Years ago, in downeast Maine, a Wabanaki leader with whom I had met a few times before generously sat across from me, knee-to-knee, to discuss a conservation idea that I thought would benefit Wabanaki communities and I was certain would be well-received. I shared with her my best thinking, written out on a yellow pad, and when I finally paused, prepared to hear encouragement, she told me flatly that my idea would do her harm.

She paused just long enough for me to absorb her words and then went further: though my intentions might be good, my own understanding of ingenuity and leadership repeated for her familiar patterns of power—enacted out of my goodwill...
and ignorance—that ultimately would take from her rather than give. I learned that morning that one doesn’t have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient. The conversation remains with me forever: a marker in the long work of freeing myself from my own sense of being right—and saving the day—to join others in the actual work of aiding one another.

Charity can be corrosive, and this can be difficult to see. To say someone is charitable is to imply they are generous and doing what is morally right. That positive connotation leaves little room for the recognition that the resources and beliefs I possess in doing acts of charity could actually be dangerous, though history is filled
with examples of how. Conservation has its roots in charity, and we even refer to conservation organizations as “public charities.” Charity and conservation are deeply entwined ideas based on a savior mentality, a moral superiority that one group possesses what is most needed and is elevated by its gift. So many of today’s greatest problems have at their root this exact power dynamic.

One of the personal consequences of my own savior mentality was the expectation, deep inside me that morning, that I deserved to be thanked. I was not thanked but given a far more valuable gift: the possibility of re-considering myself and my work through the lens of mutual aid.

Charity and conservation are deeply entwined ideas based on a savior mentality.
Conservation has held undeniably good intentions: to save the earth and be its caregivers. Conservation culture takes pride in a story of acquiring land through legitimate processes and creating a global movement based on science. I celebrate this when it’s real, and the only way I can judge realness is by not letting our successes obscure possibilities for mistakes, learning and growth. When you think you’re good and maybe even near the head of the line, it’s possible to never turn around to see the world that’s behind you or consider critically how you got there. One can live in that isolation, or one can choose to turn around and see the world, or one can have that awareness forced upon them.
Land conservation has been culturally significant, but it has rarely been just—it has mostly been the product of and in service to an affluent, educated, and primarily white culture. This has ultimately weakened the movement by smothering much of its potential to include the vision of different human beings who also respect nature. As a result, conservation has never been significant enough to counter or balance the ideology of capitalism that created it.
Some of my white colleagues “break” with capitalism to go work for conservation organizations only to recognize how capitalism and conservation depend on one another. Capitalism believes that private profit is more valuable to society than social profit, and relies on a strong system of private property rights to turn land and nature into money for individuals and corporations, the excesses of which are then sometimes given to charity. Conservationists use that same system to buy back the public values of land and nature. Capitalism makes possible conservation which makes capitalism look good. As Lokoth Sanborn, a Penobscot citizen, recently said to First Light, “in a world without capitalism conservation wouldn’t be needed.”

1 First Light is a bridge between conservation organizations in Maine and Penobscot, Passamaquodd, Maliseet and Micmac Communities who seek to expand Wabanaki stewardship of land. See www.firstlightlearningjourney.net
I was too many years into a professional career in conservation before I started teaching myself the history of Indigenous dispossession of land; this was never a story explored at staff retreats which conveniently left us silent and able to avoid history and present day problems. Since then, I’ve learned that over and over conservation has repeated the same patterns of possessing land for our “good” purposes that has defined colonization in the past. The white culture that I am part of created national parks, wildlife refuges, and other public and private conservation areas by often removing Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. This has happened in my lifetime and continues today. White-led conservation has consistently put our sense of what nature needs over the sovereignty of Native people and other people of color. The losses to everyone from this moral superiority have been staggering.
Despite that history, conservation is now being given a gift of great value: the invitation by Indigenous people to use our power and privilege to center other voices and knowledge, to redefine what conservation means, and to co-create what comes next. Conservationists and Indigenous people have always shared a metta-narrative about the centrality of nature and therefore should have had an unbreakable bond to one another. But from the creation of the very first national park in 1872 to today, conservationists have systematically removed Native people from nature first by taking their land, and then by making that land culturally inaccessible by making Native people invisible in the conservation community.
Access is vastly different from belonging. Conservation can provide access while still keeping people from belonging; it happens all the time. This betrayal has meant heart-breaking losses to Indigenous people, to us, and to nature herself.

I’ve witnessed this betrayal in the land that initiated me. Although Maine’s rivers and mountains still carry some Wabanaki names, the people and the stories that those names belong to have been relegated to small reservations out of sight to most Mainers. After 350 years of colonization and broken treaties, the Wabanaki now have access to less than 1 percent of the territory that once supported their place-based cultures.
But in the last 50 years, land conservation groups in Maine have come to steward almost 23 percent of the state, including countless places of great importance to Wabanaki people whose burial grounds and neighborhoods are now our nature preserves and state parks. Who owns the keys to these places of utmost importance to Wabanaki people?

People who look like me, raised like me, do. Now that these consequences, intentional or not, are within our awareness, we have a responsibility to make amends. The purpose of learning and confronting this history and our silence about it isn’t to punish ourselves, but to liberate us to do our best work on behalf of people and nature.

The purpose of learning and confronting this history and our silence about it isn’t to punish ourselves, but to liberate us to do our best work on behalf of people and nature.
A grateful part of me was raised in the culture of Outward Bound and National Outdoor Leadership School under their philosophy that human beings when in nature should leave only footprints, take only pictures. Following this philosophy felt good, and my resulting relationship with nature was about testing myself, experiencing awe, and about practicing restraint. In my 20s and 30s, I started to meet individuals, Native and non-native, who lived lives I admired and who believed in a different philosophy. Their way included more of themselves in connection to nature; their relationship didn’t stop with recreation but included daily life, sustenance, love, spirituality, art, marriage, life, and death. They were confident in their own ability to live well within nature and to leave a beautiful trace. I wanted more of that and wondered if it was available to me.
Slowly, I came to see that “Leave No Trace” is a philosophy that arises from a consumerist culture deeply rooted in growth that needs to admonish its children to not touch because they as parents have mostly known destruction. Leave no trace is instructions for a generation that has few skills other than for consuming and destroying nature. It arises from reverence for nature, yes, but also from a kind of fear that includes self-loathing, that wants humans and nature to be separated.
Imagine saying “leave no trace” to an Indigenous child who’s been taught all her life to tie medicine bundles on the branches of trees, or to a Wabanaki kid who knows how to drop a birch tree and make a canoe or how to spot the right kind of Black Ash to make a basket? For me, there’s now a great sadness around Leave No Trace.
In our efforts to “save” nature, my culture has too often eliminated our own human potential for a healthy relationship with nature. Sometimes I wonder if we, as conservationists, want that relationship to nature? Our language says that we don’t, that we’re protecting nature from ourselves. I’ve learned from Penobscot elder, Carol Dana, how to spot this distrust by how we constantly use the term “stewardship.” To her people this is a word steeped in theology and reminders to Indigenous people of white dominance over all other life, and consequent centuries of trauma and desecration.
As long as “stewardship” remains in the popular vernacular of the land conservation movement it will be a burr in the side of Indigenous people. A substitution that leaves behind that dogma and trauma to All Relations and reflects our aspiration is the word “relationship.” Imagine if conservation’s thousands of Stewardship Departments became Relationship Departments?

This is a small part of what we can learn from our Indigenous colleagues. Wabanaki culture believes in “leaving a beautiful trace,” that human presence can enhance biodiversity and makes nature more resilient. Examples abound from how Wabanaki harvest sweetgrass today to how they once hunted porpoises. Wabanaki culture believes in reciprocal balance between people and nature and the wellbeing of both. Our learning together could help the conservation movement to evolve from a philosophy of domination toward a philosophy of relationship.

The only antidote to the history of land conservation is a future with land justice. ☀
Years have passed from that important meeting sitting knee-to-knee; I’ve learned much more about what’s required to center other voices and other ways of knowing. I’ve returned to Passamaquoddy country, Quoddy land, Washington County, Maine, because this is the landscape that continues to teach me the most. Native and non-native colleagues in First Light have worked hard over many months getting to know one another and how to co-create the conditions for Wabanaki people—representing three generations and five tribal communities—to speak freely and unfiltered to the most connected: the land-holding, land-owning class in Maine who currently have the keys to the places to which the Wabanaki have been connected.
This is circle work for 120 of us—even done virtually on computer screens spread out across Maine—as we are people facing one another and our different levels of privilege and personal experience. The non-native community knows by now that their job is to educate themselves, not to be soothed by their emotions or needs, but to listen well to their Wabanaki colleagues. We are far from helpless to change history; we are fully capable of learning from mistakes and to recover from a blindness. Do we have the courage and foresight, as well, to share and return the power and land that we have accumulated?
I will not recount their stories for they are not mine to share, but here’s what I thought hard about and learned: to be fully Wabanaki, they need to belong to the land again; they need to be at home here, moving freely, making decisions from their own experience, all of which is a reasonable definition of sovereignty. Access to land shapes one’s ability to sustain oneself, to live secure and stable lives, to build culture and history rooted in place, to grow old and hold collective wealth. To be in relationship to land is to have self-determination over your future. To have land taken is to lose oneself.
Social healing happens at places of sustenance, which for the Wabanaki are at traditional fishing areas, on the best hunting grounds, and with farmland. This is exactly where my culture has often put dams and factories and strip malls. It dawns on me why white culture so often expresses the fear that Native people will build casinos on their land, because of how we have destroyed our land with our brand of progress. White culture has developed white landscapes at much higher rates and with much harder consequences for nature than has Indigenous culture.
Wabanaki are still the people of the shining river, affirmed here by the presence of their ancestors everywhere, but theirs must be a landscape of life not only of burial grounds. Even with the loss of land and all this entails, Wabanaki consistently still refer to nature as mother. Does my culture feel that way? I hear conservationists call forest and soils “resources” and that land can be bought and sold, but would we also say that we could own, buy, and sell our mothers? This risks romanticizing Indigenous culture, I know, but what matters is that my culture could benefit from seeing nature not as a resource but as a relationship.
By restoring relationship and belonging to the promise of conservation, Native and non-native conservationists would be co-managing lands, extending cultural respect through new access agreements, returning land, and working together when called upon to help each other attain goals for a relationship to place. As we come to know each other, more will be possible. Conservation organizations will make space for Indigenous leadership, something that very rarely exists today.

There’s more to be gained. This is bigger than doing one-off conservation projects to “help” indigenous people; it is about re-centering Indigenous expertise into the DNA of conservation. It’s about redefining what conservation means and does.
Land justice can be about building long-term, equitable relationships between Indigenous people and conservationists to support each other’s capacity to change the system itself. If we believe that restoring relationship to land builds self-power, then part of the work of conservation is about restoring and rebalancing power. Land justice is the sustained effort by conservationists to learn the history of the betrayal that took the power of belonging away. This is not a centuries-old history that shaped who ended up privileged and who ended up in perpetual cycles of poverty. It was by design and it is still unfolding. If we can confront that system through how we choose to share power and land, conservation can do more to heal nature and people.

This is what mutual aid—as opposed to charity—looks like.
What arises from mutual aid is the path to reaching our full potential as protectors of nature. Land Justice will strengthen conservation profoundly by teaching how to make human wellbeing central to the mission of restoring nature. Some will call land justice mission creep; I call it mission maturity. Our job is to protect nature, and to be in relationship with the best minds, traditions, and perspectives to do that. The conservation movement is already strong enough to do this. Efforts at land justice are unfolding right now in brave places where wisdom and care are prevailing.
There is a longing—I recognize it within myself and others—to heal ourselves, to stop the cycle of trauma, and to truly guard and protect nature, not by putting up boundaries but by showing human regard for each other, by confronting the past silence, and by avoiding nothing to finally find our shared work together. A new conservation movement is being born grounded in this self-reflection and mutual aid: the shared work of the best minds from different cultures and generations to restore balance and relationship.
Peter Forbes is a partner in First Light, a collaboration among conservation organizations and Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and MicMac Communities aimed at expanding Wabanaki stewardship of land and redefining conservation. Peter has collaborated with Indigenous groups in many regions of North America to create a learning journey model for conservationists grounded in understanding history, repairing, and returning land, as well as sharing power and resources through mutual aid.

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