THE ECOLOGICAL AND MORAL IMPERATIVE OF RETURNING LAND

Torrance Coste
National Campaign Director @TorranceCoste

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.

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.

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.

Protected areas often happen without consultation and at the expense of Indigenous communities. 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.

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

In the last decade, awareness of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (PCAs) has exploded. PCAs are lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge. 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.** While PCAs 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 in their claimed jurisdictions, Indigenous communities and their governments 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 PCAs.

**Note: This section has been shortened for brevity.

### CASE STUDY: GRASSY NARROWS FIGHT FOR PROTECTION

In 2018, Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Arisnhnaabek (Grassy Narrows First Nation) on Treaty 3 Territory in northwest Ontario declared their traditional land an IPA, banning industrial activity and outlining their vision for conservation. While the federal government recognized this PCA, 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.** 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.** 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 from their territory since 2008.** 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 heart of the boreal forest.**

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 reconciliation** and a liveable planet for future generations must support them in all ways possible.

### 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.** Indigenous scholar Sylvia McAdams defines it as the restoration of Indigenous livelihoods and respect for the land and the compensation for past wrongs.** 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: 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. 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 depletion of their forests and fisheries on their territory, the Nuchatlaht are seeking to regain title to Nootka to take back

"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

"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 Nation

Grand Rapids were then enshrined in legislation.

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 UNESCO World Heritage site, with the rare distinction of both cultural and natural significance. It stands as a model for returning land to Indigenous control.

CASE STUDY: PIMACHIOWIN AKI INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE OF LAND BACK

Eric Reder - Wilderness and Water Campaigner @EricReder

"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 Nation

"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

"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 Nation

Grand Rapids were then enshrined in legislation.

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 UNESCO World Heritage site, with the rare distinction of both cultural and natural significance. It stands as a model for returning land to Indigenous control.
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, log old-growth forests and industrial projects proven to harm wildlife. This gap 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. Like a lot of complex problems, it 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 Indigenous voices into our calls to action so that it’s not just biodiversity conservation or climate action that we are championing. We need to support the return of lands and waters to Indigenous Peoples, and honour self-determination from coast to coast.

Return 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.

TREAT ALLYSHIP
TAKE ACTION

Moving from big promises to big changes

WildernessCommittee.org/SupportLandBack

YES!

Here’s my gift to build partnerships for protection

Your gift today supports our work to align our campaigns with Indigenous efforts to reclaim and protect lands and waters across the country.

Enclosed: $35 $60 $150 Other $

NAME

PHONE

ADDRESS

PROVINCE

ZIP/CITY

POSTAL CODE

EMAIL

NAME THE ORGANIZATIONS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SUPPORT

YOUR MORTAL GIFT: $100  $150  $200  $250  $300  $350  $400  $450  $500

YOUR GIFT TO BUILD PARTNERSHIPS FOR PROTECTION

CREDITS

Wilderness Committee

Design: Faile, Toronto

Editorial: Shanna VanEck

Art Direction: Alex Hsuan Tsui

Wilderness Committee

10-4110 Grant Avenue

North Vancouver, British Columbia

V7J 1A2

Canadian Mail Product Sales Agreement No. 0900567

All rights reserved. Written material may be used without permission when credited. This publication is printed on recycled newsprint with vegetable-based inks.

References


“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.

Wilderness Committee

Editors: Shanna VanEck, Alex Hsuan Tsui

Art Direction: Alex Hsuan Tsui

Wilderness Committee

10-4110 Grant Avenue

North Vancouver, British Columbia

V7J 1A2

Canadian Mail Product Sales Agreement No. 0900567

All rights reserved. Written material may be used without permission when credited. This publication is printed on recycled newsprint with vegetable-based inks.