

Relatives, Not Resources

Applying an Alaska Native Lens to Climate Sovereignty, Economic Justice, and Healing

by Ruth Miller, Meda DeWitt, and Margi Dashevsky

To re-form Indigenous economies and economies of care does not mean creating anew. . . . What is required is an understanding on a global level of the urgency to *bring forward from the past and into the future.*

Indigenous communities, particularly those of the Arctic, not only are on the front lines of the climate crisis but also are the engineers and economists of sustainability, and offer spiritual teachings of gratitude and deep relationship. Generating collective health and well-being requires spiritually and materially reconnecting our severed relationships to the land and each other.

All three of us live in Alaska. We descend from both settler and Native communities. For all of us, Alaska Native frameworks of reciprocity and intentional interdependence inform how we answer pivotal questions of our time—one being, What do reparations to the land look like after destructive mining, leaching of toxic pollutants, and irresponsible oil extraction?

We seek healing for the land itself. To engage in true climate justice work, we must be brave enough to consider reconciliation with places that have been harmed. We must all take accountability and turn to Indigenous leadership to help us remember how to live in and practice economies of care and compassion.





HOW WE ARRIVED HERE

When we ask our Elders about the changes they have witnessed on our Arctic lands, they tell us stories of growing up in Alaska without cars, televisions, cell towers—and with no English. Instead, they had rivers filled with fish, tundra filled with caribou, families joining together to hunt across the ice or line the smokehouse with summer salmon. They recount histories of this place with anthropological detail and serene reverence. But soon, conversations turn to the days those riches began to be taken away through compulsory boarding schools and proselytizing churches. The way their languages curved on their tongues was slowly lost, and the graceful curves of familiar rivers were similarly interrupted—blocked by dams, poisoned by mines, and now heating to record temperatures, deadly to fish and other creatures.

Erasure of Indigenous connection to place was crucial for the colonial settlement of the lands that became America. Political leaders, the army, and the church worked hard to break this connection. When settlers arrived and colonization began, our economic systems were targeted for disruption and destruction: Indigenous nations were dissolved, removed, subjected to genocide, or assimilated across this continent to make way for private land ownership, profiteering from finite resource extraction, and imposing of Christian norms of patriarchy and cisnormativity.

As PennElys Droz of the NDN Collective explains, “Removing a peoples’ means of providing for themselves is a cunning way to suppress and control them. . . . A state of dependency was intentionally created, with the Nations having to look to their colonizers for survival assistance.”¹

This was the birth of our modern extractive economy, which sequesters wealth for the elite few (largely white, landholding, straight, cisgendered men). It was achieved by commodifying relationships through the transformation of land into money, and enslaving people into zero-cost labor.

When we converse with our Elders, the stories they tell are old ones—stories of bounty and abundance, balance and reciprocity.² The climate crisis is not only a product of greenhouse gas emissions (which impact the Arctic landscape at twice the rate as the rest of the globe),³ but also of an ideological shift that was imposed by colonization and

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capitalism to justify violation of sacred land-, water-, and airways—domination that taught Americans to speak of “resources” instead of “relatives.”

JUST TRANSITION IN ALASKA

This language shift is important to understand as we envision opportunities for growth and healing ahead of us. Today, the pain and trauma of separation from our Indigenous worldviews, evidenced by the imposed language, is being healed and integrated into our vision for the future. The Just Transition Framework⁴ only began gaining widespread distribution in Alaska, in 2018, through collaboration with climate and justice advocacy organizations across the state. This framework, with roots in the labor movement of the 1960s, articulates the necessary shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative one. It realigns the purpose of the economy with the healing powers of our Earth, through ecological restoration, community resilience, and social equity. ***To achieve this, resources must be acquired through regenerative practices, labor must be organized through voluntary cooperation and decolonial mindsets, culture must be based on caring and sacred relationships, and governance must reflect deep democracy and relocation.***

However, when this language first began circulating in Alaska, our communities realized that there were both familiar qualities and foreign terms preventing us from reaching deep resonance with the growing movement. We needed to see ourselves in the work. When we asked our elders how they would describe this new vision, they told us in the Behnti Kenaga language, “*Kohtr’elneyh*” (We remember forward).

This process soon led to the *Kohtr’elneyh* Just Transition Summit, where, in January 2020, over two hundred community members from all regions of Alaska and many different

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industry sectors and background gathered.⁵ For days, we heard from community leaders and movement artists about renewable energy projects, food sovereignty, and cold climate agriculture. This was the last time many of us gathered in person. As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps across the world, the Alaska Just Transition Collective has coalesced online to articulate what a transitional economy for Alaska must look like. Now, we are pushing state and national recovery conversations to incorporate Indigenous sovereignty and stories from the land.

**BRINGING KOHTR'ELNEYH
INTO NATIONAL POLICY**

These acts of translating and centering Indigenous ways of knowing have similarly guided the Just Transition Collective's statewide work in support of the Green New Deal and the THRIVE Agenda,⁶ championed by over one hundred members of Congress. The THRIVE Agenda is considered the most ambitious and holistic investment structure yet proposed, ensuring that climate, jobs, and care (health and well-being), will be made at the scale, scope, and with the justice standards this time of transition demands. In partnership with communities across the state, we have published conversations and creative zines and toolkits,⁷ elevating what Indigenous regenerative economy and climate justice must look like for Alaska.

In Alaska, we are actively engaged in building the solidarity economy ecosystem that is required to finance a just transition beyond fossil fuels. We are meeting a need for Alaskan financial infrastructure that is by us and for us, is aligned with our values, and enables community stewardship of capital. We are cultivating grassroots processes to seed the regenerative financial infrastructure Alaskans need, so that funds are grown, invested, and distributed by and for our collective well-being.

As we shift to new paradigms of land, resource, and financial management, we must remember that this meaningful participation is an exercise of sovereign Native nations' right to

self-determination: *Tl'eeyagga Hūt'aan Kkaa Nin' Dohoodeetunh* (Native people hold the land with words; Koyukon translation by Eliza Jones). The goal must be to return to balance in all investments, industries, and sectors—infusing justice and restoration throughout a new economy.

**REMEMBERING INDIGENOUS
ECONOMIES OF CARE**

Indigenous economic frameworks for augmenting and redistributing abundance are key to informing how to approach economic recovery, and are needed now more than ever. Indigenous economies can counteract greed, the costs of which are increasingly apparent. For example, an important rite of passage in many Indigenous communities is sharing one's first catch and harvest with Elders. Hunters will give away the first of each animal they kill, weavers will give away the first baskets they make, harvesters will distribute the first berries picked—based on familial responsibility and obligations to grandparents, aunties, teachers, and so on. This exchange is an act of reciprocity.

Traditional Indigenous economic frameworks center around ensuring the health and well-being of a community. The role of traditional leaders is to oversee the foundational functions to meet the community's base needs for water, food, shelter, warmth, safety, and medicine. An economy is the exchange of time, talent, and treasure, and its purpose is to create stability. People generally want the same things but need to have shared understandings and expectations to reduce conflict and meet each other's expectations. The growth of an economy also relies on creating trade or economic partners. In an Indigenous framework, economic partners are not only humans but also are plants, animals, fish, and other species. They are referred to as relatives or nations. This framing elevates these groups to being equals in the systems of exchange, and requiring respect. *A core tenet of Indigenous economic structures is to increase abundance for all economic partners.*

Reciprocity is another core tenet of Indigenous economic structures. When something is taken, something must be given, and even this is backward. Traditionally, it is understood that you give first—of your time, efforts, skills, prayers, and abundance—without expectation of return but rather out

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of pure generosity, caring, and duty. The exchange is thoughtful and intentional, benefiting all economic partners. It is also understood that taking without reciprocity can and generally will lead to suffering. For instance, if all the fish are harvested and not any are left to spawn, then starvation will be the reciprocal experience.

The modern fossil fuel economy is based in extraction and pollution for maximum profit and individual gain from a finite resource in a closed system (Mother Earth's biosphere). These activities have not had a balanced exchange of benefits with our natural economic partners, and have created what can be described as a debt to our relations and a grievous desecration against our Mother Earth. *The fossil fuel economy has overextracted, and humans are in debt to our relations.*

To re-form Indigenous economies and economies of care does not mean creating anew. Traditional ecological knowledge, collective experiences, genetic memory, and oral histories can guide action. What is required is an understanding on a global level of the urgency to *bring forward from the past and into the future*—as at other times of great transformation, the teachings of which cycle back to today. Taking these lessons and applying them to inform climate action, addressing the past harms of colonization, paying due reparations, and ceding land back integrate just land-management practices and infuse healthy human and more-than-human relationships, while continuing Indigenous ways of knowing and traditional practices. Traditional Indigenous economies will guide this time of global transformation, rooted in generational knowledge from living in eco-regions that require continual innovation and extreme resilience. As Elder Wilson Justin (Althsetnay, of the Headwaters People) shared with us regarding well-being:

Well-being is vital to good decision making present past and future . . . Economy [in the Western extractive context] didn't exist in the world I came out of. When I grew up that term had no meaning or sense. The economy in [an] Indigenous worldview is health and well-being. . . . In its most basic component [well-being] is the ability to survive unexpected trauma, warfare, all kinds of things. In a future sense be ready at all times for the unexpected. Well-being means well protected.⁸

Indigenous economies are often described as gift economies, where resources and belongings—that is, wealth—are shared and given and received in return. The entire economic system is oriented to promote the interests of the community, not individual accumulation.

For example, potlatch ceremonies are held across Alaska to mark births, marriages, deaths, and important rites of passage. They are called *ku.éex'* in Lingít, and have very specific protocols for economic redistribution.⁹ Potlatches formalize allegiances and loyalty through reciprocity. Those who have access to great abundance are expected to share; and if they encounter hard times, sharing is extended back to them. Sharing and redistributions help smooth out the ebb and flow of resource abundance and stave against not having enough, including starvation. Families save up for a very long time in preparation to host potlatches to this day. In the past, when chiefs would host a potlatch, they would give away everything they owned that they were able to give away. Generosity and responsibility are highly respected, and the most generous and thoughtful leaders were the most respected, creating extensive allyship among the community and across neighboring territories.

Lingít frameworks identify economic partners as other nations, which in the Lingít framework are the Plant Nation, the Animal Nation, the Fish Nation, and the Insect Nation. Lingít responsibilities and social expectations of behavior and roles are circular, overlapping, and follow specific protocols for caring for the community. Additionally, the Lingít headman, or *Káa Tlein*, is responsible for the health and well-being of everyone in the community, ensuring access to food, water, medicine, clothing, safety, spiritual health, and wellness. The headwoman, or *Naa Tláa*, is responsible for the organization, care, and understanding of the needs of the house group, family group, clan group, and extended community. These are just a small glimpse of traditional economic and social roles.

To achieve effective climate solutions, restoration of balance and deep justice must flow through all policy and transformation.

Lingít clans care for and augment production within the territories for which they are responsible. They increase food abundance in specific land- and waterways, through very meaningful practices—in addition to layered protocols for harvesting plants, animals, and fish. Not taking the largest animals and fish is an example of how people care for the stability and ultimate survival of the population; tending wild roots and berry patches is an example of how people assist wild plants to flourish.

These *expectations of care* are also built into treaties or agreements between neighboring Indigenous groups. Invested energy and efforts put forth by the Lingít people into the environment increase production and achieve reciprocal benefit for the community and all economic partners.

These concepts include the exchange of spiritual energy, as well. Energetic expansion is achieved by purposefully giving to someone else. These living economies ensure that people can do well, support the community and the environment, and have a sense of purpose—and *they ensure well-being in perpetuity*. These *practices of stewardship* are an economic exchange that reinvests in the land by giving back to it, and are symbiotically beneficial.

OUR VALUES MUST GUIDE AMBITIOUS SOLUTIONS

To achieve effective climate solutions, restoration of balance and deep justice must flow through all policy and transformation. Policy must remember forward and be ambitious in its mission to restore ecosystems, food systems, and practices of reciprocity. Toward this goal, the Alaska Climate Alliance, a statewide network of climate advocates and conservation organizations, has gathered throughout the past year to align across the broad spectrum of environmental advocacy, encouraging historically white-led and well-resourced organizations to implement decolonization processes and operate in accordance with just transition principles.¹⁰ In this model, conservation organizations are given opportunities to learn from and grow with Tribal governments and Indigenous-led

organizations, as well as learn from other non-Native groups who are following Indigenous stewardship principles and adopting actively antiracist policies into their work. Collectively, this leads to better coordination, healthier communication, and more unified communities.

Similarly, through Native Movement's Untangling Colonialism, Decolonizing Advocacy training, the organization provides an interactive audience with the opportunity to question the mores of traditional conservation and uncover the white supremacist roots of the conservation movement: the three Ws—*white, Western, wilderness*. The modern environmental movement placed great emphasis on their idea of the preservation of nature, of keeping an untouched wilderness safe from the destructive tendencies of humans, and of venerating certain places as examples of the sublime, where one could “glimpse the face of God.”¹¹ As A-dae Romero-Briones notes, “These coveted lands only became ‘available’ when they were no longer occupied by the Indigenous people,” who were brutally eradicated from their homelands. “Many of the Indigenous stewardship practices have weakened because of inaccessible landscapes that have been ‘preserved’ for future generations,” writes Romero-Briones. “Given this country's historical and current policies and practices, one has to question whether Indigenous people are included in this idea of future generations.”¹²

Many champions of wilderness conservation espoused racist thought and promoted eugenics as a necessary policy to accompany expanding land seizures, including John Muir,¹³ Gifford Pinchot,¹⁴ and Theodore Roosevelt.¹⁵ Modern land policy was developed through this settler colonizer framework—meaning, in conservation terms, a disruption of relationship among beings. These policies transition the land, rich with dynamic and interlocking relationships, into habitat—removing human relationship and denigrating Indigenous peoples as an unfortunate obstacle for nature conservation to overcome.

By acknowledging the ways in which colonialism and extractive capitalism have incurred climate chaos and deep social inequality, it becomes possible to enact real solutions that question these systems and break from them. False solutions maintain the status quo and will heal neither society nor the environment. Many net-zero carbon emission

schemes do not lead to quantifiable emission reduction,¹⁶ and often reinscribe social inequalities, banking on the last reserves of Indigenous territory and natural spaces to pay for continuing industry emissions.¹⁷ Many of these proposed false solutions ask for collaboration with the perpetrators of harm. As Chris Peters (Pohlik-lah and Karuk), president of the Seventh Generation Fund, observes: “It is a breach of the ethical foundation of Earth-based spiritual understanding to sell the air and to continue unabatedly polluting for personal and corporate profit.”¹⁸ Only a values-based framework that changes behavior will lead to system change.

YOUTH ARE LEADING US FORWARD

Indigenous cultures know that future prosperity requires investing in youth leadership. Native youth are not just the voices of the future—they must be the leaders of today. Key to this is infusing traditional ecological knowledge, technologies, and lifeways with modern calls to action. Today, “culture camps,” annual events held by local communities and Tribes, are immersive experiences to teach and pass on traditional knowledge and subsistence practices (*qaqamiigux*). As Unangan artist and youth leader Dustin Newman shared,

When it comes time for culture camps, we often forget how our traditions and culture are tied into the climate crisis. Our camps tend to focus on the importance of our *qaqamiigux*. We teach our youth how to pull the seine net or how to butcher the seal, but we don’t tell them the reasons behind a low salmon return or why the seals are skinnier this year.¹⁹

The climate crisis is additionally a catalyzing opportunity to bring the voices of Indigenous youth from the lands into all levels of decision making.

In Alaska, on the front lines of the climate crisis, the environmental community is beginning to unpack its colonial roots and defer to Indigenous stewardship. The next phase of climate justice advocacy in Alaska must continue to invest in youth leadership. In Wilson Justin’s words, we are “responsible for the next generation [and have a] sense of duty and responsibility to someone [we’ve] never met, and never seen, and never will.”²⁰ How we live today is guided by the needs of future generations. We pay back the lands and waters, not only in reparations for losses and damages but also in gratitude for the life that the lands have always gifted us.

In this time of great struggle, it often feels like we are lost at sea. Our canoes are strong but weathered, and we are struggling to paddle as one. Many of us are tired. The swells of waves are relentless and steadfast, and we can no longer see the horizon we move toward as we struggle to trace the path that has carried us here. This is when we remember our paddling songs, synchronize our strokes, and trust one another to carry us forward. When we cannot see the horizon, we are reminded to look to the stars. There in the sky, our ancestors navigate us home. We remember forward.

The authors acknowledge that we live and write from the unceded lands of the Indigenous peoples of Alaska. We further acknowledge that, in the spirit of adrienne maree brown, we come as people raised in, interacting with, and intentionally dismantling white supremacy. We strive to additionally acknowledge the thought genealogies, community participatory work, and elders’ guidance that contribute to this article and the work it represents. The coauthors are particularly grateful to our culture and language bearers, our Indigenous youth, and Elders, who continue to shine the light forward and remind us of our roots.





NOTES

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