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# Towards Settler Responsibility in Conservation

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### Résumé de l'article

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## Towards Settler Responsibility in Conservation

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### Abstract

This conceptual paper reviews recent efforts to confront colonialism in conservation, with an emphasis on the challenges and complexities that have emerged among settler organizations engaged in this work. We consider recent academic and grey literature in the field in order to map different approaches to conservation, including the emerging interface of Indigenous and western approaches. We also map different approaches to Indigenous engagement undertaken by settler conservation organizations, including representation, recognition, redistribution, and reparation. We suggest that regardless of their approach, in order to create the conditions for truly reciprocal collaborations with Indigenous Nations, settler conservation organizations would need to accept their responsibilities to interrupt and redress western conservation's colonial foundations, support Indigenous sovereignty, rights, and resurgence (including by supporting Indigenous approaches to conservation), and commit to the difficult, long-haul work of reorienting their approach to relationships away from patterns of paternalism and extraction toward trust, respect, reciprocity, consent, and accountability.

### Keywords

Conservation, environment, colonialism, decolonization, reparations, resurgence

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### Introduction

In the face of the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, there is growing attention on the importance of protecting land from environmental degradation.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the context of both reconciliation efforts and growing demands for decolonization and #LandBack in settler colonial countries, there is also a sense that "attempts to increase conservation without addressing underlying jurisdiction, rights, and title of Indigenous groups, and without their direct involvement and leadership, will not only continue to be unethical, but will also be increasingly impossible to implement" (Artelle et al. 2019, 2). Thus, settler conservation organizations have recently begun to confront their historical and ongoing complicity in settler colonialism. By "settler conservation organizations" we mean both public and private conservation organizations that are led and staffed predominately by settler individuals,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, when we speak about "land" we are speaking about land, air, water, and all other forms of life, including human and other-than-human beings.

operate according to the values of settler society, are legitimated according to the laws and regulations of settler-colonial states, and follow the norms of western conservation.<sup>2</sup> This includes land trusts, protected areas, parks, public agencies, and other institutions focused on land and environmental protections. While many sectors of settler society are confronting the enduring legacies of colonialism, these issues are particularly pressing for conservation given the sector's primary focus on *land*.

As Tuck and Yang (2012) note, settler colonialism's "disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence," which is not just historical but also ongoing (5). Indigenous Peoples have long identified the role of western conservation in undermining Indigenous sovereignty, rights, and self-determination while reproducing this colonial violence. A growing number of scholars and activists have joined Indigenous Peoples in suggesting that "It is past time for conservation to be decolonized" (Murdock 2021). This suggestion challenges the presumed benevolence and universality of the western conservation model that has now become globally dominant, and raises several questions about the role of power, injustice, and dispossession in the theory and practice of conservation, including: Who decides how to imagine and practice conservation? In whose name? For whose benefit? At whose expense? (Dawson et al. 2021).

Informed by Indigenous scholars, critical geographers, and others who have offered critiques of the colonial imprint of western conservation, this article reviews recent shifts in the study and practice of conservation in what is currently known as Canada, particularly shifts that seek to: 1) identify, interrupt, and redress the systemic inequities and colonial relations that continue to characterize prevailing conservation policies and practices; and 2) center Indigenous rights, knowledges, sovereignty, and self-determination. We examine the implications of these shifts for those working in settler conservation organizations. Although we focus on the Canadian context, the issues discussed here will likely have relevance elsewhere, especially in other settler colonial contexts. This collectively authored article is informed by our different positions in relation to these lands: Stein is a US-born white settler, Ahenakew is Cree from Ahtahkakoop First Nation, Oliveira da Silva Huni Kui is a member of the Huni Kui Indigenous Nation in Brazil, Bowness is a Canadian-born racialized settler, Mendes is of mixed Terena-Mozambican-Portuguese ancestry from Brazil, and Evans is Canadian-born and of mixed white settler and Métis ancestry. While we each have responsibilities to support the health and well-being of our shared, living planet and all its inhabitants, including both human and other-than-human beings, our different positionalities impact the specific shape of those responsibilities.

We find that while changes to the mainstream conservation landscape in Canada "offer opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to work together and deliver more meaningful conservation efforts" (Jacobs 2022, 24), in many cases these engagements end up

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<sup>2</sup> The western conservation paradigm has been described in many ways, including: dominant, Eurocentric, white, settler, colonial, and "the Western World Conservation Paradigm" (WWCP) (Luiselli and Amori 2022).

reproducing colonial patterns, especially given that “Indigenous Peoples are rarely invited to specify the *terms* of engagement” (Buschman 2019, 20). This has led Youdelis and colleagues (2021) to identify “a paradoxical tension in the Canadian conservation sector whereby Indigenous-led conservation is supported in theory, but actively undermined in practice.”

Thus, especially on the part of settler individuals and organizations, considerable work remains to be done in order to confront their complicity in colonial harm, including confronting the true costs of the benefits they enjoy within a settler colonial society – costs that are borne by Indigenous Peoples as well as other-than-human beings and the land itself. We suggest that in order for more respectful and reciprocal approaches to conservation to become possible, settlers would need to accept their responsibilities to redress western conservation’s colonial roots, support Indigenous resurgence (especially Indigenous/Indigenous-led conservation), and commit to the long-haul work of reorienting settler-Indigenous relationships away from patterns of paternalism and extraction toward trust, respect, reciprocity, consent, and accountability (Whyte 2020).

We begin by reviewing the colonial dimensions of western approaches to conservation and specifically consider how Indigenous Peoples’ approaches to conservation, rooted in intergenerational knowledges, relationships, and responsibilities to their territories, challenge the purported universality and benevolence of western approaches. Next, we synthesize recent efforts to confront colonialism in conservation before offering two social cartographies: one that maps different approaches to conservation, including an emerging interface between western and Indigenous approaches; and one that maps different approaches to settler organizations’ engagements with Indigenous Peoples. Through these cartographies, we invite consideration of the emerging complexities, challenges, and possibilities for reimagining conservation. In particular, these cartographies can support settler researchers and practitioners working in this area to: trace the socio-historical patterns that reproduce colonial relationships in conservation; discern their responsibilities to multiple human and other-than-human communities, especially local Indigenous Nations and Indigenous lands; deepen reflexivity about the difficulties and complexities of enacting substantive organizational, sectoral, and social change; and identify opportunities to reduce harm and enact material and relational repair, while also approaching this work as an ongoing inquiry, including by committing to learning from the inevitable mistakes that will be involved.

### **The Coloniality of Western Conservation**

As Jacobs and colleagues (2022) note, western forms of conservation were created precisely because of the harmful environmental impacts of settlers’ attempts to colonize and control Indigenous lands, and put them in the service of “commodity-based utilitarianism (e.g., the extraction of ‘natural resources,’ forest products, marine fisheries, etc)” (2). However, by focusing on protecting specific areas of land and keeping them “pristine”, the western conservation movement also provided an alibi for extraction to continue elsewhere (Enns, Bersaglio and Sneyd 2019; Lunstrum, Bose, and Zalik 2016; Youdelis et al. 2020). From its earliest days, western conservation has operated as a form of “conservation-via-dispossession”

(Murdock 2021) that displaces Indigenous Peoples and accumulates Indigenous lands under settler control (Büscher and Fletcher 2015). In these ways, western conservation has historically been part of the same colonial system that created the ecological crises it purports to solve.

The Euro-American model of conservation began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most clearly marked by the creation of public national parks in the US and Canada. Not only were these parks founded on Indigenous Peoples' lands without their consent, but in some cases, Indigenous Peoples still living there were forcibly removed to create the parks, leading Truer (2021) to describe the parks as "crime scenes" (see also Dowie 2011; Koester and Bryan 2021; Martin 2021; Spence 1999). Private settler conservation was initiated later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by "wealthy individuals, hunting and service clubs, and then natural history organizations" (Innes, Attridge and Lawson 2021, 3), and grew significantly in the 1960s. These organizations "found [their] initial base of support in largely white and affluent communities," a base that "remains largely unchanged in the present day" (Dhaliwal and Hodgson 2021, 4). As a result, the interests of settler conservation organizations' supporters are often distinct from and may contradict the needs, priorities, and interests of local Indigenous Nations.

Although public and private settler conservation differ, the impacts on Indigenous communities are often the same in terms of the maintenance of colonial structures of dispossession. Both tend to follow the theoretical and practical tenants of western science as well as western onto-epistemologies that frame humans as separate from and superior to nature, rather than as a part of nature. In this worldview, nature is treated primarily as a "resource" for human benefit (whether economic, political, social, and/or spiritual). By framing nature as a resource, western conservation is premised on colonial ontologies that construct land, water, and other-than-human beings as property from which value can be extracted, rather than as living entities to whom humans have responsibilities (Curley 2021). This approach to conservation treats protected areas as spaces of pristine "wilderness", untouched by humans but protected in the name of human benefit (Cronon 1996; Eichler and Baumeister 2022; Youdelis et al. 2020).

This wilderness-preserving approach to conservation, often called "fortress conservation", is antithetical to Indigenous relationships to land. It denies the fact that humans are part of nature, violates Indigenous Peoples' rights and responsibilities to access and govern their territories, and imposes a supposedly universal model of conservation itself, based on western science and worldviews. This approach, therefore, reinforces the erasure and epistemicide of Indigenous knowledges. The idealization of pure, untouched wilderness also invisibilizes the fact that Indigenous Peoples have long-standing relationships with these lands, and actively cultivated and sustained the health and biodiversity of those lands before colonization (Denevan 1992). This invisibilization reproduces the colonial myth of terra nullius (empty land) that was used to justify Indigenous displacement and European settlement.

These impacts are not just historical. As western governments and activists turn increased attention to climate change and environmental crises, there is a risk that proposed solutions will further entrench injustice and dispossession if they do not center Indigenous

rights and respect Indigenous sovereignty (Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change 2009; McGregor et al. 2020; Wilkens and Datchou-Tirvaudey 2022; Whyte 2020; Zografos and Robins 2020). Around the world, Indigenous Peoples identify conservation as a significant threat (Murdock 2021; Weldmichel 2020). A recent report from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples noted that in many protected areas, "Indigenous peoples are denied their rights to land and resources, self-determination and autonomy, and cultural heritage, and suffer from forced evictions, killings, physical violence and abusive prosecution" (Tzay 2022, 7). There has been expanded use of military tactics and personnel in the patrolling of protected areas worldwide (Apostolopoulou et al. 2021; Büscher and Fletcher 2018).

We suggest that western conservation continues to remain dominant not because of a lack of information about its colonial nature, but rather because people remain invested in its presumed benevolence and promised effectiveness, and thus, they deny its harmful impacts. Below, we summarize five constitutive denials that structure western conservation in settler colonial contexts. Although these denials are increasingly being challenged, they continue to structure prevailing practices in most settler conservation organizations, as well as most public perceptions and discourses around land use, conservation, and recreation:

- 1) *Denial that humans are a part of (and interdependent with) nature:* Imposing a divide between humans and "nature," and treating nature as a resource for human use;
- 2) *Denial of the significance of Indigenous Peoples' historical and enduring rights, responsibilities, and relationships to their territories:* Claiming settler ownership, control, and authority over Indigenous lands; failing to respect Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty, governing authority, relationships, and treaty and inherent rights;
- 3) *Denial of the existence and/or importance of Indigenous environmental knowledge and practices:* Treating western science and strategies of land management as the best/only means of supporting healthy environments; devaluing Indigenous knowledges, or treating them as a supermarket of options to be extracted, appropriated, and consumed if convenient;
- 4) *Denial of western conservation's colonial foundations:* Assuming western conservation's benevolence and shared interests with Indigenous Peoples, thereby disavowing or downplaying its historical and ongoing complicity in harm, and its contemporary responsibility for interrupting and redressing that harm; and
- 5) *Denial of western conservation's entanglement with extractivism:* Because conservation happens 'here', it is often presumed extraction can continue to happen 'there'

Without interrupting these denials and facing the difficult truths that they obscure, it will be difficult for settler conservation organizations to confront the colonial systems that

structure their work and develop more accountable relationships with Indigenous Peoples and lands.

### **Indigenous Challenges to Western Conservation**

In addition to drawing attention to the limits and harms of western approaches to conservation, many Indigenous scholars, activists, and community leaders emphasize they have very different relationships to land than settlers. As McGregor, Whitaker, and Sritharan (2020) note, “Many, if not all, Indigenous Peoples across the globe already have their own intellectual and legal traditions to draw upon to generate a self-determined future that involves living well with the Earth” (36). For many Indigenous Peoples, “plants, animals, and ecosystems” are themselves “agents bound up in moral relationships of reciprocal responsibilities with humans and other nonhumans” (Whyte, Caldwell, and Schaefer 2018, 155). These relationships and responsibilities are not just inter-species, but also inter-generational (Evering and Longboat 2013). Through these relationships, Indigenous Peoples have developed deep knowledges of their territories, including “an understanding of place-based natural histories; and an understanding of landscape-scale ecosystem dynamics (Buschman 2019, 11).

There is no single “Indigenous” approach to relationships with land as there are nearly 400 million Indigenous Peoples across the world from over 5,000 different cultural and knowledge traditions. This diversity of cultures and knowledges is linked to the diversity of ecosystems and bioregions that Indigenous Peoples have been tied to and with for millennia. There is significant heterogeneity not only across but also within Indigenous Nations, which must be considered so as not to flatten complexities or reproduce pan-Indigenous or stereotyped representations in conservation work (Marsden, Star, and Smylie 2020; McKay and Grenz 2021). Indigenous communities “have a wide range of legitimate political, cultural and economic aspirations for their lands” (Garnett et al. 2018, 370), some of which challenge or clash with western approaches to conservation. For instance, Indigenous Peoples may engage in subsistence activities (e.g., hunting, fishing, harvesting), income-generating activities, and in some cases resource development, rather than leaving their lands “untouched” as in fortress/wilderness approaches (Atleo 2021; Curley 2019).

While it is important not to romanticize or homogenize Indigenous Peoples, many Indigenous knowledges and practices prioritize healthy landscapes as part of holistic efforts to ensure collective well-being. As a result, there are many positive ecological impacts of Indigenous jurisdiction and land management, including high levels of biodiversity (FAO and FILAC 2021; Oldekop et al. 2016; Schuster et al. 2019; Yellowhead Institute 2019). Indeed, some challenges to the western conservation paradigm emphasize the ineffectiveness of that paradigm for actually halting ecological destruction, arguing that we cannot interrupt this destruction using tools from within the same system that is causing it.

However, settlers’ engagements with Indigenous ecological knowledges and practices also risk repeating long-standing colonial patterns of extraction and appropriation if they treat



“Indigenous knowledge systems as simply filling in the gaps of a Western scientific understanding” (Reid et al. 2022, 720; see also Ahenakew 2016; Eichler and Baumeister 2022; Muller, Hemming, and Rigney 2019). Ethical engagements would instead need to respect the political and intellectual sovereignty of Indigenous Nations, and support Indigenous(-led) conservation as a form of material, relational, and epistemic accountability. As Grenz recommends, “ecologists interested in any aspects of the application of Indigenous ways of knowing to their work would be best served to adopt the saying, Nothing about us without us” (in McKay and Grenz 2021; see also Marsden et al. 2020). In other words, Indigenous knowledges should not be engaged by settlers without the leadership and participation of Indigenous Peoples.

### Efforts to Confront Colonialism in Settler Conservation

There are growing pressures for settler conservation organizations to confront the limits and harms of mainstream western conservation and its approaches to Indigenous engagement. In Canada, these pressures are informed by public discussions of colonialism that emerged following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2015), which documented the history of forced attendance in residential schools for Indigenous children, and brought settlers’ attention to the harmful intergenerational legacies of these schools and of settler colonialism more generally. In addition to the TRC, as well as the growing movement for #LandBack (Yellowhead Institute, 2019), there is a mix of pressures informing changes in settler conservation organizations. This includes:

- *ethical pressures*, which are rooted in a sense of responsibility to interrupt colonial patterns and repair relationships with Indigenous Peoples, knowledges, and lands;
- *ecological pressures*, which are rooted in concerns about the limits of western approaches to conservation for halting and mitigating climate change and biodiversity loss, paired with the importance of Indigenous rights and knowledges for ensuring effective land conservation (FAO and FILAC 2021; Liboiron 2021b);
- *social pressures*, which are rooted in growing public expectations and demands for deepening settler responsibilities to Indigenous Peoples and lands, especially among younger generations (Steady 2021); and,
- *legal pressures*, which are rooted in shifting legal contexts that suggest “an increasing recognition of inherent Indigenous rights and title in state and federal legal systems” (Artelle 2019, 2; see also Innes, Attridge and Lawson 2021).

Many calls to decolonize conservation suggest that a “minimum starting point” would be the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (McGregor et al. 2020). Applying the spirit and letter of UNDRIP to conservation would require, amongst other things, ensuring the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of Indigenous Peoples about decisions that would affect them and their traditional territories

(Jacobs et al. 2022).<sup>3</sup> In Canada, upholding Indigenous treaty and inherent rights enshrined in the constitution, including the right to self-government, would also require significant shifts in the conservation sector. This is true not only for public parks and agencies but also for private conservation organizations. A recent report concludes, “the starting point for decisions about the securement or management of private conservation lands is not whether there is a legal duty to consult, but rather, how to meaningfully engage with Indigenous governments and respect Indigenous jurisdiction” (Innes, Attridge, and Lawson 2021).

To centre Indigenous rights and respect Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and governing authority would be a significant shift from most settler conservation organizations’ current modes of operation. It would require not only rethinking strategic plans, institutional missions, budgets, and organizational priorities but also navigating these shifts in relation to the legal and fiduciary requirements of settler governments that remain grounded in colonial frameworks. While few organizations have made this level of commitment, given their focus on land it is becoming increasingly impossible for them to entirely opt out of discussions about the role of colonialism in conservation and their responsibilities to Indigenous Peoples. Any organization that does so will likely be considered out of sync with current conversations and emerging practices, and therefore risk a loss of relevance and social legitimacy.

Recently, some settler conservation organizations, governments, and individuals have taken steps to enact some form of restitution for their complicity in colonial harm. Actions that might have been unimaginable just a few years ago now appear regularly in the news, about settlers returning or sharing lands, or enacting other forms of redress. One can now find guides about “How to Transfer Your Land to Indigenous Peoples” (Braganza 2018). In one recent example, a Mi’kmaw-led conservation trust took over stewardship of a nature reserve in Cape Breton, previously held by a settler nature trust. Another example is the Treaty Land Sharing Network of settler farmers and ranchers that welcome Indigenous Peoples to hunt, gather plants and medicines, and hold ceremonies on their traditional territories. In the US, the Indigenous-led Sogorea Te’ Land Trust in Oakland and the Real Rent Duwamish in Seattle request yearly donations (“taxes”) from settlers living in the area. In Canada, Reciprocity Trusts, a settler-led organization, wants to “arrange payments from homeowners, business owners and renters to distribute to the First Nations whose lands they live and work on” (Egan-Elliott 2021).

Not all responses to these shifts are supportive. Instead, we find a wide range, from those who say things aren’t moving fast enough, to those who say things are moving too fast.

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<sup>3</sup> The Yellowhead Institute (2019) suggests that Indigenous conceptualizations of consent go beyond FPIC to include four additional elements: restorative (centring Indigenous governmental and legal orders); epistemic (accepting Indigenous understandings of relationships to land); reciprocal (ensuring Indigenous Peoples are “not merely being asked to grant consent, but are determining the terms [and degree] of consent”); and legitimate (be granted or withheld by representatives perceived as legitimate by the community itself) (9).

This is to be expected in our current context of hyper-complexity, polarization, and rapid social change. Even those who are committed to confronting historical truths and ongoing realities of colonialism have different guiding assumptions and strategies of change. Thus, for settlers embarking on efforts to confront colonialism in conservation, it is important to learn to distinguish between these different approaches, ethically navigate the possible tensions between them, and discern the most relevant and responsible approach to take in any given context.

In the following sections, we offer two social cartographies that can support this learning. Social cartographies seek to make visible contrasts between distinct approaches to a shared issue of concern, especially by mapping the underlying and often unstated theoretical, political, and ontological assumptions behind these approaches (Andreotti et al. 2016; Paulston 1996). These maps are not intended to represent reality in totalizing ways. They rather offer one partial and provisional entry point for more discerning and accountable engagements with different (often conflicting) perspectives, and provide openings for pluralizing possible pathways forward. In the first social cartography, we map western and Indigenous approaches to conservation, and then consider emerging possibilities at the interface of these approaches, emphasizing the complexities and tensions of that interface. In the second cartography, we map four different ways settler conservation organizations are engaging with Indigenous Peoples.

### **Mapping Multiple Approaches to Conservation**

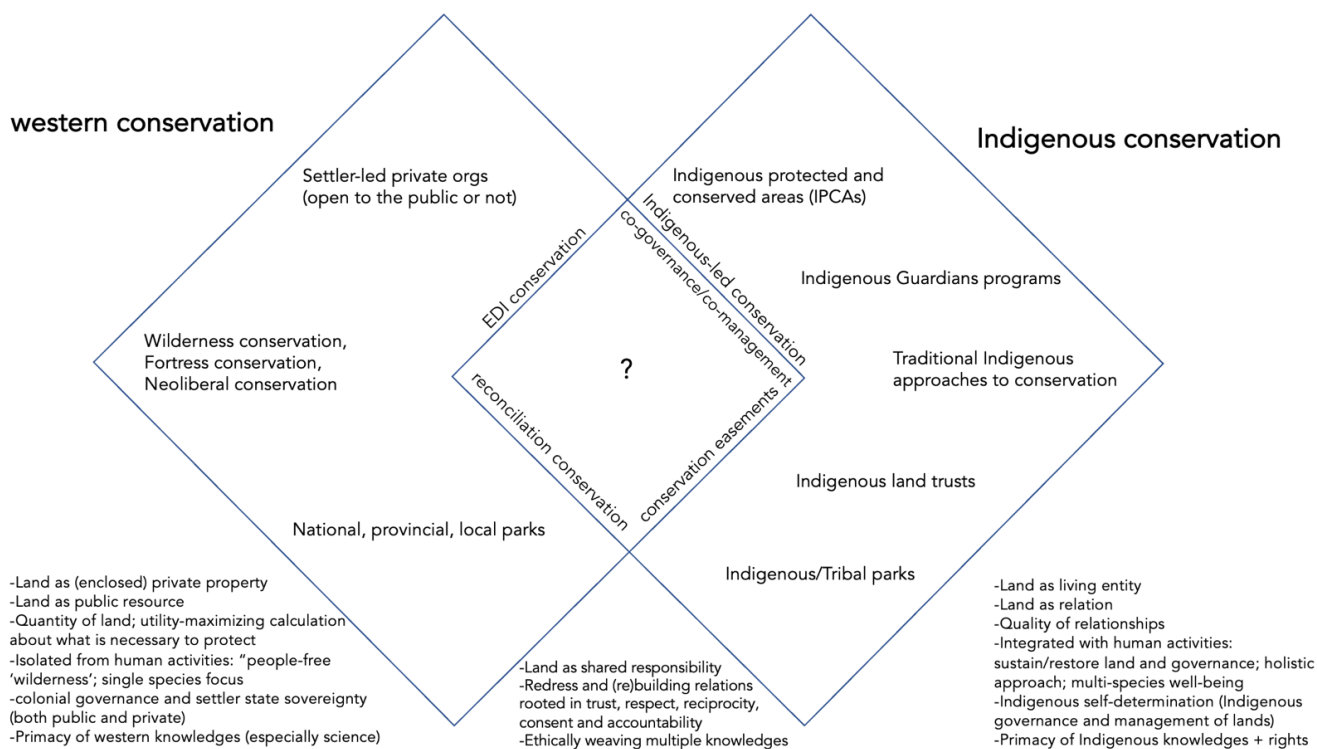
In this section, we map three approaches to conservation: western approaches, Indigenous approaches, and their interface (summarized in Figure 1). We use “approaches” in the plural form to emphasize that even within each broad category there is heterogeneity.

#### ***Western Conservation***

In western approaches to conservation, humans are considered separate from, and superior to, nature. Nature is treated either as a private or public resource, but in either case owned and used according to its perceived value to humans. In settler colonial contexts, western conservation is characterized by a colonial imprint and (primarily white) settler ownership, governance, and management of Indigenous lands, using western knowledges (especially western science) (Hernandez 2022). In fact, the idea of the “wilderness” and national parks in particular have become central to the national imaginaries of settler nation-states (Youdelis et al. 2020).

Some have identified a specifically neoliberal and financialized form of western conservation that seeks to align conservation with the creation of profit (Sullivan 2013). This form of conservation relies on and reinforces fortress conservation in its efforts to find ways to “simultaneously ‘save’ the environment and establish long-term modes of capital accumulation” (Büscher and Fletcher 2015, 273). While some emphasize the novelty of these approaches, others suggest they “can be considered the latest stage in a long and contradictory relationship between capitalism and environmental protection”

(Apostolopoulou et al. 2021, 236). In other words, neoliberal conservation can be understood as an intensification of the colonial, capitalist logics that have always been present within western conservation efforts.



**Figure 1.** Cartography of approaches to conservation

relationship between capitalism and environmental protection" (Apostolopoulou et al. 2021, 236). In other words, neoliberal conservation can be understood as an intensification of the colonial, capitalist logics that have always been present within western conservation efforts.

Increasingly, many organizations whose work falls under the western conservation approach have come under critique for the whiteness of their staff, membership, and organizational missions as a whole. Whiteness has been embedded in western approaches to conservation from the very beginning, even though Indigenous and racialized communities are disproportionately affected by environmental destruction and degradation (Dhaliwal and Hodgson 2021; Taylor 2016). Recent critiques have led, in some cases, to an "equity, diversity, and inclusion" (EDI) approach to conservation. There is a significant range of EDI approaches, from those that simply seek to include more racialized and gender-diverse people as staff and members within existing organizational structure and values, to those that seek more substantive forms of institutional and social transformation, such as the shifting of decision-making power and financial resources to systemically marginalized groups.

Some have also sought to develop an approach of "reconciliation conservation." As with EDI conservation, reconciliation conservation work varies greatly. Some uncritically combine reconciliation with EDI efforts, not attending to the specific responsibilities to and

rights of Indigenous Peoples as sovereign nations. Reconciliation efforts may be more symbolic, such as adding a tokenistic land acknowledgement (Fisk et al. 2022), while others seek to reimagine conservation at the interface of Indigenous and settler worldviews in ways that center respect for Indigenous Peoples' rights, sovereignty, and knowledges. One well-known example of the latter is the Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership (CRP), which is an "Indigenous-led network that brings together a diverse range of partners to advance Indigenous-led conservation and Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) across Canada."

### ***Indigenous Conservation***

Indigenous conservation is led by and centers Indigenous Peoples as the primary decision-makers about what, where, and how conservation should occur on their traditional territories (Wright 2018). We also note, following Hernandez (2022), that some Indigenous Peoples do not use the term "conservation" and instead describe their land caretaking relationships in other ways, including terms that come from their own languages and knowledge systems.

While conservation is usually a separate site of activity for western communities, for many Indigenous communities it is holistically integrated with efforts to ensure collective well-being "through relationships to other people, to the land, and to our ancestors in the spiritual realm" (Dennis and Robin 2020, 4). Indigenous conservation efforts prioritize upholding responsibilities to steward their traditional territories and revitalizing place-based knowledges and practices on their own terms (de Leeuw and Hunt 2018). Thus, ostensibly new approaches to Indigenous conservation are informed by traditional knowledges and practices and seek to enact the resurgence of Indigenous Nations while strategically navigating a still-colonial world.

As Craft and Plotkin (2022) note, Indigenous Peoples are "employing strategic partnerships, contracts, funding mechanisms and agreements to steward and safeguard previously dispossessed lands and waters" (33). Indigenous Peoples can designate protected areas on their territories according to their own laws, regardless of whether these are recognized by settler governments (Akins and Bissonnette 2020). However, these efforts are affected by the bounds of social and political legibility and legitimacy imposed by settler society (Zurba et al. 2019). This paradox is evident in the case of "Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas" (IPCAs).

IPCAs are an increasingly popular means of framing Indigenous conservation and asserting Indigenous self-determination in conservation. IPCAs can be defined as "lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems" (Indigenous Circle of Experts 2018, 5). IPCAs can take different forms, but the Indigenous Circle of Experts (2018) suggests they share three "essential elements: they are Indigenous led; they represent a long-term commitment to conservation; and they elevate Indigenous rights and responsibilities" (104).

Despite the promising possibilities offered by IPCAs, they “live in a legal grey zone,” as “no federal, provincial or territorial statute explicitly recognizes the right of Indigenous Nations to declare or govern their own conserved areas” (West Coast Environmental Law 2017). Thus, while Indigenous Nations can establish IPCAs under their own laws, this does not mean settler governments will recognize them (Bulowski 2022; Zurba et al. 2019). Courtois suggests IPCAs may be understood as “an interim land back action,” noting that government support for IPCAs comes in the form of programs, rather than nation-to-nation partnerships, which “consistently puts [Indigenous Nations] in this weird kind of paternal dynamic” (as cited by Bulowski 2022). Youdelis and colleagues (2021) therefore argue that although the Canadian government has provided support to IPCAs, for instance through funding pledges, “the country's extractivist development model...along with jurisdictional inconsistencies...are undermining the establishment and long-term viability of many IPCAs.”

Another approach to Indigenous conservation is Indigenous Guardian programs. In these programs, Indigenous Nations monitor and manage their protected and conserved areas to ensure healthy landscapes and strengthen governance over their lands (Indigenous Leadership Initiative n.d). The Land Needs Guardians campaign has identified over 120 Indigenous Guardian programs in Canada, many of which are led by Indigenous women, and there is a newly established First Nations Guardians Network. There are also Indigenous land trusts, whereby Indigenous Nations purchase lands within their traditional territories to be held collectively, as well as conservation organizations that are founded and led by Indigenous Peoples.

We note that the distinction between “Indigenous conservation” and “Indigenous-led” conservation is not always clear. For instance, “Indigenous-led conservation” can refer to efforts entirely undertaken by Indigenous Nations (in which case it would fall squarely within Indigenous approaches on the cartography), and/or to projects or agreements between Indigenous Nations and settler organizations or governments that take their primary direction from Indigenous Nations (in which case it would be located closer to the interface of Indigenous and western approaches, but leaning more toward the Indigenous side). The Indigenous Circle of Experts (2018) defines Indigenous-led conservation as efforts in which “Indigenous governments have the primary role in determining the objectives, boundaries, management plans and governance structures” (36), and offer IPCAs as an example.

Significant complexities can emerge when Indigenous(-led) conservation efforts like IPCAs and Indigenous Guardian programs receive federal funding. For instance, while this funding can be understood as a rightful form of redistribution that can be mobilized by Indigenous Nations to practice self-determination in conservation and beyond, some observe that it could also create “a cycle of colonial entanglement” that could undermine Indigenous efforts to seek the restoration of governing authority over their territories (Reed et al. 2020). Thus, Todd (2022) argues, “these policies and approaches should fully acknowledge the sovereignty of Indigenous communities without pressure to exchange autonomy for limited

funding and partnership support." Further complexities arise at the emerging interface of Indigenous and western approaches to conservation, which we review next.

### ***Emerging Interface of Indigenous and Western Conservation***

Efforts to foster more ethical engagements at the interface of Indigenous and western approaches to conservation are represented by a question mark on the cartography because these efforts are still emerging. While more settler conservation organizations have indicated their commitment to engage and be accountable to Indigenous Peoples and knowledges, many questions remain about how this can be done without reproducing colonial relations.

At this interface are co-governance and/or co-management agreements, which broadly indicate shared authority, responsibility, and benefits across two or more different communities or governments (Park and Allaby 2017). One high-profile example is Gwaii Haanas, which is co-governed by the Haida Nation and the Canadian government. However, getting to this agreement was not an easy process, and it was only achieved through the Haida Nation's mobilization of multiple strategies in the context of their larger struggles for sovereignty, including "a combination of legal challenges, political negotiations, and public protest" (Shields 2020).

Significant challenges and complexities have emerged in the operationalization of co-governance/co-management. In particular, there is a tendency for settler conservation organizations to maintain a strict hold over resources, decision-making power, and priorities and practical strategies in ways that fail to recognize and respect Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty, including their legal, governance, and knowledge systems (Akins and Bissonnette 2020; Arngna'naaq et al. 2020; Buschman 2019; Jacobs et al. 2022; Reo et al. 2017). Shields (2020) emphasizes that "co-management can only truly work when substantial power imbalances between the colonial government and Indigenous groups have been addressed" (n.p.).

For some Indigenous Nations, shared governance and/or management may be understood not as the final goal but rather as an "'interim step to achieving the ultimate goal of full title and jurisdiction'" (First Nations Fisheries Council, as cited by Akins and Bissonnette 2020, 7). Other Nations simply seek the ability to immediately manage and govern their own lands rather than seek a collaborative arrangement with settler governments or institutions.

In addition to co-governance and co-management, other efforts to reimagine conservation at the interface of western and Indigenous approaches include conservation easements where public or private conservation organizations grant Indigenous Nations access to lands they hold for certain purposes. This may entail granting access for cultural and ceremonial activities, and/or for Indigenous Nations to practice their own conservation or restoration methods. Indigenous Nations may also grant easements to settler conservation organizations, or Indigenous Nations and settler conservation organizations may be joint holders of an easement.

There are many emerging opportunities for settler conservation organizations and Indigenous Nations to work together to protect, promote, and restore ecological integrity and human dignity. It is not yet clear which practices could lead to a genuinely different approach to conservation, and this will likely depend on the specifics of a particular context. Most settler organizations are at the very beginning stages of learning how to do conservation work without reproducing long-standing colonial patterns of relationship. In the next section, we offer a social cartography of settler conservation organizations' engagements with Indigenous communities, which maps four possible (not mutually exclusive) approaches.

### **Approaches to Settler Engagement with Indigenous Communities**

We identify four different ways that settler conservation organizations engage with Indigenous communities: representation, recognition, redistribution, and reparation (summarized in Table 1). We offer an extended discussion of reparation-based approaches, as these are the least commonly found in practice but an area of increased interest. In addition to summarizing each approach, we offer examples and also map critical Indigenous responses to each, noting that Indigenous Peoples are heterogenous and will have a range of different responses. We also note that while Indigenous Peoples might critique these different approaches, in practice they may draw on a number of strategic responses to them depending on their own orientations, positions, and what they feel is possible within any given context (Jimmy et al. 2019).

Approaching Indigenous engagement with an emphasis on *representation* leads settler conservation organizations to include select Indigenous Peoples, practices, and knowledges into their existing programs, for instance by hiring Indigenous staff or inviting Indigenous board members. Organizations may feel that this inclusion is evidence of their benevolence, yet Indigenous critiques may view these efforts as tokenistic. Often representation is the initial step for settler organizations, yet some believe it is the beginning and end of what is needed.

Approaching Indigenous engagement with a focus on *recognition* is rooted in a settler organization's intention to offer public acknowledgements of, or apologies for, harms done to Indigenous communities, often alongside commitments to improving future relationships with those communities. In some cases, organizations may begin to sense the need to go beyond simply including select Indigenous individuals in order to enact their responsibilities to local Indigenous Nations. Indigenous critiques may point to the symbolic nature of this approach and suggest that there is also a need for more substantive and structural forms of redress.

Focusing on *redistribution* is grounded in an analysis that settler colonization has led to the highly uneven distribution of material resources. Redistribution suggests a targeted shift of resources from the group with more resources to those with less, but it does not necessarily shift underlying power relations. This approach generally fails to recognize, interrupt, and seek to make amends for the very processes through which the wealthier, more powerful group first acquired and continues to maintain control over those resources at the expense of others. Thus, redistribution-based approaches to Indigenous engagements might reallocate and



share a portion of settler organizations' budgets or other resources. However, Indigenous critiques point out that this funding may be restricted to activities that align with the organization's goals, rather than those deemed priorities by the Nations themselves, and that ultimately this only return a limited portion of what has been dispossessed.

Approaching engagements with Indigenous Peoples with an emphasis on *reparations* is grounded on an analysis that settler institutions are dependent on the historical and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous Peoples and lands. In this analysis, colonization is not simply a matter of excluding Indigenous Peoples, in which case it could be resolved with more inclusion; instead, the benefits to settler society and organizations come at the expense of Indigenous Peoples and their lands, which in turn means settlers have significant colonial debts. Repaying these debts may entail several other "R" words, including restitution, repair, repatriation, and return of land. From this approach, there is skepticism about whether settler institutions can ever be reformed, given that they were founded through and continue to be grounded on processes of genocide, ecocide, and epistemicide. Some argue that entirely different forms of social, political, and ecological organization are needed. Because reparations suggest the need to disinvest not only from the presumed benevolence and universalism of settler institutions but also from their presumed continuity, this approach is unsettling for many settler conservation organizations. It can prompt feelings of uncertainty, fear, and resentment, and may result in backlash against those who propose it.

An approach to engagement based on reparations would likely entail an emergent, relational process with a long-term horizon. However, the other modes of engagement are generally still considered important, especially in the short- and medium-term, being understood as actions that are necessary but insufficient for ensuring the well-being of current and future generations of all human and other-than-human communities. Because reparations can only unfold alongside and in truly equal partnership with Indigenous Nations, this approach requires building and sustaining relationships grounded in trust, respect, reciprocity, consent, and accountability (Whyte 2020), while recognizing these mean different things to different communities and that they take significant time to develop. In sum, a reparations-based approach seeks to create the conditions under which: settlers can do the work of disinvesting from colonial promises of authority, futurity, and exceptionalism; Indigenous Peoples can determine their own futures; and currently unimaginable decolonial possibilities for Indigenous-led shared land caretaking might emerge.

As was the case with the cartography of approaches to conservation, this map does not cover all possible approaches to engagements between Indigenous Peoples and settler conservation organizations. In particular, we note the uncertainty about what kinds of collaborations between Indigenous Nations and settler organizations might become possible through and after reparations. This is not knowable in advance; it can only unfold through the process. We have also not included a fifth relevant position, that of "refusal", in which settler

	Representation	Recognition	Redistribution	Reparation
<b>Basic approach</b>	Increase Indigenous presence; increase engagement with Indigenous knowledges	Publicly acknowledge and apologize for organizational complicity in harm to Indigenous Peoples	Reallocate and share some resources (money power, land) with Indigenous Nations and organizations	Commit to restitution; disinvest from colonial continuity; affirm Indigenous sovereignty; create conditions for different futures
<b>Examples in practice</b>	Increase Indigenous staff and board members; include select Indigenous knowledges	Issue a formal apology; include land acknowledgements in publications, websites, and public events	Create or seek funding for collaborations with Indigenous Nations, and/or Indigenous-led projects	Develop stamina and capacities for the “long-haul”; build relations with local Indigenous Nations; material restitution and land rematriation
<b>Critical Indigenous response</b>	Representation is necessary but insufficient; Indigenous Peoples tend to be tokenistically engaged when it is convenient, and are expected to meet settler agendas	Recognition is necessary but insufficient; settler organizations want to be rewarded for acknowledging/ apologizing, but do little to right their wrongs or return stolen lands and resources	Redistribution is necessary, but insufficient; it can be important, but is only a small fraction of what has been taken from Indigenous Peoples; change is still happening on settler terms	Reparation is the necessary response to colonial debt, and is a prerequisite for the possibility of genuine, sustainable collaborations; it will not be fast or easy, yet Indigenous Peoples have already been waiting a long time

**Table 1.** Map of settler organizations’ engagements with Indigenous Peoples

organizations refuse responsibility to engage with Indigenous Peoples at all and resist any kind of organizational change. Although it is increasingly difficult for organizations to maintain this approach, there are nonetheless organizations that continue to hold this stance. In some cases, Indigenous Peoples enact their own refusal of engagement if they feel an organization is not acting in good faith or accepting responsibility for their colonial actions, or simply because they do not deem those engagements a priority – and settlers should respect this.

We observe that within a settler organization, there might be individuals that fall across all these positions, even as the organization's internal orientation and public face might suggest a more unified approach. It is also important to remember that organizations as a whole might draw on more than one approach. Often organizations start this journey with some combination of representation and recognition; if they cannot take even these basic actions, it is unlikely they will be able or interested to pursue reparations. That said, while the cartography might appear to suggest linear movement from left to right, organizational change rarely happens linearly, and in some cases, organizations move between spaces. At the same time, it is nearly impossible to jump from refusing Indigenous engagement altogether to reparation. As well, movement is not inevitable; organizations would have to commit to enabling deeper forms of engagement.

By mapping different approaches to Indigenous engagement, and considering the limits and possibilities of each approach, this social cartography can support settler conservation organizations to engage in more nuanced, accountable, contextually-relevant, and self-reflexive conversations about the complexities and challenges of this work. Organizations might use this map to reflect on and have internal discussions about questions such as:

- Where would you place your organization on the map? Is this consistent across the organization, or does it vary depending on the individual, area, or program?
- How can you be sure that you are actually where you think you are on the map, given that we often overestimate how advanced we are, and underestimate how much learning there still is to do? Who or what could help you to honestly discern that?
- Where are you stuck? What are the biggest barriers to moving? What capacities would you and your organization need to develop in order to keep moving? What shifts in the wider social context could help support this movement?
- What is the next, most responsible small thing your organization can do with regard to Indigenous engagements, in order to deepen its commitment to social and ecological accountability? How can your organization commit to consistently asking this question?
- Where do you see your organization in 5, 10, and 25 years from now in terms of fostering meaningful relationships with local Indigenous Nations? What does this work look like at the different intervals? What would you need to do now to enable this work? How can you hold these possible futures in mind while also allowing the quality of relationships in the present and the integrity of the un/learning process to guide your movement?

## Conclusion

In this paper, we considered some of the complexities and challenges that have emerged in recent efforts to confront colonialism in conservation. More settler conservation organizations are starting to ask questions about the limits of the western conservation

paradigm, alongside questions about how they can fulfil their responsibilities to Indigenous Peoples, and how they can support new possibilities for the protection and caretaking of land in more equitable, reciprocal, regenerative, and mutually beneficial ways. Although there is growing consensus that things need to change in the mainstream conservation world, there are different ideas about what this change should entail, who should lead it, and how it should be enacted.

One thing that is clear is that this work is deeply relational, and the (re)building of relationships between settlers and Indigenous Peoples cannot be rushed, it can only move at the speed of trust, especially given the ongoing context of colonization. It would require a sustained commitment on the part of settler conservation organizations and their settler staff and board members to: interrupt naturalized settler colonial assumptions, investments, and perceived entitlements; support the rights, sovereignty, and leadership of Indigenous Nations; share and in some cases, ultimately devolve entirely, power, “resources”, and yes, land, to Indigenous Peoples’ jurisdiction; and stay with this work over the long-haul, even and especially when it becomes difficult and uncomfortable.

Given the entrenched and often unconscious nature of colonial patterns, it is very likely that mistakes and failures will be part of this work. While individuals and organizations are accountable for redressing the negative impacts of their mistakes, failure can also be an important site of inquiry if it is treated “as an educational moment and learning opportunity” (Arshad-Ayaz et al. 2020, 1). There is a growing movement that emphasizes learning from failure. For example, Dogwood, an environmental organization in BC, commissioned a report about the complexities of EDI work, and in addition to the report itself, the organization’s executive team produced a public document “to reflect on Dogwood’s past and take responsibility for harms and mistakes at the organization” (Cameron et al. 2021, 1). Acknowledging failure is not about shame or self-flagellation, but rather about making one’s learning public and ensuring that through this learning, individuals and organizations are consistently moving toward deeper maturity and relational accountability.

We conclude by suggesting a few guiding commitments that can help ensure failures in the work of confronting colonialism in conservation are generative, including commitments to:

- *honesty* about the harms that have been and are being done through western conservation (settlers tend to minimize uncomfortable truths about the colonial past and present);
- *self-reflexivity* about where we really are in the learning and unlearning process (settlers are often less advanced in this process than they believe themselves to be, and thus, the most responsible thing to do is assume that you are not as far along as you think);
- *realism* regarding the true depth of the challenges we face (settlers tend to underestimate the magnitude and complexity of confronting colonialism, and how long things take to change);

- *humility* about the fact that we do not know exactly where we will end up (this work entails many complexities and uncertainties, and does not move in a linear way, which means we can usually only take one small step at a time);
- *discernment* about what needs to be learned from one's mistakes so that they are not repeated and so that this learning can inform the next steps; and,
- *accountability* to those who pay the highest cost for one's mistakes (while mistakes are inevitable, they tend to happen at Indigenous Peoples' expense, and it remains important to apologize and try to make amends – without expecting or demanding forgiveness).

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