

VoicesOnTheMove_EP06 Transcript

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Suzanne: You don't know where to go. Everything's on fire right around you. Where do you go?

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Will Greaves: When a wildfire burns the forest down, Indigenous peoples who are in relation to that particular land feel it. They feel it in ways that extend beyond the physical.

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Yvonne Su: We must work to integrate Indigenous knowledge into how we plan for disasters, how we prepare for disasters, and how we recover from disasters.

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Sophia Burton (Host): How does our relationship with the land define our sense of home? Especially when that home spans generations and encompasses far more than just physical bonds? In the second part of our double feature episode, we turn our attention to the impacts of climate change and displacement on Indigenous peoples in Canada. If you haven't yet heard our previous episode on Canada, we recommend going back and listening to that first. As our experts on this topic we've invited back Dr. Yvonne Su and Dr. Will Greaves to share their insights. You are listening to Voices on The Move, a podcast about the complex relationship between climate change and migration and the people it affects. I'm Sophia Burton from Migration Matters. This episode is a collaboration between York University and Migration Matters. We met with Suzanne, an Indigenous woman from the Thompson Okanagan region of British Columbia. Although she resides in Vancouver, Suzanne was in Merritt visiting family when the wildfires approached in August 2021.

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Suzanne: Merritt is like a cowboy town, and there's lots of horses, and cowboys, and Indians, and some of the Indians are cowboys, but, um, farmland, ranch lands, and ranch people are fishers and hunters, too. So it all goes around salmon, fruit, fish, deer, everything. And that's how the families live.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Part one of our Canada episode focused on the devastating wildfire that destroyed the small town of Lytton in British Columbia in June 2021. That same summer, only 100 kilometers away, the city of Merritt found itself on evacuation alert as wildfires raged in the surrounding forests.

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Will Greaves: Most Indigenous communities in Canada are located relatively far away from larger urban centers.

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Sophia Burton (Host): This is Will Greaves, an expert on security and international relations at the University of Victoria in British Columbia.

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Will Greaves: In many cases, they have limited infrastructure and services, and so the remoteness, the small size, and the relative vulnerability creates a greater risk of experiencing an extreme weather event in these communities, just because of where they're located.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Merritt lies in the heart of the Thompson Okanagan region. For centuries, this region has been home to several Indigenous communities, known in Canada as First Nations. Dr. Yvonne Su, an assistant professor at York University and the director of the Centre for Refugee Studies, is our second expert today.

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Yvonne Su: They have just been historically underinvested in. These communities are already often living in environmentally marginalized, environmentally damaged, not great pieces of land - already.

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Will Greaves: In many cases they don't have roads, and so they're not accessible over land. They can only be accessed by water or by plane. The second dimension of Indigenous peoples' vulnerability to climate change is different than that, it is specific to the qualities or characteristics that make Indigenous peoples, in many ways, distinct from non-Indigenous peoples, and in particular, Indigenous peoples have a relationship with the land and the relationship with the natural world that is deeply, deeply embedded in their cultural and religious beliefs.

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Suzanne: My grandmother and my aunties, we all like to do our food. There's lots of mouths to feed. We're all Indian, so there's lots of things ... And growing up, anything we ate, we had killed it, or grew it, or picked it. It's like tradition. I miss it. All the family get together and go get boxes of tomatoes and wait for the fruit stands to open and all the mushrooms, picking tender mushrooms, gathering things from the land is how we grew up.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Indigenous communities' deep-rooted connection to the land and to nature means that they experience the impacts of natural disasters in a profound way.

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Will Greaves: And that relationship - not with land as an abstract concept, not with nature as an abstract concept - but a relationship with specific land that specific peoples are from is the basis for traditional Indigenous knowledge, and for ongoing lived relationships that Indigenous peoples have with their territories. This means that when a natural disaster affects those territories, a wildfire burns the forests down, that Indigenous peoples, who are in relation to that particular land, feel it.

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They feel it in ways that extend beyond the physical, it becomes a metaphysical kind of relationship where harm to the land is a type of harm to the people themselves.

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News Broadcasters: In south central B.C., in the city of Merritt ... Merritt, B.C. ... The city of Merritt, B.C. remains off limits ... The city of Merritt is under an evacuation alert in the community of 7000. Anxiety and fear are high. On Sunday, the Coquihalla highway was closed between Merritt and Hope. Anxious travelers drove along as flames blazed on both sides of the highway. The B.C. Wildfire Service says it was closed after two wildfires merged.

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Sophia Burton (Host): In the summer of 2021, as the wildfire intensified on the outskirts of Merritt, the community moved quickly to try and help one another.

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Suzanne: And the people just running around trying to bring things together, what's needed from house to house, how it's going off. And most Indians have 3 or 4 freezers full of deer, moose, and salmon, and all that meat is gone.

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Sophia Burton (Host): It only took 20 minutes for the side of a nearby mountain to become completely covered in flames. So Suzanne joined the long caravan of cars trying to escape the city.

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Suzanne: We drove all the way back, and then in Vancouver it was like that night I couldn't sleep at all. My sister is calling dad like we don't know where to go. The fire is coming really close. I never was so afraid. I thought my whole family is going to die. Everybody was like, go to the middle of the lake. What can' you do?

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Sophia Burton (Host): Many affected residents couldn't leave their land, and the area got harder and harder for emergency services to access. Others wouldn't leave. They refused to go.

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Suzanne: Many brave people. But some people stayed and they had to get airlifted out last minute. Our family has really strong men and I've never seen them broken. I've never seen them lost like that, confused, even my brother, big tough men. We never faced that much disaster before. We had a couple houses burn down and the whole valley's come together, but to be stuck in the middle of it. It was like being on the movie Dante's Peak, when you're trying to get off the mountain in a volcano. That's how scary it was, you think you're going to die.

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Sophia Burton (Host): The fire not only destroyed people's homes and livelihoods,

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for the Indigenous community, it disrupted their connection to nature, forcing them from their ancestral land where their families have been living for generations.

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Will Greaves: It's actually male hunters who are really deeply, deeply connected to the land and have produced a significant amount of knowledge, actually, about climate impacts, that Western scientists have then been able to build on and benefit from. But it also means that those male hunters going out on the land, a land that is now changing because of climate change, are disproportionately at risk to physical harm and loss of life because of the changing environment itself. So we see men, because of these gender differences, often being put at a greater risk of harm from environmental consequences. But that's balanced by incredibly challenging circumstances that fall very often on women, who are now responsible for caring for themselves, caring for their children, caring for their broader communities, while displaced from their homes, and potentially having lost all their possessions.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Dr. Yvonne Su, from the Department of Equity Studies at York University, has studied the structural inequalities that particularly affect Indigenous peoples.

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Yvonne Su: We don't talk about the discrimination that takes place politically and socially between the rural and urban areas. As you can imagine, a lot of the discrimination takes place against rural areas and Indigenous communities. There is a lot more funding that goes towards urban cities, but many things are happening in rural areas. They just don't get the attention. Indigenous people in Canada have been and continue to be disproportionately impacted by disasters, by climate change, and by overall impacts of colonization. There's been historic persecution and marginalization by the government. So I think what happens is that unfortunately, we end up valuing rural lives less. And that sounds really, really, really harsh to say, but that's what we're seeing borne out in policy.

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Sophia Burton (Host): You are listening to Voices on the Move, a podcast on climate change and how it affects mobility.

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Sophia Burton (Host): As Yvonne and Will pointed out in our previous episode, there is a real need for both increased awareness and political action. Lawmakers are currently focusing more on urban centers and safeguarding densely populated cities, but a more inclusive approach that protects all residents equally is urgently needed to mitigate the worst effects of climate change.

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Yvonne Su: In the most recent wildfire season we saw in Canada, which made global

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news because it contributed so much carbon to the atmosphere, the government was triaging wildfires. There was a bit of controversy because there were local people, local firefighters reporting this triage. And what that means is that they're picking small communities that they're deciding to burn before it reaches, or to avoid it reaching larger cities. We could have a conversation and there could be debates, but no, we are just choosing to prioritize urban areas, economic centers over rural communities.

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Sophia Burton (Host): The wildfires in British Columbia exposed a lack of planning and preparedness at the provincial and local government levels. The people of Merritt, just like in Lytton, lost almost everything. Many are still living in temporary housing three years later.

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Suzanne: Every family I talk to and they're just devastated. And they don't have insurance, they don't have things. Some of the people are homeless, in a hotel. They get \$100 a day from the ESS. What will happen to them? All this stuff they worked hard for all their life, and it's all gone in minutes in a day.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Emergency Support Services, or ESS in Canada, provided some relief to those who had evacuated from Merritt. However, long term sustainable support has been harder to find. For Indigenous people, the effects of a changing climate extend beyond immediate losses, leading to deeper, more enduring issues, as Will Greaves explains.

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Will Greaves: As climate change effects have become more visible and more severe, the knowledge that was derived over many centuries and many millennia from an intimate, intimate relationship with a particular ecosystem is in many ways less useful knowledge now than it used to be. Much of the effort, over the last number of years, towards restoring Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land is producing a condition where Indigenous peoples are trying to reclaim a relationship that doesn't exist any longer, because the land is not what it used to be, and the ways of hunting that their grandparents may have passed down to them can't be practiced anymore, because the animals may not be there anymore, because the animals may not be healthy any longer, because the growing season is different. And so this then takes the physical impacts of climate change and transforms it into a social, a psychological, and a cultural phenomenon.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Climate change is increasingly altering traditional ways of life for Indigenous communities. So what types of support would be especially crucial and effective?

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Suzanne: Money. They need money. They need medication. They need stuff. They need housing. Where can they go from hotel rooms? People that didn't have insurance. What are they going to do? Where can they go? Where's the jobs and where's the stuff now? You know they need a hand up, not a handout. They need a hand up, Government come on!

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Sophia Burton (Host): People in rural areas, especially Indigenous people, have always shown a high degree of resilience and adaptability to changing environmental conditions. But this doesn't mean that they do not need support, or should be left to face these challenges alone.

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Yvonne Su: Because of historic under-resourcing, and general marginalizing, they are displaced and they have to go to cities. People in the cities, they don't want to necessarily open their doors. They don't want to welcome them. And they see them as a burden, and they see them as contributing to a housing crisis that's happening in their city, and they see them as a problem. And that's really sad. And that shouldn't be the situation.

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Suzanne: I'm a city girl now. This is my home. All my kids are raised here, but I always respect my land, and the waters, and the mountain, and the people, and what's going to happen now? We have to pray for the ice. We have to pray for the ice because what happened last year is going to, it's going to be more.

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Sophia Burton (Host): To prevent a repeat of the fires in Merritt and Lytton, Yvonne and Will emphasize that policymakers need to collaborate closely with rural and Indigenous communities. Traditional Indigenous methods have proven to be effective in mitigating natural disasters. They can greatly contribute to the development of viable prevention and preparedness strategies.

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Yvonne Su: We need to do more community consultation that engages and involves communities. Yet we decide over and over again to perhaps pay lip service, but not to actually take any action. There just needs to be more attention. And we also just need to incorporate their Indigenous knowledge in our disaster preparedness and recovery.

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Yvonne Su: So that in the future we can do, I think, what they call prescribed burns that take place in anticipation of a wildfire. So in a situation like this where they understood and felt that we were having a heat wave, there was a North American heat wave, and that a wildfire of a disproportionately large size might be coming, they can do a burn before it gets too hot, and they can do the burn in an area which

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is not going to be inhabited by people. And this is something that Indigenous communities have been doing for a very long time, very effectively. And they know the land. So we must work towards stronger community led responses.

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Will Greaves: We need to get smarter about recognizing the risk factors that are baked into how we build our communities, where we build our communities, how people get around, the kinds of services that are located locally versus those that are located outside of the community, and do better medium and long term planning at the intersection of climate preparedness and climate adaptation.

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Sophia Burton (Host): As Will Greaves points out, climate change is a phenomenon that demands a coordinated approach at multiple political levels. This need is not unique to Canada. It's true for almost all regions around the world, as our previous and upcoming episodes illustrate.

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Will Greaves: Yes, local governments need to be resilient, yes, but we cannot expect them to be autonomous or able to cope with these situations on their own. And so the practical action that we need has to be multi-level governance. It has to be supporting communities and potentially neighborhood associations, right? Voluntary groups, civic groups, who are going to be adaptable and, and capable of organizing and mobilizing themselves, even if their city hall has burnt to the ground.

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Sophia Burton (Host): What is clear is that the needs and vulnerabilities of Indigenous men, women, and children, along with other marginalized groups, must underpin any plans to prevent future disasters. Bottom up solutions need to be strengthened to complement top down policies.

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Will Greaves: So, as we speak, there is a motion going through the Parliament of Canada, not yet enacted into law, to create a youth climate corps of some kind, to create a civilian body that probably recruits from young Canadians in all manner of climate related mitigation and adaptation work.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Communities cannot solely rely on trained volunteers to provide assistance in emergency situations. But the involvement of civilians and community-based organizations is crucial both in preventing and responding to disasters.

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Will Greaves: In the case of wildfires, obviously it's firefighting itself, but it's providing assistance to people who've been displaced, right? It's helping to transport community members. It's helping to provide food and water, and emergency medical

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supplies. It would mean that you would have a body of people, who were trained professionally, and able to be deployed from one part of the country to another. Or even better, you would have different bodies organized by regions that they could deploy within their own regions.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Suzanne and her family lost more than their homes in the Merritt wildfire, and their traditional ways of life continue to be threatened by the ongoing effects of climate change.

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Suzanne: We have to adapt. We didn't die. We're going to live. But we got to carry on. And carrying on means coming together, and helping each other, and not giving up. I'm strong. I got a family to feed. We got to get up! We still have to hunt, and fish, and feed our family. What about our kids? Our children, our children's children. We got to do something for our people here. The white, the black, the Chinese, Indigenous, the ones that don't have insurance. Stand up, grab your drum and say hello, world. I'm here and this is my space. And I got to live.

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Sophia Burton (Host): And with that we conclude our Voices on the Move double feature on Canada's response to climate disasters and migration. A special thank you to Suzanne for sharing her experience. To read her full story, along with others from Canada, visit the Climate Disaster Project's website. You'll find the link in our show notes (www.climatedisasterproject.com), along with additional resources and research that informed this episode. Thank you also to our experts, Dr. Yvonne Su of York University and Dr. Will Greaves of the University of Victoria. Join us for our next episode, where we'll explore how social and gender differences affect responses to climate change, featuring stories from Kenya and Nigeria.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Voices on the Move is a podcast series developed by Migration Matters, York University, Samuel Hall, and the HABITABLE research project. The podcast is funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. It is hosted by the Dahdaleh Institute for Global Health Research at York University. Our producer and senior story editor is Bernadette Klausberger. Our editorial team includes Frankie Reid and for the interview with Suzanne, Sean Holman and Tosh Sherkat. The series is edited by Line Schulz. Audio engineering and sound design by Tim Strasburger-Schmidt. Original music by Eliah Arnold and Podington Bear. I'm Sophia Burton, your host. Until next time, with more Voices on the Move.