CLIMATE JUSTICE

What Does Tribal Land Stewardship Look Like?

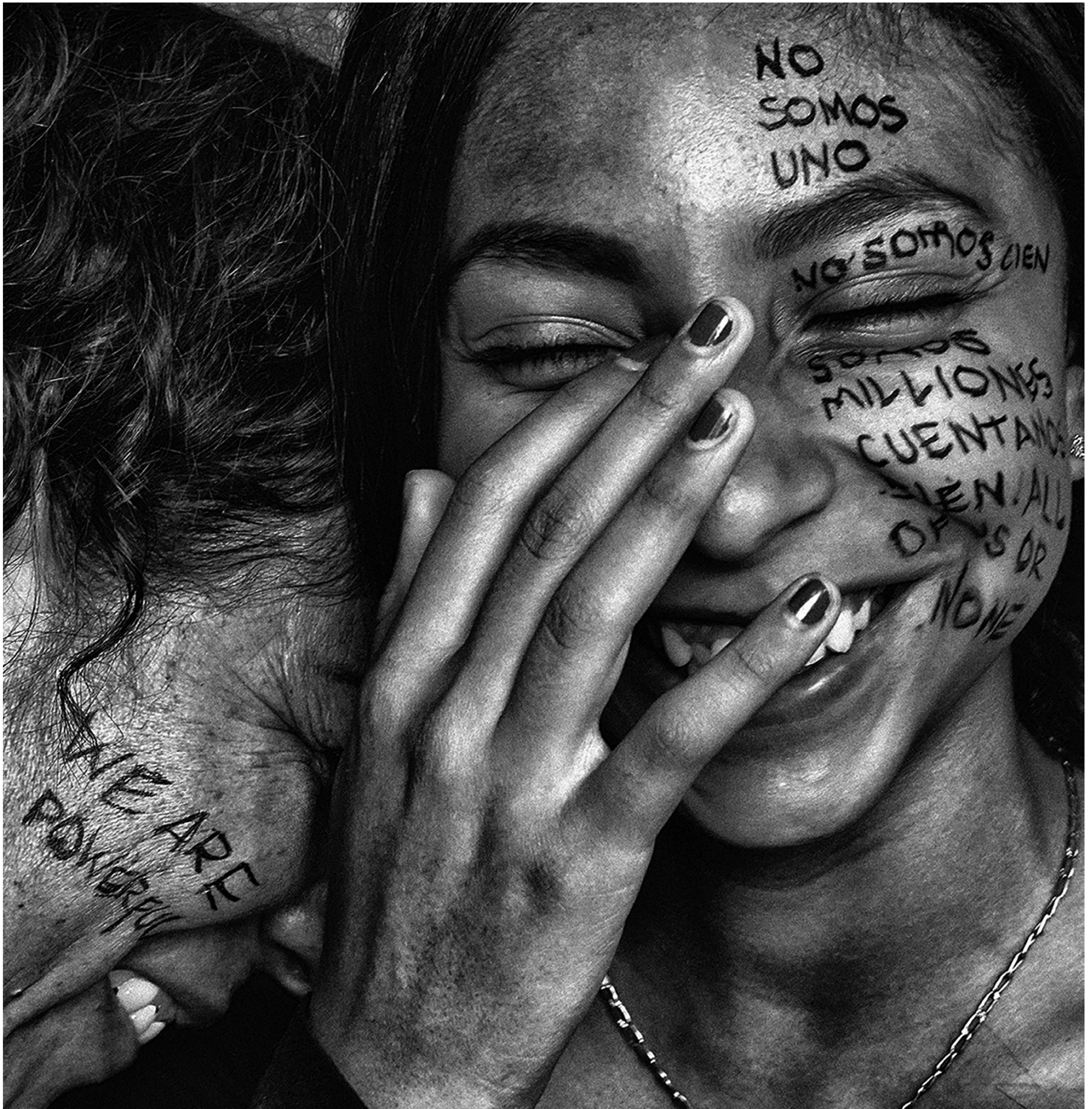
by Steve Dubb

This article was first published by NPQ *on May 1, 2022, and is republished here with minor alterations.*

> **The climate crisis is not only a product of greenhouse gas emissions . . . but also of an ideological shift that was imposed by colonization and capitalism to justify violation of sacred land-, water-, and airways—domination that taught Americans to speak of "resources" instead of "relatives."**
>
> —Ruth Miller, Meda Dewitt, and Margi Dashevsky[1]

To understand Native land stewardship, it is important to recognize that it occurs within a context of repairing the ravages of colonialism. A new report, *Models of Holistic Tribal Land Stewardship in the Northern Great Plains*, published by the First Nations Development Institute and authored by Mary Adelzadeh, examines these themes as it highlights efforts by four Native nations in Montana and South Dakota to restore stewardship principles to land management.[2]

"WE ARE POWERFUL" BY CHIP THOMAS/JETSONORAMA.NET



Raymond Foxworth of First Nations noted in *NPQ* that “Native people have long held a worldview that connects human and community health to the health of land and the environment. It shapes and perpetuates Native identities, cultures, and worldviews.” This worldview can be summarized as one that centers the notion of stewardship rather than resource extraction.

The report offers some lessons learned from a project, "Mapping Ecological Stewardship Opportunities," that was supported by Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies. The resources involved were modest ($240,000 total) but the ambition was large—namely, to assist Native nations to "regain control of their land and natural resources, revitalize traditional stewardship practices, and build sustainable stewardship initiatives that contribute to tribal economic and community development opportunities."[3]

The costs of resource extraction for Native American communities are hard to overstate. To take just one example, between 1944 and 1986, nearly 30 million tons of radioactive uranium ore were mined from Navajo lands, leading to elevated levels of birth defects, kidney failure, and cancer in Navajo communities.[4] Testifying to Congress in 2019, Navajo President Jonathan Nez noted that "prior to uranium mining, the Navajo people were virtually cancer free with the lowest lung cancer rate of all Native American nations.Today, cancer is the second leading cause of mortality among the Navajo people. Cancer rates doubled on the Navajo Nation from the 1970s to the 1990s."[5]

The climate crisis brings new pressures. As Christopher Flavelle and Kalen Goodluck of the *New York Times* remind readers, settler colonialism sought to confine Native communities to "marginal" lands. Today, these lands are often disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. As Flavelle and Goodluck detail, "In the Pacific Northwest, coastal erosion and storms are eating away at tribal land, forcing native communities to try to move inland. In the Southwest, severe drought means the Navajo Nation is running out of drinking water. At the edge of the Ozarks, heirloom crops are becoming harder to grow, threatening to disconnect the Cherokee from their heritage."[6]

There is a deep irony in this situation, as the climate emergency's effects fall on those least responsible for their occurrence. Indeed, the principles of resource stewardship long championed in many Native American communities are critical to restoring environmental balance.[7] For example, as fire archaeologist Hillary Renick has noted in *NPQ*, as mass wildfires fueled by the climate crisis become increasingly common, "there is widespread scientific acknowledgment that Indigenous fire ecology practices are both appropriate and environmentally necessary."[8] Still, she adds, "fire ecology efforts must deal with the legacy of a century of fire ecology mismanagement, a challenge that has been greatly exacerbated by climate change."[9]

Two years ago, Raymond Foxworth of First Nations noted in *NPQ* that "Native people have long held a worldview that connects human and community health to the health of land and the environment. It shapes and perpetuates Native identities, cultures, and worldviews."[10] This worldview can be summarized as one that centers the notion of stewardship rather than resource extraction.

OVERVIEW OF STEWARDSHIP CHALLENGES

Adelzadeh's report looks at four communities. The Lower Brule Sioux Nation of South Dakota is housed on 132,601 acres of land (over 200 square miles).[11] A key challenge for the Lower Brule Sioux is preserving native wildlife, such as the pronghorn antelope. A pilot program of coyote sterilization shows promising results. The tribal nation also aspires to implement what would be the first grasslands carbon sequestration project in the United States.

In North-Central Montana, the Chippewa Cree Nation, with 122,000 acres of land (over 190 square miles), has similar ambitions.[12] One of the tribal nation's goals is to develop "baseline maps to protect and restore sensitive areas and resources such as medicinal plants, riparian areas, waterways, and wildlife corridors."[13] The Chippewa Cree are also seeking to implement a forest carbon sequestration project.

The third community at Fort Belknap, also in North-Central Montana, has 650,000 acres of land (over 1,000 square miles). It is jointly governed by members of the Nakoda and Aaniiih nations, and includes a 22,000-acre (over 34,000 square miles) bison reserve, home to a herd of over 500 buffalo. In 2014, the tribe founded the Nakoda Aaniiih Economic Development Corporation (NAEDC), a Native-led nonprofit that supports tribal ecotourism, business development, and ecological preservation.[14]

The fourth community is the Crow Nation, with 2.2 million acres of land (over 3,400 square miles). The Crow are Montana's largest Native community. Like the Nakoda and Aaniiih, the Crow formed a nonprofit, known as Center Pole.

[The] principles of resource stewardship long championed in many Native American communities are critical to restoring environmental balance.

Founded in 1999 and similar in mission to NAEDC, the nonprofit supports ecotourism while also promoting "food sovereignty and ecological stewardship."[15]

THREE THEMES: HOLISTIC STEWARDSHIP, SOVEREIGNTY, AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

As the descriptions above make clear, the four communities in the study share some common challenges: all are small—enrolled tribal membership ranges from 4,354 for the Lower Brule Sioux to 14,343 for the Crow;[16] and each nation seeks to balance ecological and economic concerns, the latter of which should not be underestimated in these heavily rural communities. A Montana State study from 2019 estimated that the poverty rate statewide for Native communities exceeded 30 percent.[17]

In her report, Adelzadeh notes that "Western funding models tend to be linear and directed narrowly toward ecological endpoints of restoration."[18] The call for holistic models of stewardship is not just rhetorical; models that care for both land and people, she points out, "are more likely to be sustained and to achieve [their] goals over the long term."[19]

A second theme is the centrality of Indigenous sovereignty to stewardship. A sovereignty focus has many implications. One is control over data. Another facet is food sovereignty, including "reclaiming Native food traditions."[20] As Adelzadeh notes, Center Pole, the Crow economic development nonprofit, seeks to "restore traditional food systems by restoring Native grasslands and plants used for traditional foods and medicine."[21] A sovereignty lens is also critical to successful ecotourism development. Absent Indigenous ownership and control, Adelzadeh observes, ecotourism becomes just another mechanism for "the extraction of revenue from communities."[22] Avoiding this, she adds, "requires tribes to retain decision-making authority over their land and natural and cultural resources."[23]

A third theme is the need to invest in leadership, which requires a multigenerational approach that cultivates the wisdom and sustained involvement of elders while also focusing on developing the next generation of leaders. Both Center Pole and NAEDC understand this and place youth development at the center of their work. Stewardship, Adelzadeh emphasizes, "has always been a community activity, with the transfer of knowledge from elders to youth."[24]

THE PATH FORWARD

Adelzadeh concludes by noting that "tribes and Native-led organizations have demonstrated that they have the knowledge, commitment, and ingenuity to lead innovative and effective stewardship initiatives, but they lack adequate funding to fully realize the potential of these efforts."[25]

Perhaps the $20 billion in the American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) support for tribal nations can help boost these stewardship efforts.[26] A policy brief from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and the Native Nations Institute, however, cautions that distribution of ARPA funds favored "have" tribes (those with large gambling revenues, for example) over "have not" or "have less" tribes.[27] All four tribal nations cited here are in the poorly resourced category. Even so, a small portion of the funding they did receive—which ranged from $28.2 million for the Lower Brule Sioux to $74.5 million for the Crow—could boost some local efforts.[28]

As is often the case, a redirection in approach—and not just resources—is required. Too often, Adelzadeh cautions, "Western pedagogies of stewardship, typically channeled through agencies and universities . . . laud individuals as experts and knowledge holders, while greatly downplaying the importance and traditional roles of communities."[29] The solution, she contends, requires the opposite—namely, "active efforts rooted in local place-based knowledge" and Indigenous stewardship.[30]

NOTES

1. Ruth Miller, Meda Dewitt, and Margi Dashevsky, “Relatives, Not Resources: Applying an Alaska Native Lens to Climate Sovereignty, Economic Justice, and Healing,” *Nonprofit Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 40–48.
2. Mary Adelzadeh, *Models of Holistic Tribal Land Stewardship in the Northern Great Plains* (Longmont, CO: First Nations Development Institute, 2021).
3. Ibid., 5.
4. “Navajo Nation: Cleaning Up Abandoned Uranium Mines: Abandoned Mines Cleanup,” United States Environmental Protection Agency, last modified June 8, 2022, epa.gov/navajo-nation-uranium-cleanup/abandoned-mines-cleanup.
5. Jonathan Nez and Myron Lizer, “Written Statement of the Navajo Nation Prepared for the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources On Uranium Mining: Contamination and Criticality and H.R. 3405, the Uranium Classification Act of 2019,” The Navajo Nation, July 12, 2019.
6. Christopher Flavelle and Kalen Goodluck, “Dispossessed, Again: Climate Change Hits Native Americans Especially Hard,” *New York Times*, last modified October 28, 2021, nytimes.com/2021/06/27/climate/climate-Native-Americans.html.
7. Native Peoples Action, “An Indigenous Vision for Our Collective Future: Becoming Earth’s Stewards Again” *Nonprofit Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 38–48.
8. Hillary Renick, “Fire, Forests, and Our Lands: An Indigenous Ecological Perspective,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, March 16, 2020, nonprofitquarterly.org/fire-forests-and-our-lands-an-indigenous-ecological-perspective/.
9. Ibid.
10. Raymond Foxworth, “Protecting the Earth, Protecting Ourselves: Stories from Native America,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, March 9, 2020, nonprofitquarterly.org/protecting-the-earth-protecting-ourselves-stories-from-native-america/.
11. Adelzadeh, *Models of Holistic Tribal Land Stewardship in the Northern Great Plains*, 7.
12. “Chippewa Cree Tribe: Annishinabe Ne-I-Yah-Wahk, Rocky Boys,” Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs, accessed August 8, 2022, tribalnations.mt.gov/chippewacree.
13. Adelzadeh, *Models of Holistic Tribal Land Stewardship in the Northern Great Plains*, 8.
14. Ibid., 10. And see “Welcome to Fort Belknap Indian Community: Home of the Nakoda and Aaniiih Nations,” Fort Belknap Indian Community, accessed August 8, 2022, ftbelknap.org/history; and “Our Programs,” Nakoda Aaniiih Economic Development Corporation, accessed August 8, 2022, fortbelknapcedc.org/.
15. See “About Us,” The Center Pole, accessed August 8, 2022, thecenterpole.org/about-us.
16. Eric C. Henson et al., “Executive Summary: Assessing the U.S. Treasury Department’s Allocations of Funding for Tribal Governments under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021,” Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and Native Nations Institute, November 3, 2021.
17. *Fort Belknap Reservation: Montana Poverty Report Card* (Bozeman, MT: Montana State University Extension, September 2019).
18. Adelzadeh, *Models of Holistic Tribal Land Stewardship in the Northern Great Plains*, 13.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 15.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 16
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 21.
25. Ibid., 22.

26. Sofia Jarrin, "Indian Country Begins to Witness Real Signs of Justice," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, March 17, 2021, nonprofitquarterly.org/indian-country-begins-to-witness-real-signs-of-justice/.

27. Eric C. Henson et al., *Assessing the U.S. Treasury Department's Allocations of Funding for Tribal Governments under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021*, Policy Brief No. 7 (Cambridge, MA and Tucson, AZ: Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and Native Nations Institute, November 3, 2021).

28. *Fort Belknap Reservation: Montana Poverty Report Card*.

29. Adelzadeh, *Models of Holistic Tribal Land Stewardship in the Northern Great Plains*, 21.

30. Ibid.

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