



CHANGING CONSERVATION

ENVIRONMENTALISM MUST SUPPORT LAND BACK

THE ECOLOGICAL AND MORAL IMPERATIVE OF RETURNING LAND



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The environment is having a moment. From celebrities to governments to some of the biggest brands in the world, advocacy for the natural world has become popular and mainstream. Here at home, the federal government along with some provincial and territorial ones have made big promises to protect land and water, and lower carbon emissions. A few have even acknowledged the substantial funding this will require.¹ The climate and biodiversity crises are in the spotlight for good reason: it's the future of the planet and our ability to thrive on it at stake.

This is a huge opportunity to halt and, in some cases, reverse destructive industrial resource exploitation. But it's also an opportunity to address the injustice at the foundation of what's now called Canada: colonialism and the theft of land from First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

The destruction of ecosystems, the decimation of species,

the overconsumption of resources and the pollution of soil, water and air — all began after settlers arrived and colonial governments claimed the land. Whether treaties were negotiated or lands were unceded, in the end these governments gave themselves supremacy over the peoples here for millennia.²

Recognizing Indigenous laws and practices that stem from centuries of observation and interaction with lands, waters and species and returning authority to these Nations is the right thing to do.

It also happens to be our best bet to survive the biodiversity and climate crises and give ourselves a shot at a safe and stable future. Researchers who analyzed biodiversity data from Canada, Brazil and Australia — three of the world's biggest countries — found biodiversity

was higher on Indigenous-managed or co-managed lands.³ Indigenous-led conservation initiatives are the best way to meet targets for protecting nature.

As with many opportunities, the international push for increased conservation also carries risks. Efforts to safeguard biodiversity and establish new

protected areas often happen without consultation and at the expense of Indigenous communities.⁴ These are mistakes that cannot continue.

Combining the ecological imperative of protecting nature and biodiversity with the moral imperative of returning land to Indigenous Peoples is a chance to build the framework for a better and healthier future.

Governments must start to support Indigenous-led projects to protect land and water and conserve biodiversity without hesitation. They must respect efforts by First Nations, Inuit and Métis people to reclaim their territories and determine what happens on them.

There are more than 1.8 million Indigenous people and almost 700 First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities across the country.⁵ There isn't a one-size-fits-all model for how Indigenous people get their land back — it's up

to communities to decide and the rest of us to amplify and support their vision.

Read on to learn about a few of the exciting Indigenous-led initiatives underway and why the return of land to First Nations, Inuit and Métis people should be central in efforts to fight biodiversity loss and climate change.

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Photo Top: Little Klappan River, Sacred Headwaters (Carr Clifton).
Photo Bottom: salilwata4 Nation canoe paddlers (Michael Wheatley).



Photo: Rice River Falls, Hollow Water First Nation (Eric Reeder).

REPAIRING THE COLONIAL HISTORY OF CONSERVATION

Despite feeling the most impacts of environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity,⁶ Indigenous Peoples are often left out of conservation efforts. In a pattern described as eco-colonialism, governments impose power structures and prioritize their interests in nature protection just as in its destruction.⁷ Through a process called “fortress conservation,” governments protect biodiversity and ecosystems by displacing and further marginalizing Indigenous communities.^{8,9}

Modern efforts to protect ecosystems and biodiversity must buck this trend, shifting from a top-down approach that centres colonial governments’ priorities to a model that puts Indigenous communities in the driver’s seat.

Canada is far behind other jurisdictions when it comes to protected areas. An even smaller percentage of the country is currently within Indigenous jurisdiction. Indigenous-led conservation can help address both problems, growing conserved areas while dramatically increasing the amount of land managed by Indigenous communities.

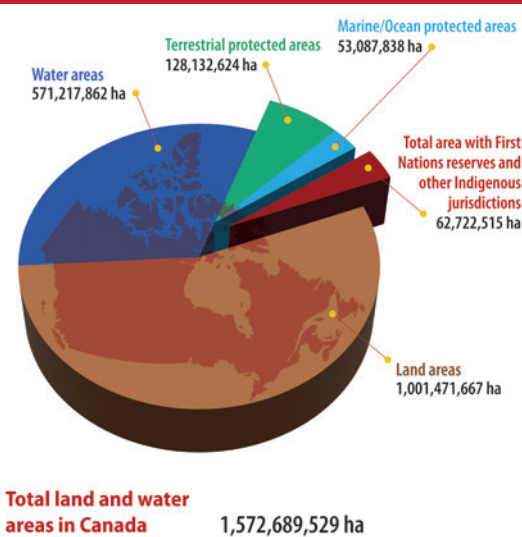
Municipal, provincial and federal governments must shift from final authority to supporter and funder. Money

to develop conservation plans, fund non-extractive economies and implement Indigenous-led protection should come from the governments that have benefited from centuries of colonialism here.

Canada, the provinces and the territories have to remove economic barriers to conservation. More logging, oil and gas development and other extractive industries cannot be the only job and revenue options for Indigenous communities. Governments must make it economically viable for Indigenous Nations to protect lands and waters for their people and future generations.

Ultimately, we must respect the self-determination of Indigenous Nations. Governments can and should support conservation and ensure it benefits Indigenous communities.

First Nations reserves and protected areas in Canada



INDIGENOUS PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS AND BEYOND

In the last decade, awareness of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) has exploded. IPCAs are lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge.¹⁰

Indigenous communities have been at the forefront of conservation here and around the world for decades, but in the last few years Indigenous-led protected areas have been highlighted as a solution by everyone from environmental groups to the federal government.^{11,12}

While IPCAs are an exciting and just answer to the biodiversity crisis, the environmental movement’s support for Indigenous self-determination should not be limited to them alone. Those of us who call for the recognition and funding

of Indigenous-led conservation must also support assertions of land rights by First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities that aren’t solely linked to protecting land.

Just as colonial governments have taken the authority to determine what happens everywhere in their claimed jurisdictions, Indigenous communities and their



Photo: Grizzly bear (John E. Marriott).

governance structures must be able to make decisions on what happens across all lands and waters in their territories. If provincial, territorial and federal governments are going to look to Indigenous Nations as leaders on the path to meeting targets on biodiversity and climate change, they must also return land and jurisdiction to First Nations, Inuit and Métis governments more broadly to ensure they benefit from their territories both inside and outside IPCAs.

What does Land Back mean?

There are many meanings and intentions behind the phrase “Land Back.” Land Back can refer to the actual return of land ownership or to the restoration of traditional stewardship models, but the concept is always tied to the relationship and responsibility to land.^{13,14} nêhiyaw scholar Sylvia McAdams defines it as the restoration of Indigenous livelihoods and respect for the land and the compensation for past wrongs.¹⁵ Wilderness Committee encourages all non-Indigenous people to learn what Land Back means to the people whose territories you’re working on and align your activism with those visions.

CASE STUDY: GRASSY NARROWS FIGHT FOR PROTECTION

In 2018, Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishnaabek (Grassy Narrows First Nation) on Treaty 3 Territory in northwest Ontario declared their traditional land an IPCA, banning industrial activity and outlining their vision for conservation. While the federal government recognized this IPCA, the Ontario government has refused to come to the table. Instead, the province has continued to issue mining licenses on Grassy Narrows land without consultation.

The people of Grassy Narrows have defended their territory, rights and ways of life from colonial appropriation, resource extraction and industrial pollution for over 150 years. Since 1970, the community has worked to draw attention to mercury contamination of their

waters from chemical dumps by an upstream pulp and paper mill. While the provincial government denied for decades that the fish there, a main source of food for Grassy Narrows people, were toxic, the community increasingly showed signs of mercury poisoning.¹⁶ Only in the last five years, following large demonstrations in Toronto, presentations at the UN, international scientific attention and a legal challenge, has the community begun to see compensation for this injustice. In 2019, the Supreme Court ruled Weyerhaeuser Company and Resolute Forest Products responsible for cleaning up the mercury-contaminated site. And in 2020, Canada committed to build a medical clinic in the community to treat those with mercury poisoning.¹⁷

In the 1990s, Grassy Narrows

community members stood strong against industrial logging with the longest-standing Indigenous-led blockade in Canadian history. Combined with legal challenges, they have successfully forced logging companies out of their territory since 2008.^{18,19} In 2023, Grassy Narrows declared an alliance with Big Trout Lake, Wapekeka and Neskantaga First Nations to support each other in asserting sovereignty over their territories against mining speculation contracts issued by Ontario and committed to stop unwanted encroachments on their land and waters. The four communities’ traditional territories cover roughly 60,000 square kilometres of land in the

Katie Krelove Ontario Campaigner [@wildernewsON](#)

“It will be a good day for everyone in Ontario when the government finally stops fighting us and decides to partner with us in respecting our people’s decision to protect our land.”

- Joseph Fobister, Grassy Narrows Land Negotiator²²

heart of the boreal forest.²⁰

The path these Nations have set in asserting sovereignty over their lands and waters is a triumph of the bravery and knowledge integral to their culture and survival and serves as an inspiration to us all. Alliances with non-Indigenous environmental groups have played a part in Grassy Narrows’ ability to raise awareness of their efforts. All of us committed to truth and reconciliation²¹ and a liveable planet for future generations must support them in all ways possible.



Photo: Near Grassy Narrows First Nation’s Territory (Mike Grandmaison).

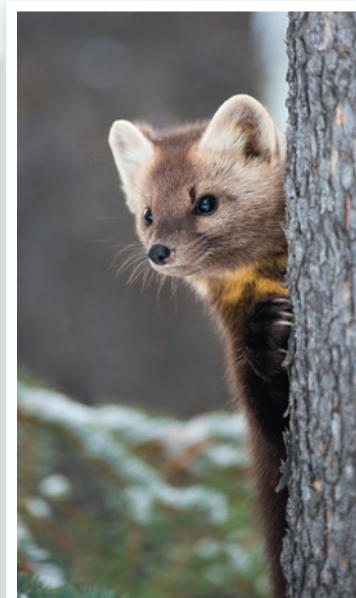


Photo: Pine marten (John E. Marriott).



CASE STUDY: PIMACHIOWIN AKI INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE OF LAND BACK

Eric Reder Wilderness and Water Campaigner [@EricReder](#)

The greatest intact forest left on Earth is protected in part by IPCAs envisioned long before the modern return of land discussion started. Return of legal control of land for Pimachiowin Aki began with internal Indigenous community decision-making and advanced into the colonial provincial governance system, where new legislation was crafted and passed so the vision of First Nations could become law in Manitoba.²³

Pimachiowin Aki means “the land that gives life” and is the name bestowed by elders on the wild and vibrant lands and waters on the eastern shores of Lake Winnipeg. This is the land of moose, wolf and boreal caribou. Pickerel and wild rice populate the rivers and lakes. Blueberries and innumerable medicinal plants cover the forest floor and wetlands. Poplar River



Photo: Moose cow and calf (Robert McCaw).

First Nation, Little Grand Rapids First Nation, Bloodvein First Nation and Pauingassi First Nation made the decision to nominate their traditional territories for UN World Heritage Site status, as well as for protection under Manitoba law.²⁴

Each Nation created a community land use plan for their territory,

which indicated areas for preservation and areas for community resource use. Despite reports of the heavy colonial hand of the provincial government in the process, the First Nations produced plans their

“We believe that what we have is very beautiful and it’s still very culturally vibrant. The beautiful part about this whole area is how the people still use the land and water like they did thousands of years ago. We are willing to share it with the rest of the world.”

- Sophia Rabliauskas, Poplar River First Nation²⁸

communities approved. In 2008, the Manitoba government passed the East Side Special Protected Areas Act, which created the legal path for Indigenous land use plans to become law.²⁵

Years of public pressure were required to move the province along. In 2011, ten years after efforts began, Poplar River First Nation territory was the first piece of Pimachiowin Aki protected, when their Asatiwisiwe Aki Management Plan became law.²⁶ Community plans from Bloodvein, Pauingassi, and Little

Grand Rapids were then enshrined in legislation.²⁷

Today, Pimachiowin Aki encompasses a mammoth 29,000 square kilometres of boreal forest. Under the established First Nations plans, 86 per cent of the region is legally protected from industrial activity and development. In 2018, the region was formally designated as a UN World Heritage site, with the rare distinction of both cultural and natural significance. It stands as a model for returning land to Indigenous control.



Photo: Pimachiowin Aki UNESCO World Heritage site (UNESCO).

CASE STUDY: NUCHATLAHT TITLE CASE HIGHLIGHTS GOVERNMENT HYPOCRISY

Since 2017, the Nuchatlaht First Nation has undertaken a historic legal effort in the Supreme Court of Canada to claim aboriginal title to part of Nootka Island, off the west coast of Vancouver Island. In May 2023, the judge presiding over the case ruled in favour of the Nuchatlaht as title holders, but did not grant the Nation title to their entire claim area.²⁹ This case is an instructive example of why Indigenous efforts to get their land back need support and how governments are failing to do so.

After decades of fighting the



Photo: Preparing salmon for drying (Gary Fiegehen).

depletion of their forests and fisheries on their territory, the Nuchatlaht are seeking to regain title to Nootka to take back

authority and reverse the damage. But instead of respecting this expression of rights, the B.C. government opposes Nuchatlaht title, fighting tooth and nail against their claim. B.C. is using shameful colonial arguments like Nootka Island was inhabited by disparate family groups and not a proper Nation, and that the Nuchatlaht have “abandoned” their territory.³⁰

Both the Nuchatlaht and the BC NDP government have spent significant time and resources in this court battle, yet the issues on Nootka Island remain unresolved. B.C. positions itself

“We aren’t going anywhere, we know what’s ours. This isn’t just about Nuchatlaht, but about every First Nation.”

- Erick Michael, Nuchatlaht councillor

as a champion on Indigenous rights and passed landmark legislation to align provincial laws with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.³¹ Declaring support for First Nations and then denying their land claims in court is hypocritical and unacceptable.

It’s not enough for provincial and federal governments to just say they care about reconciliation and protecting the environment. To really walk the walk on this, they need to get serious about recognizing First Nations, Inuit and Métis jurisdiction and returning land to them.



Photo: Nootka Sound, Nuchatlaht Territory (TJ Watt, Ancient Forest Alliance).



Photo: Towering giant cedar tree (Dave Hutchison).



MOVING FROM BIG PROMISES TO BIG CHANGES

The federal government and some provinces and territories acknowledge the climate and biodiversity crises as the emergencies they are. But they haven't yet aligned their actions with their words — they still approve new pipelines, logging in old-growth forests and industrial projects proven to harm wildlife.

This gulf between words and actions is mirrored when governments state support for Indigenous rights and then fail to honour the wishes of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people and communities when it comes to lands and waters.

The environmental crisis and colonialism are bound together. Experts have connected the dots between the degradation of ecosystems and the theft of land both in Canada and around the world.³² Like a lot of complex problems, it



Photo: Skwxwú7mesh and salilwata4 Nation Chiefs sign the Save the Fraser Declaration (Michael Wheatley).

makes sense to tackle these two together.

Maybe it seems so daunting to slow climate change and protect nature because those in power don't yet respect Indigenous science, knowledge, culture and laws that are many times older than Canada. It is logical those with the deepest connections to the land will have the most insight and knowledge into how to care for it.

Individuals and organizations in the environmental movement are making efforts to recognize this truth and shift our work towards better supporting Indigenous rights. We need to expand on this, incorporating into our calls to action the fact that there can't be healthy ecosystems without justice and safety for the people of the land.

We need to support the return of lands and waters to Indigenous Peoples, and

call on elected governments to work towards this.

Governments at all levels need to undertake a swift reckoning of humility. They need to move from assuming they have final authority to recognizing Indigenous jurisdiction and engaging with every First Nation, Inuit and Métis Nation about what Land Back means to them. The structures within governments that lock in the status quo need to be replaced with new models that respect what Indigenous governance could look like, as determined by each Nation.

Importantly, the uncertainty of what comes next can't be used to justify continuing with projects that destroy ecosystems, harm biodiversity or worsen climate change. Strong measures to safeguard land and biodiversity, even temporarily while long-term governance is determined, will ensure more ecosystems and species aren't lost in the meantime.

Perhaps most critical is the funding. Colonial governments have had more than a century to establish themselves, usually with the proceeds of resources from stolen lands. Shifting jurisdiction back to Indigenous Peoples will carry costs that federal, provincial and territorial governments should bear.

Tens of thousands of us are raising our voices and calling on our governments to properly address the climate and biodiversity crises. We shouldn't leave advocacy to address the original injustice

of Canada to Indigenous people alone: our environmental activism can and should include bold calls to return land and decision-making rights to First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

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Photo: Treaty Alliance Against Tar Sands Expansion signing (Lasia Kretzel/News 1130).

TAKE ACTION

Returning land to Indigenous Nations requires legislation, jurisdictional change and funding from federal, provincial and territorial governments. Politicians that form these governments need to know there is public support for Land Back, and that we expect efforts to fight climate change and protect biodiversity to centre justice for First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples.

- ▶ Write to the prime minister, with a copy to your premier, and call on them to legislate and invest in solutions that return authority to Indigenous Peoples and honour self-determination from coast to coast to coast.



Photo: 2023 United for Old-growth Rally (Tim Matheson).

WildernessCommittee.org/SupportLandBack

YES!

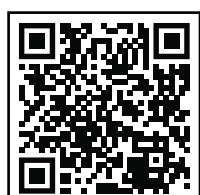
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Wilderness Committee, Vol. 42, No. 6, 2023.
Canadian Mail Product Sales Agreement No. 0900567.
Posted in Vancouver for free distribution. Printed in Canada on recycled newsprint with vegetable-based inks.
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Published by

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