

Land Justice

Presented at the New York State Land Trust Conference

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I'm grateful for everyone who is here and what we're setting out together to do today. Your presence says something very important about your intentions. I bet there's a range of emotions in this room around this topic of land justice: curiosity, skepticism, possibly shame and fear, very likely longing.

I want to step away for just a moment from conservation strategies, communication plans and easements, fee acquisitions and land as rights, legal descriptions, hydraulic flow, sums of money, habitats or even soils types.

I want to talk with you about land as relationships and responsibilities to one another.

You folks know this: land is life, and therefore land is also power. Access to land shapes our abilities to sustain ourselves and communities, to live secure and stable lives, to build culture and history rooted in place., to grow and hold collective wealth. To be in relationship to land is to have some self-determination over your future and also in relationship with one's ancestors.

To lose the land, or to be blocked access to it, is to lose these forms of power. To lose one's relationship to land is to lose oneself.

(Indigenous Land loss meme presented on video.)

There's a direct correlation with this map of land loss to cultural loss and the and growth of diabetes, alcohol addiction, rates of suicide.

Land is life and land are power.

For thirty years, I've tried hard to hold a space within the conservation movement for conversations about culture change: encouraging its values and challenging its histories, strengthening it by making it more inclusive of different worldviews, making it more about relationships between people and between people and nature. The movement I love, that you are leaders in, has already made many important shifts:

The shift from transactions to relationships;

The shifts from science values to social values;

The shift from social values to community values;

The inquiry into who is conservation for? Which people are served and not served;

The shift from diversity to equity and justice.

Each of these shifts have strengthened conservation because each has demanded a deeper and deeper self-awareness and enabled us to connect with others who need land as the source of their lives, too.

I think about how my own relationship to land has changed over the last 30 years, too as these shifts have been happening. Emotional and intellectual love of land to something deeper, harder to describe that is more about dependence, reverence, sustenance.

This is just my belief: As a movement, we've grown in skill, resources and maturity after many decades that we can begin to meaningfully address other concerns around land that go beyond the health of nature to address health of people, and to understand how these are connected. I think we're strong enough to begin to address *in our own way* one of our nation's founding sins: the land dispossession of the people who were here before.

We're not powerful enough to change treaties, but we do own land and we are in relationship with others who own land. If we have the will, we can do privately a great deal of reconciliation of access to land that rebuilds culture and sovereignty. There are tools available right now to do this. Land trusts are doing this in other parts of our country.

I need to say something about the special relationship that exists between indigenous peoples and conservation groups. Tribes are not special interests like hunters or snowmobilers or churches, they are sovereign people and nations with a special legal and – I think- moral status. Legally, our culture made treaties with their culture that must be upheld because that's the law. But morally and spiritually, conservation groups and indigenous people have, in my opinion, a special responsibility to one another because we share a narrative about the importance of nature.

The really hard part is that there's been betrayal between us.

The culture that I am part of created national parks, wild life refuges and other public lands by removing Native people, and by conserving that land "from" American Indians and "for" my culture. That act of betrayal around this shared love of nature is alive today in the blood memory of young Wabanaki people.

But if we conservationists can show a high degree of respect and the ability to share power and land, there's an enormous opportunity to learn, to make amends, and to move forward together. I've seen this in other places.

Land trust leaders are returning lands and interests in lands to Indigenous people for many different reasons beyond any moral argument. We are doing it to add traditional ecological knowledge to our scientific knowledge, to deepen our understanding of history and our own relationship to the place we love. Many of us feel that we can't ever fully understand our own place in the world without being in healthy relationship with the people before our values and ways took over.

I've previously co-led two sustained collaborations between indigenous and non-native conservationists to restore land, and I want to focus for now on First Light in Maine.

The motto of First Light is: Repairing, Returning at the speed of trust.

History: 1980 was the Maine Native Claims Settlement Act. The Wabanaki confederacy of tribes had undisputed legal claims to about 78% of Maine. The settlement Act reduced that to 1% in exchange for \$90 million and a promise of the restoration of hunting rights which has never been done. Since 1980, the land conservation movement in Maine, which is vigorous, has grown from controlling 1% of the state to controlling 28%.

Isn't the room in there for sharing and reconciliation?

The Nature Conservancy, Maine Coast Heritage trust, and 16 other land trusts believe so and have come together around a process of reconciliation and returning of land called First Light.

We are in an ongoing collaboration built on these three steps:



We spent 18 days the first year visiting the tribes, meeting with chiefs, doing homestays, going on a joint canoe expedition, building trust, and building tools to grant access to land for 3 purposes: harvesting medicines (sweetgrass and ash) holding ceremony, and protecting ancestors.

Permits over 62,000 acres granted so far. Our goal is 250,000 acres in 5 years

This is about culture change for land trusts and about cultural survival for the Wabanaki.

I need a few more words about our process:

Showing respect:

Learning the history of land dispossession, reading the treaties, meeting equitably where everyone is treated fairly and respectfully for their time and expertise, me showing gratitude that a Wabanaki leader will meet with me.

For the last 6 months, our focus has been on raising the financial resources for the creation of a Wabanaki Task Force of representatives from each of the 5 tribal communities to have a forum to answer their own important questions about their priorities and the best way for them to hold new lands.

Building Trust:

Working on their priorities, not our priorities. Now, it's about land trusts organizing to deliver water and fresh produce to the reservations.

Slowly, it been about sharing maps and granting access.

There have been so many essential lessons in this work that I value greatly. Here are 21 of those essential lessons.

If we can show respect and build trust, then our third goal of **Belonging** takes shape as a result.

There's a huge difference between access and belonging, right? Our tools are to grant access, but our goal is to foster belonging. What do we mean by belonging?

To be accepted. To draw meaning and purpose from. To be part of. To be inseparable.

We, I'm speaking as a white conservationist, really hope for the first time to belong to our landscape in a deeper way we've not achieved through farming, recreation or science.

We hope our Wabanaki colleagues will feel belonging, once again, because they will have rights and be welcomed back to many places. Their language would return our mountains and rivers. Every Mainer, Native or not, would be proud our our shared Wabanaki history. This is what we mean by belonging.

I want to end by sharing with you my own personal reasons for doing land justice work: Foremost, I want to learn. I want to understand different ways that people relate to the land and to each other. I want to deepen my own relationship to land and nature. I want to bring our best minds together to learn how to live more wisely in place. I want to make amends.

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