INTERNATIONAL LAND CONSERVATION NETWORK

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Indigenous wisdom: Traditional land management driving conservation

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For tens of thousands of years, Indigenous Peoples have stewarded natural landscapes to ensure that they support all life into the future. In many parts of the world this practice has been rapidly undone by western and colonizing forces. In a recent webinar hosted by the International Land Conservation Network (ILCN), First Nations people from Australia, the United States, and Aotearoa New Zealand joined a panel to explore how traditional land management approaches could help reverse this trend and drive better conservation outcomes.

The discussion built on an earlier webinar about how the conservation sector can build effective partnerships with First Nations Peoples. In that session, participants learned that the process requires a fresh mindset that embraces careful listening, builds trust for strong relationships, resources effectively, and brings a different relationship with time.

Cultural celestial-scape at Joshua Tree National Park, California. Traditional territories of the Maar'yam (Serrano), Nüwü (Chemehuevi), and Kawiya (Cahuilla) Tribes. Credit: © Hawk Rosales.

Reasons and strategies for working toward this new mindset were a focus of the most recent webinar as well. Panelists shared several case studies where cultural land-management approaches were driving conservation outcomes. These included cultural burning, fence removal, seed collection, forest thinning, and sustainable harvest of plants and animals. They also emphasized the need for a more fundamental shift in how practitioners think about conservation and highlighted pathways to Indigenous leadership in the sector.

The idea of interconnectedness is embedded in Indigenous notions of conservation. Nature is not something to be set aside and left untouched. “We are *of* the land not *on* it”, said Lily Middleton, program coordinator for Kaimahi for Nature Whakaraupō. “*Mātauranga Māori* is a body of knowledge that informs the Māori worldview. It reinforces the relationship Māori have to the land and sea, embodying human connections to the ecosystem”.

Hawk Rosales, *Ndé* (Apache) Indigenous land defender and consultant from the U.S., took this idea even further. “Indigenous agreements with nature … are all based on reverence for, and the *consent* of nature”.

Conservation organizations are responsible for making room for this mindset and capability. Where they do, conservation approaches tend to take a more integrated, landscape-scale approach. Even better, they enable new ways of thinking about natural landscapes.

As Ben Cullen, a non-Indigenous panelist and Regional Manager at Trust for Nature, observed: “I learned a very western version of ecology, and I’ve gone through the process of unlearning and relearning from Traditional Owners for many years now. It’s been so fruitful, and the environment is better off for it”. He is not alone in his assertion; a major report backed by the United Nations and published by the World Economic Forum found that this relationship with the land results in nature benefits. “Our role,” he said, “is to listen and act on behalf of the direction from Elders”.

Bush food planter box erected on Phillip Island, 2021. Credit: Ben Cullen.

Relearning conservation tactics and context sometimes requires conservation organizations to relinquish control. Doing so can demonstrate trust for, and provide agency to, Indigenous groups. It is also important because, where land-management programs and policies are Indigenous-led, they are more likely to succeed. Ngarrindjeri woman and Agriculture Victoria's first cultural heritage officer, Marissa Williamson Pohlman, said that the Conservation and Ecosystem Management Course in Victoria, where she received her training in cultural land management, is "designed by Aboriginal People for Aboriginal People." And that, "This is why it works."

Similarly, Ben Cullen described his experience assisting a cultural burn that happened on Country for the first time in 160 years. Trust for Nature maintained a largely administrative role, allowing the Traditional Owners of the land to lead the process. "It was so good to be part of it but not take ownership of it."

Part of returning power and agency to First Nations Peoples may mean addressing past wrongs—most notably, displacement and disadvantage of Indigenous communities—and the systemic damage that has resulted. As Hawk observed, "the most basic human needs need to be understood and addressed, before we can hand back land". While conservation organizations cannot redress all historic wrongs, they play a critical role in building capacity, including, as Lily Middleton observed, providing representation, ensuring reciprocity, and being consistent.

The end game of this relearning process is to provide access to ancestral lands. The significance of this, at a social, economic, physical, and spiritual level, cannot be underestimated. Having recently experienced a land hand-back, Renee Sweetman, Bunurong Traditional Owner, reflected on feelings of pride and empowerment, and the sense of place afforded when caring for Country. This, said Hawk, is "where we find purpose, solace, healing." The work of conservation organizations is to "open minds and hearts to these important ideas and connections."

To watch the panel discussion where these conversations took place, please follow this link.