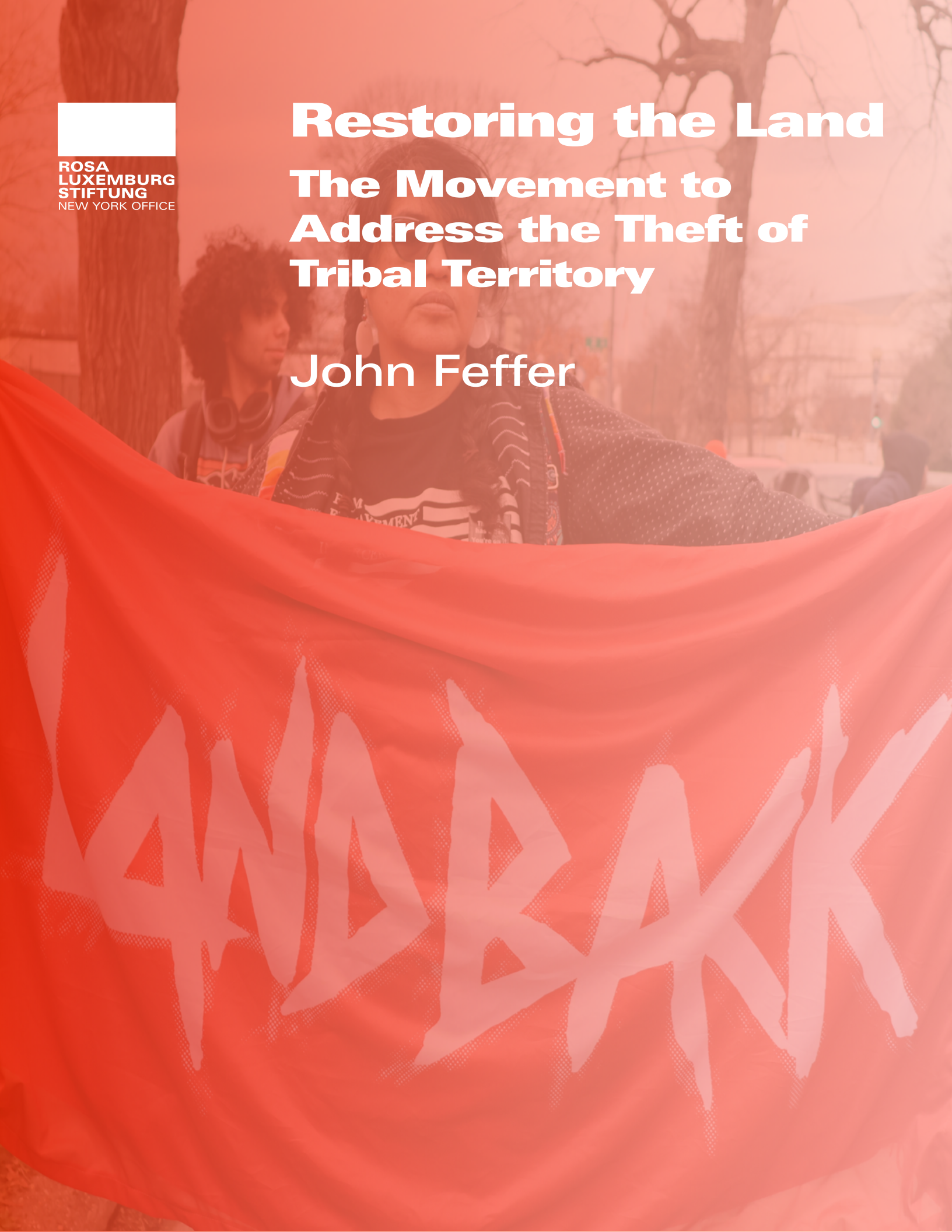

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Restoring the Land

The Movement to Address the Theft of Tribal Territory

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By John Feffer

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In the largest single land-back deal in California history, the Yurok Tribe reclaimed 73 square miles of ancestral territory on the eastern side of the lower Klamath River in June 2025. The size of the land transfer was certainly important for it doubled the tribe's holdings. But more important perhaps was the character of the land. At a time when tribes are "gifted" land that has been degraded by overgrazing or mining, the Yurok parcel contained the prizes of a salmon sanctuary and a redwood forest.

The return of this vitally important land was made possible by a tribal struggle further upstream on the Klamath River. For two decades, the Yurok, Karuk, Hoopa and other tribes had been fighting to remove four dams that were preventing salmon and trout from reaching their upstream spawning grounds. In 2024, thanks to litigation, collaboration between tribes and environmental NGOs, and the declining economic viability of the hydroelectric facilities themselves, the removal of the three remaining dams finally took place. It was a victory for the tribes involved as well as for the biodiversity of the region.

This rewinding of history—the removal of twentieth-century dams, the return of lands stolen in the nineteenth century—comes with some asterisks. The land was not given back directly to the Yurok. Rather, the Western Rivers Conservancy—an NGO with the motto of "Sometimes to save a river, you have to buy it"—arranged the purchase of the land with $56 million in private capital, low-interest loans, tax credits, carbon credit sales, and $8 million in public grants. It then delivered the land into Yurok hands. Nor was the land transfer accompanied by an apology from the timber companies, though California Governor Gavin Newsome did apologize in 2019 "on behalf of the citizens of the State of California to all California Native Americans for the many instances of violence, maltreatment and neglect California inflicted on tribes."

The Klamath River example showcases the challenges facing the movement to reclaim and repair the land taken from Native Americans across three centuries. On the one hand, the Yurok transfer expands tribal stewardship over stolen territory and opens an opportunity to restore land that had been degraded by unsustainable economic development. On the other hand, the transfer skirts the problematic history by making it a commercial transaction, and it avoids acknowledgement of wrongs much less an apology for that past.

The Klamath River successes also come at a time of federal reversals by the Trump administration on energy, sovereignty, and land stewardship.

The Trump administration's "reality is a scarcity model," observes Morning Star Gali, a member of the Ajumawi band Pit River Tribe and the founding director of Indigenous Justice. "There's a lot of very real fear, and fearmongering. But I look at the beginning of this year when the Klamath River dams were brought down. Thirty years ago, my parents were involved in the fishing wars around there. Also, my very close friends. They say that they were laughed out of the room and told that that would never happen. We have to hope that things will get better."

The Land Back Movement

"At the base of every great fortune," goes the famous adage, "there is a great crime." The United States, the wealthiest country in the history of the world, also owes its fortune to a great crime—the theft of land and resources from the original inhabitants. According to a Historic Economic Loss Assessment that the Colorado organization People of the Sacred Land conducted, the value of dispossessed land in the state of Colorado alone is over $1 trillion, with another half a trillion dollars in minerals extracted. The economic value of all the buffalo exterminated on the Great Plains amounts to almost $50 billion.

The "land back" movement has gathered momentum in recent years, though not everyone in the movement is comfortable with that label. "I had non-Indian

friends who commented that it made them nervous because they thought somebody was going to come and take their home," says Rick Williams, who is Oglala Lakota/Cheyenne and founder of the People of the Sacred Land. "So, I thought, well, what is this really about? Is it about taking private land? No, for me and many of the people that I interact with, it's about restoration. It's about restoring our homeland."

"We are not trying to squash non-Indigenous connections to land," adds Jason Brough, an anthropology graduate student and Northwestern Band of Shoshone Nation Tribal Member. "Land Back does not necessarily mean you will lose access or connections to places that are important to individuals, families, or communities, only that the stewardship of those lands is in Indigenous hands. And we are open to hearing from or working with our non-Indigenous kin in those decision-making processes."

This effort to restore a homeland is not a single initiative. In its bid to rectify historic injustice, the movement is a mosaic of efforts at the local, state, and national level, involving community struggles, private donations, commercial transactions, state programs, and federal initiatives. "There isn't a national strategy on land back," notes Judith LeBlanc, an enrolled member of the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma and executive director of Native Organizers Alliance. "It's very local, it's very tribally driven." In addition to a focus on territory, the movement encompasses questions of sovereignty, environmental sustainability, cultural practices, educational opportunities, and acknowledgements of past wrongdoing.

Recent years have seen many victories for the land back movement. Between 2003 and 2023, according to one study, tribes recovered about 420,000 acres in 100 cases involving over 70 federally recognized tribes. In 2024, in its first ever transfer, the California government gave back the 40-acre Mount Whitney Fish Hatchery to the Fort Independence Indian Community of Paiute Indians. In addition to the Yurok initiative, the state transferred over 2,800 acres of ancestral land connected to the Klamath River dam removals to the Shasta Indian Nation. At the beginning of 2025, 2,000 acres in southern Oregon were returned to the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. At roughly the same time, the Hassanamisco Nipmuc Band received 500 acres of forest land in western Massachusetts. In June, the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas regained control of land in Illinois, including a state park, from where it had been ejected in the nineteenth century.

Another important land-related development has strengthened tribal sovereignty. As part of a historic legal settlement involving the federal government and tribal entities, the Land Buy-Back Program sought to reunite historic Native territory fragmented by the 1887 General Allotment Act. Between 2012 and 2024, "nearly 3 million acres in 15 states were consolidated and restored

to Tribal trust ownership and $1.69 billion was paid to more than 123,000 interested individuals."

This successful trajectory now comes up against a federal administration that is openly hostile to Native American concerns. The tone was set in Trump's first term when he pursued a maximalist approach to drilling. The blueprint for his second term, Project 2025, again prioritized fossil fuel extraction in addition to dismissing the importance of tribal input and treating "tribal sovereignty as something the government can grant or revoke rather than a permanent right guaranteed by treaties and the Constitution."

Trump's second term has accelerated this reversal. Indian Country has suffered disproportionately from the sharp reductions in federal spending on social programs. It has had to endure the environmental consequences of the Trump administration's fast-tracking of energy projects like the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines. The administration's rush to open up federal lands to energy and mineral exploitation—whether the Bear Ears National Monument in Utah, the 21 lease sales covering most of the waters off of Alaska, or the potential reversal of the ban on mining around Chaco Canyon in New Mexico—also directly challenges tribal sovereignty.

Still, like the reparations movement in the African-American community, the land-back movement is currently making progress at a state and local level, a powerful example of resistance and resilience at a time of retrenchment.

Treaty Rights

In 1794, President George Washington sent Postmaster General Timothy Pickering to negotiate a treaty with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy that recognized the sovereignty of the six Iroquois-speaking tribes, promised an annual payment of $4,500 in goods, and, importantly, restored a million acres of land to the Seneca that had been ceded in a treaty a decade earlier. This effort to repair relations between a powerful sovereign nation and the U.S. government is a rare early example of a land-back movement based on a measure of mutual respect and the impulse to right a wrong.

It's also the exception that proves an unfortunate rule. The history of relations prior to the creation of the United States is replete with examples of colonial forces seizing land and warring with various tribal entities. The history after the Revolutionary War is characterized by broken treaties alongside genocidal policies of expulsion, extermination, and assimilation. From the first official treaty with the Lenape (Delaware) in 1778 to the declaration in 1871 that denied recognition of Indian tribes as sovereign powers, the U.S. government negotiated almost 370 treaties. Although honored for the most part in the breach, these treaties nevertheless provided a legal basis for future struggles over

stolen territory, with tribes pointing to provisions in the original documents to buttress their cases in modern court proceedings.

In the General Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the Dawes Act, the U.S. government shifted negotiations with Native Americans to an individual basis. The government attempted to dissolve reservations and dismember tribes in an effort to turn Native Americans into individual farmers. As with an early experiment of the Andrew Jackson administration, this privatization of tribal lands was purported to protect tribal members from a fresh round of land grabs. Since much of the privatized land was unsuitable for farming, the Act ended up with non-Indians expropriating land by other means. Between 1887 and 1934, the landholdings of Native Americans dropped from 138 million acres to a mere 47 million acres.

It wasn't until 1946 that the U.S. government began to reevaluate its misappropriation of Native American lands. The Indian Claims Commission, which lasted until 1978, handled hundreds of land claims, disbursing about $818 million in nearly 550 cases (the resolution of another 10 cases through 1994 brought the total to $1.3 billion). It was a woefully insufficient amount of money given the magnitude of the crime.

Land claims in Alaska were handled differently given the absence of treaties and reservations. In 1971, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) divided land into three categories: federal, state, and Native. It allotted 45 million acres of land to Alaska Natives to be divided among 200 village corporations and 12 regional corporations. Unlike the General Allotment Act, ANCSA respected tribal entities; but it also treated these entities like corporations, with individuals acting as shareholders. The political structure of Alaskan communities thus became a complex of three overlapping jurisdictions: corporate, tribal, and municipal.

Three key legal challenges have also informed land-back struggles. The first, from 1980, led to a monetary judgement that remains in trust, unclaimed. The second, from 1996, produced a sizable settlement that has gone some way toward reversing the General Allotment Act of 1887. The third, in 2000, resulted in the largest return of tribal jurisdiction in modern American history.

In 1980, in one of the Indian Claims Commission cases, the Supreme Court upheld a $105 million compensation for eight Sioux tribes ——for the U.S. government's unconstitutional seizure of the Black Hills in South Dakota in 1877. One tribe, the Oglala Sioux, had previously launched a lawsuit with a much larger demand: the land back, $10 billion in compensation, and $1 billion in damages. But the courts ruled that the Indian Claims Commission had resolved all such claims, and the Supreme Court upheld that verdict as well. The Sioux tribes ultimately rejected the $105 million compensation, and the money went into a trust that is now worth an estimated $1 billion. The Sioux continue to insist that the "Black Hills are not for sale."

In the second case, one of the largest class-action suits against the U.S. government, the treasurer of the Blackfeet Confederacy, Elaine Cobell, accused federal authorities of mismanaging trust accounts that dated back to the land privatized in 1877. The U.S. government had leased Indian-owned land to oil, mineral, and timber interests in what amounted to yet another wave of theft. Congress passed the Claims Resolution Act of 2010 that provided a $3.4 billion compensation package, $1.5 billion going to claimants and $1.9 billion going for government repurchase of individual Indian properties to return to tribal ownership. This effective reversal of the General Allotment Act resulted in the return of nearly 3 million acres to tribal authority.

"The Land Buy-Back Program's progress puts the power back in the hands of Tribal communities to determine how their lands are used — from conservation to economic development projects," announced Interior Secretary Deb Haaland in 2023. The announcement was important not only for its content but for who was issuing the statement. In 2021, in two historic firsts, Haaland became the first Native American interior secretary and the first cabinet secretary.

Just before Haaland's appointment, in the summer of 2020, the Supreme Court, by a slim majority, ruled that an 1866 treaty between the Muscogee Creek Nation and the United States still held. This meant that nearly one-half of Oklahoma was under the jurisdiction of Indian Country, including territory that had not previously been reservation land. This was not "land back" per se but rather an important affirmation of tribal sovereignty and thus a legal precedent that can be used in other cases involving treaty rights.

Markets and Charity

In 1863, responding to pressure from Mormon settlers encroaching on tribal lands, the U.S. army attacked the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone, killing between 350 and 500 men, women, and children in the Bear River Massacre in present-day southern Idaho. Shortly after, the tribe signed the Treaty of Box Elder, which provided the tribe with a $5,000 annuity and "friendly and amicable relations" with the government of Abraham Lincoln. The government, meanwhile, took two-thirds of the tribe's hunting grounds.

"The Courts ruled the Treaty of Box Elder as a Treaty of Peace and Friendship and that we did not cede our lands, but the Courts have also ruled the matter was closed during the Indian Claims Settlement Act," explains Jason Brough. "We had had plans to try to get back that land for many, many years. There were talks in the 1990s of the federal government actually stepping in and maybe purchasing it for us. But those talks fell through when, from my understanding, some of the local landowners were opposed and felt like we were doing the same thing that they did to us."

By 2018, "some of the younger generations acquired these properties and were more open to the idea that these lands needed to be returned, though they wanted to be fairly compensated," Brough recalls. That year, the tribe was finally able to buy 350 acres around the massacre site.

The deal restored land to tribal authority. But it was a commercial transaction, not a compensation for past wrongs. So, there was no official apology attached to it. And the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone had to pay tax on the transfer. "The land was farmed, it had cattle grazing on it," Brough continues. "Railroad, roads, canals dug through there: it was very disrespectful. They would never do that to Arlington Cemetery, right?" And then there have been costs of restoration. The tribe is investing a lot of time and effort into restoring the wetlands, removing invasives, and planting 300,000 native trees and shrubs.

"There's always an argument that buying back land that was stolen from us isn't necessarily 'land back,'" Brough admits. "But the other argument is: by any peaceable means available to you. If that means applying for federal dollars to get that land, then that's okay, too."

The Yurok land purchase involved public funds along with private capital, loans, and even the sale of carbon credits. This last element generates some controversy as well, given opposition in some quarters to carbon markets. In Maine, tribal authorities "keep buying more land with their carbon credits," points out Judy Dow, an Abenaki educator and executive director of Gedakina. "They get more land so that they can hunt and gather. The trees just sit there, because they can't cut the trees down, which is fine to a certain extent. But you're allowing somebody else to pollute someplace else."

As initially with the property around the Bear River Massacre, current owners are often reluctant to sell, much less give back land to the original owners.

"We don't have a land base in Ajumawi territory, which is 3.5 million acres," Morning Star Gali reports from northeastern California. "Cattle ranchers have been able to monetize off of our tribe in terms of having 4,000-acre cattle ranches worth millions of dollars where my great-grandfather, who worked as a blacksmith, had a one-room home and toolshed." The 2,800-acre Carroll Ranch, in the middle of this territory, is now on the market for $14 million. "The rancher family will never return the land to the tribe, won't grant parcels, won't even provide access through allotment roads," she continues. "The family passes the land back and forth between trusts."

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the individuals, families, and corporations that have donated land back to tribes. In Western Massachusetts, for instance, the lumber company W. D. Cowls transferred 500 acres of forest to the Hassanamisco Nipmuc Band. The company has been in operation since the mid-eighteenth century. "This land belongs in the care of the Hassanamisco

Nipmuc Band, whose stewardship practices are rooted in respect for the Earth," the ninth-generation president of W.D. Cowls said. "I am honored to play a small role in this historic moment."

In some cases, valuable land is gifted back to tribes. But in other cases it's not much of a gift. "What does it mean when the land returned or offered is contaminated or it's been burnt through wildfires?" Morning Star Gali asks. "Many times, tribes can't receive returned land because of additional property taxes."

"With the Western Shoshone, the strip-mining companies gave back several hundred acres of land, and it was great that they did that," Jason Brough reports. "But there's some work that needs to be done there. It'd be nice not to get back the tailing ponds."

Sometimes, tribes don't have the capacity to accept the land. "The Spokane tribe was offered 3,000 acres on the river land from this person who was trying to give back land they'd inherited," explains Jacob Johns, a Hopi and Akimel O'odham environmental defender living in Spokane. "But the infrastructure was not in place for the tribe to be able to accept this massive tract of land, because then they would have to manage it. They had to actually turn down the land. And sometimes state or local governments have land that isn't developable and they want to get rid of it, so they say, 'let's just give it back to the Indians.'"

As in African American communities, other options are being explored to raise money to fund restoration projects. The Sogorea Te' Land Trust has promoted a voluntary tax for those living in East Bay communities like Berkeley and Oakland where the Ohlone tribe once flourished. Residents of the Humboldt Bay region can similarly pay a voluntary tax to the Wiyot people. The Colorado-based People of the Sacred Land has proposed a reparation fee on all real estate deals in the state.

For more than two decades, tribes have also used casino profits to purchase ancestral lands. But the money that flows through the casinos on tribal land has by no means closed the wealth gap whereby Native Americans in 2000 possessed only eight cents for every dollar of wealth in white American households, a gap that has only increased over the last 20 years.

The Case of Alaska

In 2022, Alaska decided to sell 35,000 acres of land south of Fairbanks to encourage farming to ease the state's food scarcity. However, many Native peoples were already using the land for subsistence.

"Some community members from the village of Nenana, which was an affected village, came to us and said they wanted to organize a campaign against this land sale," reports Michaela Stith, climate justice director at Native Movement. "Of course, it didn't stop the land sale."

So, activists pivoted. They decided to bid for parcels instead.

"It was a blind auction, so no one knew how much people were bidding," Stith continues. "If you had the top bid for each parcel, you could own that parcel. It was a crazy experiment, because a lot of that land was not even good agricultural land. It was more because the state of Alaska was trying to make income. But we ended up raising enough money to make a bid on a few parcels."

Those bids won two plots. Eva Dawn Burk, a Native Alaskan leader in food sovereignty from Nenana, is excited about the 42 acres of which she and her colleagues are now stewards. They're surveying the land to see the best places to clear for organic farming of climate-appropriate crops like root vegetables. They're planning a commercial smokehouse for fish, which will also produce compost for the soil, and a Land Center.

"The Land Center is going to have hide tanning. and tool-making from the different animals that we are going to process," Burk reports. "If we have sheep, we'll spin the wool and dye it. We're mapping our lands so that we can put in wild berries and wild plants that will be for teas and medicines, but also for food."

Burk sees the work on the land as part of reducing dependence on imported food and reviving cultural traditions. "It might look like just 42 acres on a map, like this little drop in the bucket," Burk continues. "But returning land back is a way for Native people to build community, to care for the land in this bigger way that will have a much larger impact on the overall ecosystem."

Native lands are held by 12 regional corporations and a number of village corporations. They share sovereignty with tribal authorities and municipal structures. "It's a very complex governance system, and it causes a lot of that sort of divide and conquer," Stith explains. "Let's say an oil company wants to run a pipeline through a particular stretch of land—land not held by either the state or private individuals but governed by these three entities of corporation, tribal council, and municipality—the oil company could provide different carrots and sticks according to whatever mix it thought would be most successful in providing payoffs or political favors."

Tribal corporations, because of market pressures, often face difficult decisions. "A lot of these corporations were losing money, because they're not just going to cut down trees in a sacred site," Stith continues, "so they would often have to sell off their land to stay afloat."

The Trump administration's renewed emphasis on drilling—for instance, reopening more than 1.5 million across of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to oil and gas leases—has accentuated divisions within tribal communities and their respective corporations. "Leaders in Indigenous Gwich'in communities near the refuge consider the coastal plain sacred, noting its importance to a caribou herd they rely upon, and they oppose drilling there,"

according to NPR. "Leaders of Kaktovik, an Iñupiaq community within the refuge, support drilling and consider responsible oil development to be key to their region's economic well-being."

But corporate interest in drilling in the ANWR is minimal, with no bids offered at an auction for leases in early 2025 because extraction is not economically viable given the lack of financing and the potential harm to animals and the environment. "Putting an oilfield out there is not taking care of the land or the animals," says Robert Thompson, an Inupiaq activist from Kaktovik. "I don't think anyone here is going to say we should throw our culture away and be billionaires." Climate change has already led to a drastic decline in the number of polar bears, caribou, and Dall sheep. Thompson is worried that the Trump administration, in its eagerness to promote drilling, will just give away the leases, regardless of the environmental consequences.

"Trump said he could kill someone and get away with it," Thompson says. "Trump thinks he could kill all the animals and get away with it."

Sovereignty and Control

In a much-cited 2021 article in The Atlantic, novelist and essayist David Treuer argued in favor of a huge land-back deal involving U.S. national parks.

"As parks were being created, over 87 million acres of parkland were being set aside for Americans, Native Americans were being deprived of and we lost control of over 90 million acres," he explained. "So, I think it's high time that the United States did the right thing and returned land to Native tribes. And we would manage it on behalf of all Americans."

By 2024, the National Park Service had 109 co-stewardship agreements with tribal authorities. Although this is by no means anything close to co-ownership, much less a transfer of full management to First Nations, it represents a deepening of relationships. Along with the other co-management agreements signed with other federal agencies, these accords are important for recognizing tribal sovereignty, acknowledging tribal expertise, and establishing dispute resolution mechanisms.

"The superintendent of Pipestone National Park is very much a supporter of enhancing and developing the relationship with the Yankton Tribe on that land," notes Judith LeBlanc. The success and even the very existence of these co-stewardship agreements "depend on the superintendents."

"I wouldn't mind having some of the federal lands around my community back," says Jason Brough. "But I think there's also some fear that returning lands to Indigenous communities would restrict access, that all of a sudden, we're going to bar everybody or charge outrageous fees to get into these places. But, hey, we've had that done to us. We're not really apt to do it to other people, right?"

Buried in a provision of a nearly $1 billion infrastructure bond for Denver that passed in 2025 is a $20 million allocation for an American Indian Cultural Embassy. In addition to promoting government-to-government relations, the embassy will welcome the many peoples forced from the area—like the Cheyenne and Arapaho—to return to their homelands.

Education

The establishment of land-grant universities in the United States was another opportunity to steal land from Native Americans. In 1862, the Morrill Act created these state educational institutions with over 10 million acres taken from 250 tribes. Some money changed hands—around $400,000—but more than one-quarter of the territory was taken without payment. Nearly half a billion dollars (in 2020 dollars) was raised for the endowments of these 52 institutions.

It wasn't just higher education. As western states entered the Union, they established "school land trusts" to establish public schools with at least 8 million acres taken from 123 tribal communities. When Colorado became a state in 1876, it received nearly 4 million acres of land in this process. "A lot of the land is still in the possession of the state of Colorado," reports Rick Williams. "Last year, that fund produced $150 million for the schools across the state. From 1876 to the present, not a dime of that money has been used to help our students get an education."

In the last few years, schools have become increasingly involved in the restoration process. In some cases, that has meant giving land back directly, as in the case of the transfer of the Yale Union art and education center in 2020 to the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation. In rare cases, institutions have provided full tuition waivers for Native Americans, as in the cases of the University of California system and the University of Arizona. Other institutions have limited their redress to more symbolic acts, like land acknowledgments and studies. The federal government, through its Buy-Back Program, also provided $60 million to the Cobell Education Scholarship Fund, which has awarded more than 12,000 scholarships.

Especially since the groundbreaking research on the Morrill Act in 2020, academics and students have been pushing universities to do more. Following recommendations by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and others, schools are revising their curricula to incorporate Native history and perspectives. The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian has been training educators since 2018 to teach Native American history. In Illinois, a new law requires social studies departments to include Native American history in their curricula, beginning in 2024. Native American studies programs, since their start in 1969, have been gathering steam, with Hawai'i leading the way in conferring degrees.

Educational institutions and museums have a long way to go, however, including their approach to sacred objects. "There have been 20 years of protests at UC Berkeley for repatriation of sacred objects," reports Morning Star Gali. "The Anthropology department was founded by bulldozing shell mounds in Berkeley and levelling and using the bones of ancestors to line and pave the roads of Berkeley. They took skeletal remains to house in their collections. There's still a lot of arrogance in their attitudes that native peoples are just there to be studied."

Environment

"Restoring" land has two principal meanings—returning the land to its previous stewards and restoring the quality of the land from an environmental point of view. "Land-back work, restoring our right relationship with land and natural resources, has to do with managing that land, caretaking that land, being good stewards," Judith LeBlanc points out.

Rick Williams sees buffalo as essential to this restoration of land. The slaughter of the buffalo was a key part of removing Native Americans from large swathes of the land west of the Mississippi. Bringing back the buffalo has more than just symbolic value.

"You think about the breadbasket of America—Nebraska, Kansas, that whole central area," he says. "The reason it's prime land for agricultural development is because the buffalo were there for thousands of years. This land as fertile and productive is almost coming to an end: less and less production, more and more fertilizer being used. They're destroying the land, and it may never come back. Unless there's buffalo on it."

In 2020, the federal government passed management of 18,000 acres of land in Montana to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Inside that tract is a bison range. "When our Indigenous ancestors lived on this land alongside the plethora of animals," Interior Secretary Haaland explained at the celebration of the handover, "they each respected their place and the balance of nature."

"Indigenous peoples protect 80 percent of the world's biodiversity despite being 5 percent of the world's population," Michaela Stith points out. "Often, Indigenous-managed lands are more biodiverse than federal lands."

Climate change and the reduction of biodiversity thus pose specific challenges to Native Americans. "We are sovereign nations," notes Judith LeBlanc. "So, especially in the last 15 years, tribal nations have been leading and initiating many of the key climate struggles because of our legal standing." In the United States, for instance, the Standing Rock Sioux led the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, arguing that the project violated the Fort Laramie Treaty which protected the "the undisturbed use and occupation" of nearby

reservation lands (and which was also the subject of the lawsuits around the Black Hills in the 1980s).

The struggles over pipelines and climate questions have forged alliances between tribes and their non-Native allies, including some ranchers and farmers who have been just as incensed by corporate actions and federal policies. "Land back is a movement that cannot be just a Native movement," Judith LeBlanc says. "Of necessity, it has to include strong alliances with a broad political spectrum of people who have a relationship to land and water that is not determined by who they vote for."

This movement has been gathering strength over the last decade at all levels of U.S. society. In the last year, the federal government has lamentably attempted to reverse that trend. But Rick Williams takes the long view.

"There was a time when it was questionable whether our people were even going to survive," he says. "In 1900, there were only 250,000 American Indians left in North America, and we were expected to become extinct by 1913. But we've continued to survive. We've continued to grow. And have opportunities." Today, there's somewhere between 3.1 million and 8.7 million Native Americans, a more than tenfold increase.

"When you drop a ball, is that ball going to bounce or is it just going to go thud?" he continues. "We are anticipating that the ball's going to bounce—and we're going to see even greater opportunities post-Trump."

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