

Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene

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Conservation in the Anthropocene

The proposed Anthropocene epoch is understood geologically as a time when the collective actions of humans began influencing earth systems in marked, unprecedented ways. Some claim that the Anthropocene could have started in the year 1610 with “colonialism, global trade and coal” (Lewis and Maslin 177). Scientists and environmental ethicists often characterize futures in the Anthropocene in additional ways, one of the most common being as a future involving climate destabilization that will likely threaten the very existence of certain ecosystems, plants, and animals (Kolbert; Thompson and Bendik-Keymer; Vaidyanathan; Sandler). Ever-expanding human economic activities and consumer lifestyles are major drivers of climate destabilization through their dependence on burning fossil fuels and certain kinds of land-use such as deforestation. Some conservationists argue that we will inevitably have to learn to live with these changes, make careful decisions about conservation priorities, and, in some cases, learn to let go of certain ecosystems and species (Kareiva and Marvier). Yet others in the conservation community take an adamant position that these changes, especially extinctions, are morally dreadful (Vaidyanathan; Cafaro and Primack).

Cafaro and Primack express this latter position clearly when they argue that “Anthropocene proponents” have “selfish and unjust” views that deem the extinction of species as morally acceptable as long as humans suffer no harm. Human expansion that extinguishes the “polar bear” and other species ends the value of these natural species as “the primary expressions and repositories of organic nature’s order, creativity, and diversity... Every species, like every person, is unique, with its own history and destiny...” To destroy species through human expansion is to bring a “valuable and meaningful story to an untimely end” (2014, 2).

Conservation views *à la* Cafaro and Primack can help to explain why some scholars and writers have noted various strains of dystopian thought in Anthropocene discourses (Trexler; Singleton; Weik; Johnson et al.). For such views can be used as a basis for depicting futures in which many hundreds of “valuable and meaningful [stories]” (Cafaro and Primack) are irreversibly extinguished, leaving human societies to reckon with a world marked by greatly limited historical memories, biodiversity, and expressiveness. In an article titled, “Climate Change is So Dire We Need a New Kind of Science Fiction to Make Sense of It,” futures writer Claire Evans writes that “we need an Anthropocene fiction. Since sci-fi mirrors the present, ecological collapse requires a new dystopian fiction... a form of science fiction that tackles the radical changes of our pressing and strange reality...” (Evans).

As a Neshnabé (Potawatomi) and scholar-activist at a U.S. university working on indigenous climate justice, I was initially struck by what seemed to be some similarities between the dystopian Anthropocene views and the views motivating quite a few indigenous projects to conserve and restore native species. Indeed, indigenous peoples have long advocated that the conservation and restoration of native species, the cultivation of first foods, and the maintenance

of spiritual practices require the existence of plants and animals of particular genetic parentage whose lives are woven with ecologically, economically and culturally significant stories, knowledges and memories. I wondered whether indigenous peoples share the same dread of species extinction in an Anthropocene dystopian future.

While surface similarities are present, it is perhaps more accurate to say that indigenous conservationists and restorationists tend to focus on sustaining particular plants and animals whose lives are entangled locally—and often over many generations—in ecological, cultural and economic relationships with human societies and other nonhuman species. We try to learn from, adapt, and put in practice these relationships, ancient as some may be, to address the conservation challenges we face today and in the future, especially the environmental destruction of settler colonialism in North America. In this sense, while we may embrace the value of species such as the polar bear—even when we may have never interacted with one—it is also true that we are unlikely to invoke the polar bear in the absence of also invoking the species' significance to particular human and nonhuman communities for whom it has long, local, complex, and unique relationships.

What is more, the environmental impacts of settler colonialism have made it so that quite a few indigenous peoples in North America are no longer able to relate locally to many of the plants and animals that are significant to them. In the Anthropocene, then, some indigenous peoples already inhabit what our ancestors would have likely characterized as a dystopian future. So we consider the future from what we believe is already a dystopia, as strange as that may sound to some readers. Our conservation and restoration projects are not only about whether to conserve or let go of certain species. Rather, they are about what relationships between humans and certain plants and animals we should focus on in response to the challenges we face, given that we have already lost so many plants and animals that matter to our societies. In this way, indigenous conservation approaches aim at negotiating settler colonialism as a form of human expansion that continues to inflict anthropogenic environmental change on indigenous peoples—most recently under the guise of climate destabilization.

The Dystopia of Our Ancestors

A longstanding environmental advocate and friend, Lee Sprague (Potawatomi / Odawa, Little River Band of Ottawa Indians), always reminds me that Anishinaabek¹ already inhabit what our ancestors would have understood as a dystopian future. Indeed, settler colonial campaigns in the Great Lakes region have already depleted, degraded, or irreversibly damaged the ecosystems, plants, and animals that our ancestors had local living relationships with for hundreds of years and that are the material anchors of our contemporary customs, stories, and ceremonies. Settler colonial campaigns refer to the various global projects of combined military, commercial, and cultural expansion of European, North American and many other states (e.g. New Zealand). These waves of settlers, such as those forming the U.S. and Canadian states, continue to deploy strategic tools and weapons to establish permanent roots in indigenous territories with the continued hopes of inscribing homelands for their own families and societies in those territories (Lefevre).

¹ Anishinaabe or Anishinaabek (plural) and Neshnabé and Neshnabék are English spellings that correspond to different accents of the language of Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi peoples. There are multiple English spelling systems.

I use the term *campaigns* because these waves of settlement are sustained, strategic and militaristic. These campaigns include both war-like violence and the tactics for suppressing populations that are used alongside belligerence, from assimilative institutions (e.g. boarding schools) to containment practices (e.g. reservations) to the creation of dependency (e.g. commodity foods). As a means of carving out settler homelands from indigenous homelands, waves of settlers harnessed industrial means, from military technologies to large-scale mineral and fossil fuel extraction operations to sweeping, landscape-transforming regimes of commodity agriculture. Industrial settler *states* are the corresponding polities, from federal nation state governments to local municipalities and subnational provincial governments, that create and enforce the laws, policies, and jurisprudence that serve to protect and incubate the homeland-inscribing process from indigenous resistance, refusal, and resurgence in such territories.

The fallout of what I will call “industrial settler campaigns” is that, as indigenous peoples, we continue to exercise political and cultural self-determination even though there are now states such as the U.S. and Canada that are perceived by most people as being the preeminent sovereigns in the places where indigenous communities live, work, and play. Our degree of success in exercising self-determination is irreversibly coupled with our political relations with states whose constituent people and institutions wield daunting financial, military, and police resources and regulatory and legal enforcement capabilities. Ecosystems have been reshaped to such a degree by settlers and their institutions that it is hard to recognize anything “indigenous” about them. Hence many scholars and activists describe settler colonialism as a structure of oppression that erases indigenous peoples (Lefevre).

It would have been an act of imagining dystopia for our ancestors to consider the erasures we live through today, in which some Anishinaabek are finding it harder to obtain supplies of birch bark, or seeing algal blooms add to factors threatening whitefish populations, or fighting to ensure the legality in the eyes of the industrial settler state of protecting wild rice for harvest. Yet we do not give up by dwelling in a nostalgic past even though we live in our ancestors’ dystopia. My friend Deb McGregor (Ojibwe, Whitefish River First Nation) always points out to me that we are really living in just the tiniest sliver of Anishinaabe history. The vast majority of our history precedes the campaigns that have established states such as the U.S. and Canada. Our conservation and restoration efforts are motivated by how we put dystopia in perspective as just a brief, yet highly disruptive, historical moment for us—at least so far.

This historically brief, highly disruptive moment, “today’s dystopia of our ancestors,” sounds a lot like what others in the world dread they will face in the future as climate destabilization threatens the existence of species and ecosystems. Yet for many indigenous peoples, the Anthropocene is not experienced as threatening in precisely the same sense because the particular era of settlement I am describing forced many of our societies to let go of so many relationships with plants, animals and ecosystems at a wrongfully rapid pace. Rather, if there is something different in the Anthropocene for indigenous peoples, it would be just that we are focusing our energies *also* on adapting to another kind of anthropogenic environmental change: climate destabilization. Indeed, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we already suffered other kinds of anthropogenic environmental change at the hands of settlers, including changes associated with deforestation, forced removal and relocation, containment on reservations (i.e.

loss of mobility), liquidation of our lands into individual private property and subsequent dispossession, and unmitigated pollution and destruction of our lands from extractive industries and commodity agriculture, among many other examples. While all societies alter the environment in which they dwell, anthropogenic environmental change here refers very specifically to how industrial settler campaigns *both* dramatically changed ecosystems, such as through deforestation, overharvesting and pollution, *and* obstructed indigenous peoples' capacities to adapt to the changes, such through removal and containment on reservations.

Though the climate destabilization described in Anthropocene futures may be a distinct ecological challenge for indigenous peoples, we experience it nonetheless as associated with an iteration of patterns of industrial settler strategies and tactics that is very familiar to us from our experiences with and memories of the other kinds of anthropogenic environmental change just described. Indeed, settler industrial campaigns paved the way for industrial and capitalist collective actions whose ecological footprint contributes significantly to today's climate destabilization ordeal that, for many indigenous peoples, includes numerous conservation challenges involved in adapting to conditions such as sea level rise, warming waters, and increased severity of droughts, among others. Indigenous peoples are on the frontlines of dealing with these changing conditions, from coastal communities who have to relocate permanently to communities who are losing habitats in their homelands needed to continue their relationships with the remaining culturally and economically significant plants and animals. What makes many of these communities particularly vulnerable to the local impacts of climate destabilization is their continued intertwinement today with the same industrial settler strategies that already degraded many of their relationships with plants and animals in the past. For example, many indigenous peoples lived as highly mobile, multispecies societies capable of exercising great agency in shouldering environmental changes of the sort we are discussing now with climate destabilization. Yet industrial settler containment practices in North America rendered many indigenous peoples immobile, confining them to reservations, treaty harvesting areas or small islands that provide fewer options for adapting to changes that threaten their land base or shift the habitats of significant plant and animal populations farther away. As in the past, industrial settler campaigns today also obstruct the efforts of indigenous peoples to respond—from legal and diplomatic failures to mitigate dangerous climate change by lowering emissions to the enactment of laws, policies and bureaucratic institutions that stymie indigenous efforts to adapt within current confines such as reservations (Marino; Whyte; Wildcat).

In all these ways, climate destabilization fits into a larger pattern of a particular kind of anthropogenic environmental change taking place across this brief, but disruptive period of settlement. The ecosystems in which we live today are already drastically changed from those to which our ancestors related—a fact which shapes how we approach discussions of Anthropocene futures. Our ways of approaching conservation and restoration, then, are situated at the convergence of deep Anishinaabe history and the vast degradation of settler colonial campaigns occurring in such a short time. I think of this junction as our ancestors' dystopia.

Anishinaabe Restoration and Conservation

Anishinaabek/Neshnabék throughout the Great Lakes region are at the forefront of native species conservation and ecological restoration projects that seek to learn from, adapt, and put into practice local human and nonhuman relationships and stories at the convergence of deep

Anishinaabe history and the disruptiveness of industrial settler campaigns. These projects also seek to find ways to reconcile—as much as makes sense—with settler societies so that indigenous and settler conservation can share responsibilities and hold each other accountable. Consider three projects.

Nmé

Nmé (Lake Sturgeon) is the largest and oldest living fish in the Great Lakes basin, sometimes exceeding 100 years in age. *Nmé* served the Anishinaabek as a substantial source of food, an indicator species for monitoring the environment, and a clan identity, playing a role in ceremonies and stories. However, industrial settler campaigns in the Great Lakes region threatened the stability of *nmé* populations and the Anishinaabe system through over-harvesting, dams, stocking rivers with non-native fish species for sport fishing, and pollution. *Nmé* used to be plentiful, yet are now reduced to less than one percent of their historic numbers (Holtgren). Kenny Pheasant, an elder, says “Decline of the sturgeon has corresponded with decline in sturgeon clan families. Only a few sturgeon clan families are known around here” (Little River Band). The Little River Band of Ottawa Indians sought to restore *nmé* in the early 2000s.

The Natural Resources Department of the tribe started a cultural context group, composed of a diverse range of tribal members and biologists, which developed goals and objectives for restoration. The cultural context group facilitated “a voice” that “was an amalgamation of cultural, biological, political, and social elements, all being important and often indistinguishable” (Holtgren 135). The goal was to “restore the harmony and connectivity between *Nmé* and the Anishinaabek and bring them both back to the river . . . Bringing the sturgeon back to the river was an obvious biological element; however, restoring harmony between sturgeon and people was steeped in the cultural and social realm. Each meeting began with a ceremony, and the conversation was held over a feast” (Holtgren 136). Ultimately, the Department created the first streamside rearing facility for protecting young sturgeon before they are released each fall in order to preserve their genetic parentage (Holtgren et al.).

Annually in September, a public event featuring a pipe ceremony, feast, speeches and education about Ottawa traditions, the Band’s sovereignty and conservation science takes place and attendees use buckets to personally release *nmé* back to the river. The event can attract hundreds of attendees from all over the watershed. The relationships between people and sturgeon change and become stronger as individuals realize their dependence on *nmé* and the significance of how the deep historical relationship between the fish and Anishinaabek can guide innovate restoration and conservation efforts today that can improve environmental quality and heal people’s relationships in the watershed. Participants, including many children, begin to feel a sense of responsibility to *nmé*, developing a lasting connection when holding the fish in the atmosphere framed by Anishinaabe traditions and conservation science. I have talked to attendees who proclaim how they have come to realize through the event that it is people who also depend on *nmé*. This is especially significant in a watershed where the relationships among people have been strained by settler colonialism. The participants do not necessarily adopt the Anishinaabe way of thinking or living, yet they come to feel a sense of themselves as co-occupants of and relatives in a shared watershed. Success, perhaps, lies in how *nmé* restoration has changed the relationship between the settler Americans in the Manistee area and the Anishinaabek through

situating the project at the convergence of deep Anishinaabe history and industrial settler campaigns (Holtgren, Ogren, and Whyte).

Manoomin

Wild rice, or *manoomin*, is another important native species for Anishinaabek. Wild rice grows in shallow, clear and slow-moving waterways and can be harvested in early autumn. After harvesting, manoomin is processed through activities such as drying, parching, hulling, winnowing, and cleaning (that is, handpicking out any leftover rice husks). Manoomin is rich in vitamin, mineral, and protein contents and is easily stored as a dried good. The origin story tells of how Anishinaabek migrated from the East until they reached the land where food grows on water, or the Great Lakes region. Neighboring groups of U.S. and Canadian citizens and companies engage in activities such as mining, damming, growing commercial paddy rice for mass distribution, and recreational boating. These activities directly affect manoomin and its habitat—especially the interdependency of manoomin and water. Historically, settlers drove prices of manoomin down, making it uneconomical for Anishinaabe to sell it commercially as an alternative to subsistence use (Wallwork). For example, in states such as Minnesota, manoomin abundance has declined by half in the last 100 years (Andow et al.).

Anishinaabe people are leaders in the conservation of wild rice. The Nibi (water) and Manoomin Symposium, which takes place every two years, brings tribal rice harvesters in the Great Lakes, indigenous scholars, paddy rice growers, representatives from mining companies and state agencies, and university researchers interested in studying genetic modification of rice together. Elders share their stories about manoomin and youth share their perspective on how manoomin fits into their futures. Indigenous persons working as scientists in their Tribes share the experiences working with elders to understand the deep historical implications of the work they do to study and conserve manoomin. Other indigenous peoples are often invited to share their experiences restoring and conserving other native species, such as taro and maize.

Many at the symposium emphasize the importance of wild rice for the collective well-being of Anishinaabe people. While members of settler society may come to the event understanding manoomin as something of scientific curiosity, or a commodity to sell in a niche market, or a nuisance to the growth of mining, they are instead exposed to the deep historical relationship between Anishinaabek and manoomin and the significance of manoomin for Anishinaabe self-determination today. In the most recent white paper from the symposium, Norman Deschampe, former Minnesota Chippewa Tribal President, speaking of the state of Minnesota and the U.S. federal government, said that “we are of the opinion that the wild rice rights assured by treaty accrue not only to individual grains of rice, but to the very essence of the resource. We were not promised just any wild rice; that promise could be kept by delivering sacks of grain to our members each year. We were promised the rice that grew in the waters of our people, and all the value that rice holds” (Wild Rice White Paper 3). All of these actions have formed an important front of manoomin-based conservation that has challenged mining and other polluting activities, research on genetic modification, and the mass distribution of commercial “wild” rice.

Nibi

For Anishinaabek, as exemplified in the previous projects, it is hard to talk about native species conservation without *nibi* (water). Nibi has traditional value for Anishinaabek because it is

among the basic elements of Anishinaabe cosmology, as told in the creation story, which frames how community members view their relations to water. Water quality and abundance benefits human and animal health (McGregor, “Honouring”). Anishinaabe scholar Deb McGregor says that

We must look at the life that water supports (plants/medicines, animals, people, birds, etc.) and the life that supports water (e.g., the earth, the rain, the fish). Water has a role and a responsibility to fulfill, just as people do. We do not have the right to interfere with water’s duties to the rest of Creation. Indigenous knowledge tells us that water is the blood of Mother Earth and that water itself is considered a living entity with just as much right to live as we have. (McGregor, “Honouring” 37-38)

Water is sacred for Anishinaabek. Though the Great Lakes region has a high proportion of the world’s fresh water supply, things have changed in recent times. The waters are now the dumping ground of numerous pollutants. Agricultural runoff, sewage disposal, and contamination from industry, such as mercury, become entangled in the food chain and affect habitats for species important to Anishinaabe, such as fish. Changes in the Great Lakes, including the recent profusion of algal blooms which threatens whitefish populations, are projected to affect the ecological contexts needed for Anishinaabe to harvest first foods.

Anishinaabek are taking collective action to protect *nibi*. A group of Anishinaabe women began walking around the Great Lakes in the early 2000s, calling their efforts the Mother Earth Water Walk. The purpose is to help people in the basin recognize and re-recognize human relationships to water in its spiritual dimensions instead of seeing water as an inanimate resource. The walks, which take place in the spring, include a water ceremony, feast, and celebration, and the participating grandmothers take turns carrying a water vessel and eagle staff. Similarly, the grassroots women’s group *Akii Kwe*, made up of Anishinaabe women from Walpole Island, “have been diligently trying to protect water in their territory for years. Guided by their traditional responsibilities, they consider it their duty to speak for the water” (McGregor, “Traditional Ecological Knowledge” 107). *Akii Kwe* members are guided by their knowledge of how to be sensitive to water and care for water, which arises from their living near and attending closely to rivers and lakes (McGregor, “Considerations”).

These collective actions by Anishinaabe women are changing decision-making processes in Canada. The Anishinaabek Nation, an indigenous multi-party organization that plays an important role in Canadian politics, created the Women’s Water Commission for bringing women’s voices into Ontario and Great Lakes water issues. The explicit goal of the commission includes fostering “the traditional role of the Women in caring for water.” “Traditional,” here, is important not because of pseudo-factual claims about indigenous women’s roles, but because it indicates that certain kinds of orientation towards water imply cultural understandings of one’s responsibilities to the earth’s living, non-living, and spiritual beings, as well as criticisms of industrial settler campaigns in the region that have damaged indigenous systems of stewardship. The Commission seeks to encourage recognition of traditional responsibilities along with the need to include women as part of the decision-making processes (McGregor, “Considerations”). The Walk too has also spread across North America, becoming a regional form of action that includes more people each year, not just Anishinaabe women alone (McGregor, “Considerations”; Mother Earth Water Walk). Again, these water conservation efforts place in

context how recent degradation of the Great Lakes looks from a deep Anishinaabe historical perspective.

Nmé, Manoomin & Nibi

The three restoration and conservation projects just described all take place today in our ancestors' dystopia. In each project, the focus on native species puts in perspective the convergence between deep Anishinaabe stories and histories and the more recent industrial settler degradation of the environment. The projects bring attention to how industrial settler campaigns erase the particular systems of interdependent relationships of humans, nonhumans, and ecosystems that matter to many indigenous peoples, from more historic seasonal rounds to more contemporary structures of self-determination. Participants in the projects learn from, adapt, and put into practice ancient stories and relationships involving humans, nonhuman species, and ecosystems to address today's conservation challenges in the Anthropocene. The value of these local stories and relationships derives from indigenous peoples' knowledge of what it means to survive and flourish in times our ancestors would have likely imagined to be dystopian. They are not based on dread of certain futures; rather, they arise from indigenous perspectives on how to respond to anthropogenic climate destabilization based on having already lived through local losses of species and ecosystems.

It is certainly true that sturgeon or wild rice are not likely to play the same prominent dietary or cultural roles that they once did. Yet the very act of engaging these stories and relationships through restoring and conserving native species brings attention to indigenous perspectives on the harms of settler colonialism and engenders collective actions based on the lessons we can draw from those experiences. These kinds of native species conservation go along with many other forms of adaptation that indigenous peoples do that are often seen as "untraditional," from investing in science education for youth to updating building codes and other tribal infrastructure to engaging in advocacy through direct actions coordinated by social media and writing declarations. It is also true that the water relations of Anishinaabek will not be restored to what they were. But the Mother Earth Water Walk seeks to engender a greater understanding of how the water was and is degraded through industrial settler activities such as pollution, and to foster respect for the sorts of responsibilities humans of all nations and heritages must have in order to protect the water now and moving into the future. The projects emphasize that the industrial settler campaigns erase what makes a place ecologically unique in terms of human and nonhuman relations, the ecological history of a place, and the sharing of the environment by different human societies.

These projects acknowledge that before people can work together to grasp the nettles that are conservation problems in the Anthropocene, there needs to be reconciliation among people so that they come to have sufficient appreciation of their different histories and can share responsibilities and be accountable to each other. The sturgeon, wild rice, and water restoration programs feature public events that bring together indigenous people and members of settler society to learn about how humans are entangled with other species and with the environment. These multispecies engagements are not aimed solely at avoiding the physical loss of certain species or ecosystems, but also at building people's appreciation of what it means to share local places in light of how they are implicated in more regional and global forces such as industrial settler colonialism. The conservation of native species, then, is not *only* about restoration for the

species' sake in the absence of histories and relationships with other human and nonhuman species, but because the act of starting to conserve *some* native species—the ones that are still around—serves to raise questions about environmental justice and colonialism that too often are marginalized in global discussions of the future.

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