



STEWARDS OF OUR EARTH All of God's Creation

Social Justice Committee, Holy Cross Parish, Mt. Airy, January 15, 2023

Indigenous Lands in Indigenous Hands - Part 1

“In the beginning, a woman fell from the sky, clutching seeds and fruits. The animals helped her find safety on the back of a turtle and brought her mud, from which she grew the seeds and fruits into a wilderness. In these moments together, the animals and Skywoman created Turtle Island, later named North America by European colonists.

This creation story, shared among many tribes in the Great Lakes region, as told by Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, reflects the relationship Native tribes have shared with the land for countless generations—and one that was stolen from millions of people when colonists crossed the ocean and forcibly removed Native tribes from their lands. And while returning land back to Native peoples is a moral imperative, there are economic and environmental benefits that would come with doing the right thing.

Today, that movement is called **Land Back**, and is about putting Indigenous lands in Indigenous hands. Krystal Two Bulls (Oglala Lakota, Northern Cheyenne), the director of NDN Collective's Land Back campaign, says that reclaiming land is part of a bigger movement. **‘It’s the reclamation of our kinship systems, our governance systems, our ceremony and spirituality, our language, our culture, our food systems, our housing, our health care...those are all based on our relationship to the land. The land provides for us and is a life source for us.’...**

Helen Ding, a senior economist at World Resources Institute, says that the biggest barrier to securing Indigenous land rights comes down to economic opportunity costs on the land. If a nation deems that oil, forestry, or gold on the land is more valuable than treaties, then they likely won't honor land rights....

Settler colonialism has resulted in genocide, poverty, addiction, and much more harm to Native nations, which have the highest poverty rate among minorities according to Census data. **Two Bulls states that the root of their ills comes from land theft; therefore, the solution is giving land back.**

Across Turtle Island, Indigenous tribes are finding ways to return home. In 2020, the Esselen Tribe was returned nearly 1,200 acres of their ancestral lands near Big Sur, California, after 250 years. In late 2021, the Squaxin Island Tribe was gifted over a thousand acres of land near the southern Puget Sound in Washington. In April 2022, 465 acres in the Chesapeake Bay area was donated to the Rappahannock Tribe.”

(Mary Meade, *Native Land in Native Hands: Why the Land Back Movement Makes Economic Sense*, Green American Magazine Issue Divided, We Fall)

“Last month, the Biden administration released **guidance for federal agencies to consider and include Indigenous knowledge in federal research, policies, management, and decision-making. But it does not require federal agencies to act.** Instead, it has made suggestions including to ‘consider’ co-stewardship of federal lands and waters with Tribes.... We need President Biden and his administration to do more to keep their promises about respecting and fulfilling treaty rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. [Please send a message to President Biden to act now.](#) (Judith Le Blanc, *Native Organizers Alliance Action Fund*, 1/4/23)