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Land Back: A Examination of Colonialism and Indigenous Inclusion in Environmental Activism

Land Back is a movement that has existed for generations. Though it is a recent term, it has managed to fight for its place in the discussion of environmental activism. It's an important branch of environmental justice with goals to improve conditions by returning land to Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island as well as other places on Earth. There are benefits that do come with this movement and the results that it aims for. Despite this, there are also misunderstandings of what Land Back means and what it stands for. Oftentimes, it is mistaken as an aggressive movement that aims to displace the non-indigenous populations of North America. This is not the case, however. Overall, Land Back is a push for Indigenous sovereignty over the land in order to improve the existing conditions of the Earth and the environment. It is a political movement that aims to fight against Western perceptions of land ownership, the effects of white supremacy, and improve the conditions of the environment.

Land Back (or #LandBack) is defined by the NDN Collective as “organizing and sacrifice to get Indigenous Lands back into Indigenous hands” (LANDBACK). Though it is more complex and in-depth, this meaning has been created to condense the overall goals of the movement. Its goals are to fight against the effects of colonialism and protect the environment by returning sovereignty to indigenous peoples of the Americas. The manifesto for Land Back,

which is easily accessible to the public, states that it seeks a “future where Black reparations and Indigenous LANDBACK co-exist. Where BIPOC collective liberation is at the core”

(LANDBACK). This is a crucial part to understanding what Land Back stands for and is because colonialism and its effects are still visible today



Willi White

There are many misconceptions about what Land Back is. These are spread from both a genuine lack of knowledge on the subject, but also by those who are against land back due to Western perceptions of sovereignty over land. Nickita Longman, a community organizer from George Gordon First Nation states that “Any time an Indigenous person or nation has pushed back against the oppressive state, they are exercising some form of landback” (qtd. In Thompson). Landback aims to battle this rather than displace the people who are living on the land. To kick everyone who is not indigenous out would be genocide which is not the goal of this movement. What Landback aims for instead is “the restoration of all that has been taken, and continues to be taken, from Indigenous people while avoiding unnecessary harm done to

non-Indigenous people” (Smith). There is no harm to non-indigenous folk as a result of returning land back. To believe so is a result of Western concepts of land ownership and the effects of imperialism.



NDN Collective

Concepts such as the American Dream use land ownership as a means to promote the idea of “hard work, land and a home [as a] platform for boundless opportunity – or at least escape – from capital domination” (Noisecat) when in reality a rich 1% hoards most of the wealth that is promised. This is not the only idea within Western understanding of land ownership that is flawed. The West takes this idea that land is meant to be owned and ruled over while not being tended to in a way that protects the environment. This has only been pushed more by industrialization which has had devastating impacts on the environment. So while “Indigenous people themselves, find common roots in a relationship to land and water radically different from the notion of property”(Noisecat), the “Western colonial legacies operate within a paradigm that assumes they can extract its natural resources as much as they want, and the Earth will regenerate itself” (qtd. in Varanasi) as said by Hadeel Assali.

Landback's goal to return land sovereignty to Indigenous peoples seeks to dismantle these very colonial systems which continue to oppress people and strain the Earth. It is a "rallying cry for dismantling white supremacy and the harms of capitalism" (Thompson). While colonial understandings of land ownership strain resources and also oppress people, "Indigenous Peoples speak of inherent rights accompanied by inherent responsibilities to the natural world" (What Is Land Back?). The Earth is not something to be owned and torn apart but rather something that all humans have a natural responsibility to take care of due to the complex network of organisms that make up the environment (Simon). This is done and seen through many indigenous practices which include methods like controlled fires in order to create fertile earth. Though despite these explanations, it can be difficult to see why the impact of Indigenous peoples are so significant in discussions regarding climate change and environmental justice.



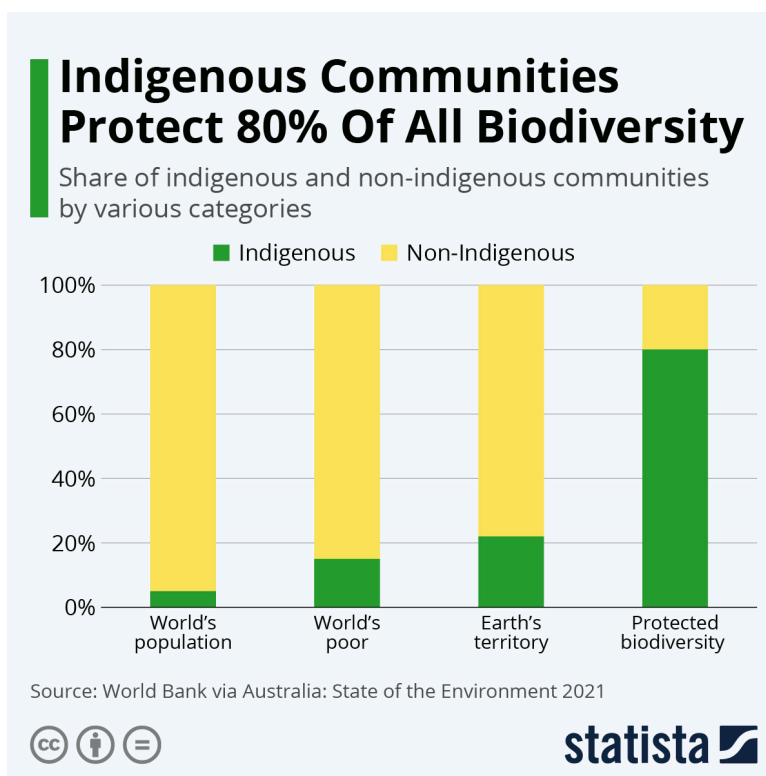
'Indigenous people are on the frontlines of movements fighting for a just relationship between humanity and the land.' Photograph: Helen H Richardson/Denver Post via Getty Images

These colonial ideals also affect how climate change is addressed in the modern day. Research regarding climate change is less likely to include the way the Global South is affected despite being “least responsible for climate change emissions” at “3.8%” greenhouse emissions compared to the “13-19%” that is emitted by the US and EU (Varanasi). Paige West, a professor of anthropology at Columbia University dives into the conversation regarding climate change and the lack of indigenous voices within the discussions regarding it. West states that “environmental destruction can be traced back to colonialism and imperialism” and that to “some extent, the present-day conservation interventions are a part of these colonial legacies” (qtd. in Varanasi). Colonial impacts on the environment are still visible in the modern day. They affect not only the environment but also the way that people interact with the communities around them.



Micah Garen / Contributor / Getty Images

Indigenous impacts on the environment are easy to see once looked into, but it is also easy to see the effects of land being taken from Indigenous populations. Despite making up a minority of the population on Earth, Indigenous folk “protect 80 percent of the planet’s biodiversity” (What Is Land Back?). Indigenous land, which makes up for 20% of all land on Earth, carries 80% of the Earth’s biodiversity (Recio and Hestad). When these lands are taken away by force or when indigenous people lose the ability to govern themselves and the land, it leads to devastating impacts on the environment as well as the lives of the people living in these lands. In the case of the Bajau Laut of Eastern Sabah, “fishing was banned and the tribal community lost access to its main sources of food and income” (Varanasi). This makes the necessity for the Landback movement something that is global.



Anna Fleck

Over the years, there have been many attempts to subjugate Indigenous populations by going after the environment. The struggle over land for Indigenous people has been a consistent problem in North America as well as other places in the world for centuries. It continues to go on to this day through acts that the average person would not think about. This can be observed through events such as the wiping out of buffalo in order to toxify the land in the 1870s (Simon). It can also be observed through modern day farming techniques where massive plains are filled with few crops which then leaves them more susceptible to widespread disease (Simon). However, it is also something that can be observed today through actions such as in 2020 when the “Wet’suwet’en people evict[ed] the Coastal GasLink company from their territory”, sparking turmoil that lead to several police raids (Gouldhawke). Indigenous battles over their land is not something new and as a result, neither is Landback despite its newer internet presence.



Activists hold an Indigenous Sovereignty banner at the rally outside the American Museum of Natural History in October 2019. Photo Courtesy: Erik McGregor/LightRocket/Getty Images



Colin Temple / Shutterstock

Landback does not just cover the environmental fight but also the acknowledgment of Indigenous contributions to the world within environmental battles and through other activities such as farming. Foods such as “[c]orn, chili peppers, many beans, tomatoes, and so much more come from Native ingenuity” (Simon) but are so often looked over and dismissed even when they make up a large part of European and American cuisine. Native Americans get so easily stereotyped as only finding success in contributions through casinos and reservations. This becomes a symbol of their low status when the land they are on is still often held in a trust by the government. This means that the land that is supposedly meant for Indigenous peoples is not in fact really theirs in the end (Simon). In fact, only about 8% of indigenous land has been returned at all (Smith).

Landback's battle is seen through both sacred lands and even urban settings. Landmarks like Mount Rushmore were unfairly taken from indigenous populations and continue to serve as a sour reminder that the United States, Canada, and other parts of the Americas obtained the land we live on "through violence and continues to exclude Indigenous people from them today" (Smith). Thus returning it means that Indigenous populations have sovereignty over their historical and sacred lands. In a more urban environment, Landback's push might include "developing a cultural space where Indigenous peoples can hold community" or "paying a voluntary "land tax" to support a local Indigenous tribe" (Smith). In another case, Landback can push the return of the land National Parks lay on to Indigenous people who were forced out of there (Smith). There are a lot of thought out processes in which the movement aims to improve the conditions of the Earth while returning what rightfully belongs to Native people.



Desert X Indian Land installation by Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit and Unangax̂)

Landback can have a number of meanings depending on the different Indigenous people that are a part of this political movement. Even before the phrase was coined in 2018 by Arnell Tailfeathers (Smith), its sentiments have long since been present in the activism pushed forward by Native Americans. It is seen through “Chief Deskaheh of the Iroquois Confederacy” who “brought the Iroquois dispute with the Canadian Government over their sovereignty to the League of Nations” (Recio and Hestad) and through Nick Tilsen who is the current president and CEO of the NDN Collective. Landback means a “new policy era based on free and prior informed consent” (qtd. In Thompson), a creation of spaces founded in Indigenous values, and defunding the very systems that uphold colonial concepts and white supremacy. It is a push for environmental activism with Indigenous voices at the center of it. Indigenous people have tended to the Earth’s biodiversity in an effective manner and it is for this reason that Landback exists.

Landback is a political movement that seeks to improve conditions on Earth through Indigenous sovereignty. Though often misunderstood and thought to be an aggressive movement that seeks to displace non-indigenous people, it is a movement that pushes for deconstruction and decolonization. It has many meanings and though the term itself is new, the ideals behind it have existed for decades. Its goals are to save the environments that we live in while dismantling the systems that keep white supremacy in power. Though Western perceptions of land ownership battle it, it proves to seek the best interest of all parties that live on the Earth. It comes with benefits that have statistics and history which support it and looks to a better future on Turtle Island and other places on Earth where Indigenous voices have been silenced. Thus, it is an important movement to acknowledge and educate oneself on.

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