put at \$11 million.

## The Wildland-Urban Interface

News crews were on the scene by May 6, a Sunday. Many newspapers and broadcasters set up shop along the Gunflint Trail (until the area was evacuated) and stayed for several days. The dominant news frame in the first reports of the fire was the danger to the human-built structures (not necessarily to humans, who had been evacuated or ordered to). This was the wildland-urban interface, where people have built homes and businesses near or in the wilderness.

Coverage also focused on the evacuation, the progress of the fire, and the buildings that were burned. Forty structures were lost in the first forty-eight hours. Typical of the language was this: "Sheriff Mark Bergland said those structures ranged from hunting shacks to multimillion dollar buildings, but he didn't have specifics on what was burned."<sup>20</sup> Much of the reporting read like a sports story, full of statistics: miles of fire perimeter, numbers of firefighters and planes, acres torched, buildings burned, speed and direction of the wind.

## Order Restoration

The order restoration frame was presented in a subtly different way than at Hinckley; instead of seeking donations, food, clothing, or tents, as was the case in 1894, officials and local residents asked tourists to return to the area and spend their money. "Business as Usual" read one subhead. In another example, in a story on May 8, only three days after the blaze began and many



*The Ham Lake Fire in 2007 saw some property loss but no loss of life, due in part to the fire's location in the remote northeastern area of the state. Because tourism and recreation are important to the area's economy, reportage focused on the perception of order being maintained and assuring the public that it was "business as usual." Heroics were limited to turning on a neighbor's sprinkler system.*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LAYNE KENNEDY, WWW.LAYNEKENNEDY.COM

days before it was under control, there was this exchange:

*The Williamses [local outfitters] were eager to see their land, too, but were more concerned about the perception that vacationers—including people heading up for the fishing opener this weekend—would have when they heard about the fire.*

*“It’s a local fire that’s only burned the last few miles of the Gunflint Trail,” David Williams said. “Business is going to continue up here.”*

*“And they need more people than ever to come up,” Cathi Williams added.<sup>21</sup>*

As was the case in Hinckley, the news frame of people pulling together through tough times was common. “But as a community, we’ve always been strong and stuck by each other,” one fire chief was quoted as saying. “We will rebuild.”<sup>22</sup> The Gunflint Trail Volunteer Fire Department increased from twenty-five members to thirty-two after the fire. For one Gunflint-based reporter, the system may not have been repairing itself fast enough: “Many business owners said the fire did not come within even five miles of their establishments, leaving trails, views and even the smell of the great outdoors unchanged.

“But how, oh how, to explain that to potential tourists?”<sup>23</sup>

Tourism was the most important industry on the Gunflint Trail in 2007, just as lumbering was the most important industry in Hinckley in 1894. In each case, the media sought to maintain order in the social system, particularly in its economic underpinnings—keeping tourism active in 2007, and taming the wilderness and preparing for a transition to farming in 1894.

## CONCLUSION

In the wildland-urban interface fires at Hinckley and Ham Lake, the consistent news frame was that order would emerge out of chaos. I have advanced the idea that in times of crisis, natural and otherwise, the media serve a social control function called reassurance, of which order restoration is a part. This system maintenance role means that when disaster strikes, one task the news media performs is to assure people that help is on the way, victims will be taken care of, towns will be rebuilt, a giant catalogue company may mail some shoes, and that, in short, the social system will right itself and is not permanently broken. In this way the existing power structure maintains itself, usually with winners and losers among competing power groups. As we have seen, although the headlines in 1894 were more lurid and sensational, this notion is evident more than a hundred years ago, as well as today, in the case of a major fire.

Sometimes we can learn more about an issue or a societal circumstance from what is not written about (or what is taken for granted) than what is covered. One idea related to the wildland-urban interface that was *not* mentioned in the 2007 coverage was one of lifestyle choice. This is the notion of “why the heck are these people living in this wilderness anyway?” A second missing news frame was economic: “Why should we spend all this taxpayer money and save their property if they chose to live in the wilderness?” A reason for the absence of these two themes might be the strong historic and traditional place of the “cabin up north” in Minnesota culture. About as close as the coverage would come to framing a story as an individual’s lifestyle choice was “four

structures without sprinkler systems near Sea Gull Lake burned,” implying that a better-prepared cabin would have survived.<sup>24</sup>

What were the differences in reportage in the two periods? The term “forest fire” went away, but that was not attributable to the beat system of reporting. The existence of a hero, or lack of one, seems like a matter of circumstance in this case rather than any change in the newsroom structure from 1894 to 2007; there is no shortage of hero worship in modern culture. The order restoration theme remains, and it continues to have a subtle but distinct economic underpinning: agriculture in the nineteenth century and tourism in the twenty-first. So there is not much difference in the eras after all.

I did not see the actual phrase “wildland-urban interface” and its problems in the coverage of the Ham Lake Fire. In whose interests would this idea serve if it appeared in the media? One of the hallmarks of the beat system of reporting is the use of regular news sources. However, the sources used for the Ham Lake fire did not use the interface terminology. Why? Perhaps one reason is that the news sources at Ham Lake were primarily firefighters, residents, and business owners and not fire scientists, environmentalists, urban planners, antisprawl campaigners, or wildlife groups. The latter sources might have been more likely to bring it up.

Obviously, there is an imperfect comparison between a fire that killed more than four hundred in several small villages and a wilderness blaze that destroyed structures but spared human life. But the media coverage of each event, however crudely the measure is, shows something about the culture of the day and, importantly, how the media continue to function to maintain the dominant power structure in the social system. □

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## NOTES

1. For more on this argument, see Mark Neuzil, *The Environment and the Press: From Adventure Writing to Advocacy* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008).
2. Irving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 21.
3. See, for example, Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward a Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43(4) (1993): 51–58.
4. Entman, “Framing,” 52.
5. See, for example, Jeanette Wenig Drake, “Is Agriculture Spinning Out of Control?” in *Case Studies in Organizational Communication*, ed. Steve May, 185–198 (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2006).
6. D. A. Scheufele, “Framing as a Theory of Media Effects,” *Journal of Communication* 49(1) (Winter 1999): 106.
7. I have compiled general information on the Hinckley Fire from Grace Stageberg Swanson, *From the Ashes: The Story of the Hinckley Fire of 1894* (Stillwater, Minn.: The Croixside Press, 1979); Antone A. Anderson and Clara Anderson McDermott, *The Hinckley Fire* (New York: Comet Press, 1954); and Daniel James Brown, *Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894* (Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2006).

8. Data indicate that the St. Croix valley lumber production, which includes Pine County, Minnesota, peaked in 1895, the year following the fire. Overall, Minnesota's lumber industry reached its apex in 1905.
9. *New York Times*, September 3, 1894, 1.
10. Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 10.
11. *Ibid.*, 82.
12. *Minneapolis Journal*, September 21, 1894, 2.
13. *Hinckley Enterprise*, May 8, 1895, 8.
14. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 10, 1894, 4.
15. *Hinckley Enterprise*, December 19, 1894, 1.
16. Hinckley did not immediately recover, however, because James J. Hill moved his terminal facilities and rail yards from the town to Sandstone. By 1905, Hinckley's population had dropped to around five hundred. By 2006, some years after Interstate 35 came through, its population had grown back to fourteen hundred, about the size it was at the time of the fire 112 years earlier.

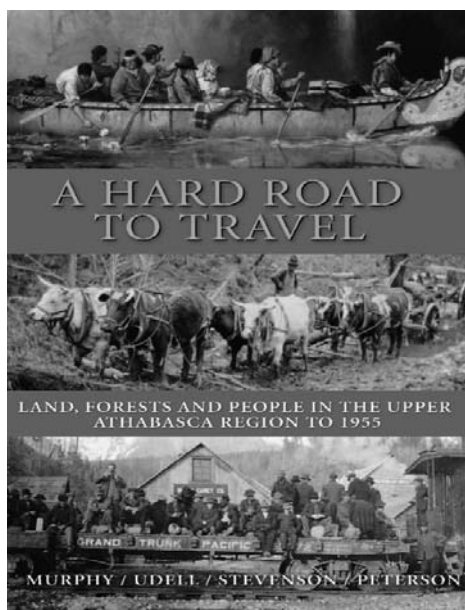
17. Information on the Ham Lake Fire of 2007 comes from the dispatches of the Associated Press and the pages of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* newspaper.
18. The one-million-acre Boundary Water Canoe Area is a federally protected camping and canoeing site in the Superior National Forest; no motors or permanent structures are allowed.
19. John Brewer, "Wildfire season is here," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 1, 2007, B1.
20. Associated Press, May 7, 2007.
21. John Brewer, "Dangerous and growing," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 8, 2007, B1.
22. John Brewer, "'We will rebuild,'" *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 9, 2007, A1.
23. Frederick Melo, "'We're going to be open for business,'" *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 17, 2007, B1.
24. Associated Press, May 6, 2007.

## A Hard Road to Travel: Land, Forests and People in the Upper Athabasca Region

by *Murphy, Udell, Stevenson, and Peterson*

People have co-existed with the land in the upper Athabasca in western Alberta, Canada, for the last 10,000 years. Its geology, topography, waters, climate, forests, and wildlife have all had a significant effect on the relationship between people and the land.

The authors trace the changing relationships between people and forests as humans first traveled through the area, then stayed to struggle, survive, and eventually flourish—first despite the forest, then in harmony with it. With extremes of temperature, drought and forest fires, deep snow, floods, muskegs, and fallen timber, it truly has been a hard road. Such a history must inform our present and future decision-making about resource use and sustainability.



*“A wonderful example of the resilience of the forest and people—it clearly shows how people used lessons from the past to protect and perpetuate the forest as well as their futures. Highly readable, very informative and well illustrated with well-chosen maps and photographs. Congratulations to the authors on a first-class book.”*

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