Andrew Rakich
Did Native Americans Really Live in Balance with Nature?
24 Oct 2024

<www.vimeo.com/1022813734>, plus the teleprompter script in an email from the author.
Included is an unaired conclusion that the author ended up cutting for time.
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# Did Native Americans Really Live in Balance with Nature?

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plowing a single field or killing a single animal, a truly, unironically sustainable future is possible. We don't lack the means. We lack the will.

And while we shouldn't take ethical or environmental advice from any culture that lived 500 years ago, clearly there is a lot we can learn from indigenous knowledge as we pursue that goal.

As long as we continue to act as the tyrants of this planet and not its caretakers, then frankly, we deserve the worst that climate change can throw at us. But if we can humbly internalize the age-old indigenous wisdom that we are ourselves a part of nature, that other species are here with us, not for us, and that a spirit of life flows through all things, then maybe – just maybe – we'll have a fighting chance.

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Very special thanks to everyone who sat down to be interviewed for this piece, including fellow YouTubers @NathanaelFosaaen and @CatherineKlein94.

The Isengard and Mordor metal covers are the work of the talented @GabrieleMottaCarabus.



# Contents

Internet trolls and smirking media personalities mocked these feelings and derided people experiencing them, snidely coining the phrase "post-Avatar depression syndrome." After all, only a virginal basement-dwelling ultra-nerd could feel depressed that they didn't live on Pandora, right?

What blind, stinking arrogance. I say, if you don't get depressed after watching Avatar, then you didn't understand the movie, and you certainly aren't paying attention to the way we're treating this planet. Ivar is absolutely right. We do live on a dying world, and that seems like pretty good grounds for depression to me.

But of course, the horror of climate change and spiritual corrosion of consumerism is a much larger cultural phenomenon than the Avatar films. One way that modern people try to resolve that malaise is to look back in history, to see how cultures more "in tune with nature" used to live.

Food sovereignty is a huge issue for a lot of underserved communities, and as with the Makah, discussions of the topic seem to be inherently regressive, even among people who consider themselves politically progressive – we need to eat local, hunt and gather our own food, become self-sufficient. Essentially, they want to rebuild the biological cathedral.

But in my opinion this is just another way that people on the left ahistorically romanticize indigenous lifeways. It's also laughably impractical – hunting and gathering is a physically impossible way to feed eight billion people and counting. With all due respect to my dear Uncle Ted, going back won't resolve our current crisis. We need to look to the future. The only way out is through.

There are technologies currently available right now that could conceivably forestall the worst impacts of climate change if we were to adopt them at scale. From nuclear power, which can produce enormous amounts of electricity with zero carbon emissions, to precision fermentation, a brewing technology which can create edible foodstuffs literally out of thin air using genetically modified microbes, and could conceivably feed billions of people without

Because the Ecological Indian isn't really about Indians, and it never has been. It's an aspirational goal for modern society, a parable about our own shortcomings as a civilization.

The war between the RDA and the Na'vi isn't a conflict between humans and aliens, but rather a struggle between two potential futures for humanity. James Cameron presents us with a grim portent of Earth's capitalistic future – in the extended edition of the film we see the fires of industry choking the earth, rendering it nigh-uninhabitable, a global city of soul-crushing neon advertisements, and a spiritually adrift human species spreading its sickness of greed and consumption across the stars.

But he also presents us with an alternative in the Na'vi. We can reject the colonial project, reject exploitation and extraction, reject anthropocentrism, and instead revere all life, take from nature only what we need, and build a society based on love rather than profit.

James Cameron is a child of the '60s, a classic white hippie environmentalist. His vision of indigeneity is fantastical and a little goofy, but it's there to serve a narrative purpose, and the moral and political message it conveys is incredibly potent.

When the first Avatar movie came out in 2009, many viewers reported feelings of depression, even suicidal ideation, after seeing the film in theaters. In 2009, a teenage fan named Ivar Hill described just such feelings on a fan forum:

> *"When I woke up this morning after watching Avatar for the first time yesterday, the world seemed … gray. It was like my whole life, everything I've done and worked for, lost its meaning. It just seems so … meaningless. I still don't really see any reason to keep … doing things at all. I live in a dying world."*[40]

[40] Sian Cain & Steph Harmon. *'Post-Avatar depression syndrome': why do fans feel blue after watching James Cameron's film?*. (2022). The Guardian. <www.theguardian.com/film/2022/dec/15/post-avatar-depression-syndrome-why-do-fans-feel-blue-after-watching-james-camerons-film>



Though the trope of the "Ecological Indian" is indelible in popular culture, history tells a much more complicated story.

## Cast

**Andrew Rakich** — American YouTuber, activist, and filmmaker.

**Catherine Klein** — Animal Rights Activist, YouTuber

**Drew Shuptar-Rayvis** — Cultural Ambassador, Pocomoke Indian Nation

**Jack Ivie** — Environmental Scientist

**Loren Spears** — Executive Director, Tomaquag Museum (Narragansett Nation)

**Nathanael Fosaaen** — Archaeologist, YouTuber

**Sequoyah Hunter-Cuyjet** — Professor, Interior Designer (Shinnecock Nation)

## Introduction

The Ecological Indian. It's a stereotype we've all come across in popular culture. Native Americans so in tune with nature that they almost cease to be fully human, melding into their environment so harmoniously and so completely that they are effectively just another natural process, like the wind or the waves.

Moreover, their closeness to the land and profound respect for nature makes them the ultimate environmental stewards. Unlike the rapacious white man, the Ecological Indian only takes what he needs from the natural world. He believes there is a spirit of life in all things; he thanks the animals that he kills for their sacrifice; and he wastes nothing of the food that he hunts or gathers.

Though it has roots in dualistic Puritan theology of 17th century colonists and the racist Victorian trope of the "Noble Savage",

it might surprise you to learn that the concept of the Ecological Indian only came to the fore in American culture in the early 1970s, in the midst of a broad sociopolitical push to fight the pollution and environmental degradation brought on by massive industrial developments following World War II.

This was when the Environmental Protection Agency was established, the "Save the Whales" campaign gathered steam, and one of the most famous and effective commercials ever made blazed across television screens all over the country:

> Some people have a deep, abiding respect for the natural beauty that was once this country. And some people don't. People start pollution. People can stop it.[1]

The "Crying Indian", who was in fact played by an Italian-American actor, firmly established a pop cultural connection between indigeneity and environmentalism in the minds of a whole generation of Americans.

The commercial appealed to the late 60s early 70s hippie nostalgia for a primordial time of unspoilt nature – and the mythic image of the Ecological Indian became a moral cudgel with which disillusioned 20th century white liberals could use to castigate their own environmentally catastrophic industrial society.

The trope was then powerfully reinforced through cinema. In Disney's Pocahontas, the title character chides Mel Gibson's John Smith for his ecological ignorance, and declares that all the animals and plants of her forest home are friends and siblings bound by the circle of life.

Terence Malick's The New World, another highly fictionalized portrayal of the life of Pocahontas, features Native American actors incorporating distinctly animalistic body movements into their per-

[1] Crying Indian public service announcement. <www.simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crying_Indian_public_service_announcement>



> *and a host of other colonial ills. Similarly, we must find ways to adapt to the increasing individuality of urban life … Dominant white discourse portrays our cultures as embedded in the pre-colonial past. This perspective must be replaced with the recognition that indigenous cultures are living traditions, responsive to changing social and environmental circumstances."*[39]

In the 21st century, a climate catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions looms over us all. If we want to save ourselves and everyone we share this planet with, we need a philosophical and political alliance between traditional indigenous knowledge and militant western environmentalism to show us that colonial capitalism is not the only lifeway possible in a global high-tech society.

But you know, that's just like, my opinion, man.

## 6. Oel Ngati Kameie ("I See You")

James Cameron's Avatar is about indigenous people violently resisting a colonial capitalist attempt to strip a beautiful natural ecosystem of its resources. It also happens to be the highest grossing film of all time, and resonated with Americans of every conceivable background.

And as I said right at the start, it's the poster child of the Ecological Indian trope in modern American culture. And yet, I'd argue that despite the fact that this film is peppered with indigenous actors and draws inspiration from the beliefs and material cultures of indigenous people from around the world, it ultimately has next to nothing to say about indigeneity, and everything to say about western environmentalism, climate change, and 21st century ecological angst.

[39] Ibid.

> and really be. And be leaders and visionaries in what it looks like to in, in, in modern terms, be one with the Earth. I think that the issue will always be capital. You have a tribe who has no money. What are they rubbing together to make you know, to make two sense?

This controversy saw anti-whaling environmentalists being flippant and dismissive of the Makah's history, cultural understandings, and economic circumstances. The Makah, however, were downright contemptuous of genuine and well-founded ethical concerns raised by environmentalists.

For me, the whole situation is a perfect illustration of how divorced the trope of the Ecological Indian is from the reality of indigenous ecology, and how these different visions of eco-consciousness can find themselves at irreconcilable impasses. It's also a quite tragic story of groups that should be natural allies finding themselves at loggerheads.

The Micmac scholar Margaret Robinson, who considers herself an eco-feminist and an animal rights advocate, has written a number of fascinating essays that, in my view, beautifully syncretize indigenous and environmentalist ecology into a complimentary biocentric ethos.

She argues that ideas within preservationist environmentalism, though western in origin, are actually much closer to traditional indigenous values than the Micmac's current economic lifeway of extractive commercial fishing, itself a product of colonialism. Traditional wisdom and cutting edge technology can work hand in hand in her vision of the nation's future.

> *"When indigeneity is defined as a primordial lifestyle, it reflects our intentional extinction as a people. The reinterpretation of tradition and the malleability of ritual enabled our ancestors to survive genocide, famine, disease, forced moves, isolation on reserves, residential schooling,*



formances, and Colin Farrell's John Smith likens the indigenous people he meets to a "herd of frightened deer".

The animalized characterization is not meant to be degrading, but rather flattering, a sign of the depth of Native people's ecological consciousness. This version of the story depicts Smith as a criminal and a social misfit among his own people, who discovers a sense of meaning when he adopts the simple, self-sufficient lifestyle of the local Powhatan.

But the Ecological Indian doubtlessly reached its cinematic quintessence with James Cameron's 2009 masterpiece Avatar – And yes, it is a masterpiece, goddammit, don't at me. – which tells a nearly identical story as the other two films, but filters it through the conventions of fantasy and science fiction. In Avatar, the tribal Na'vi are not only the ultimate environmental stewards, they can literally connect to nature by means of a neural appendage they share with many other species of plants and animals on their home planet of Pandora. This sacred bond connects them to a sort of Gaian hivemind of the planet, an interconnected psychedelic consciousness personified as the nature goddess Eywa – who we are told protects the "balance of life."

The indigenous Na'vi exist in sharp contrast to the hypercapitalist human colonists of the RDA corporation. Protagonist Jake Sully begins the story as a gruff Marine who has nothing but contempt for the eggheaded environmental scientists running the avatar program; but as he slowly begins to appreciate, then embody, Na'vi ecological consciousness, he turns his cloak and flies to battle against the venal and materialistic humans intent on stripping Pandora for its resources.

These portrayals are certainly a crude approximation of indigeneity, but that's not to say there's absolutely no historical basis for the Ecological Indian trope. In many ways, indigenous North Americans had the most elegant systems of land management of any culture in human history. But these systems were much more complex than pop culture would have you believe, and

varied widely across time and place. Some indigenous understandings and practices appear to have a strong sense of ecological consciousness, while others definitely undermine those values.

So I'd like to fully interrogate this stereotype by taking a trip through Native American history, from pre-colonial times to the modern day. To fill in the blind spots in my knowledge, I've enlisted expert help. This video will include interviews with indigenous historians and cultural ambassadors, as well as scientists, activists, and other experts who specialize in associated topics.

Thanks to everybody who sat down for an interview – the perspectives you shared in our conversations had a huge impact on the video.

For the sake of brevity, I'll mostly be focusing on cultures in the Eastern Woodlands, with one or two jaunts to the Great Plains and the Pacific Northwest. This video is by no means intended to be exhaustive. Examining the ecological practices of even one indigenous culture could be a book-length project, and I'm going to be ping-ponging between several. If anything, consider this a jumping off point.

But I do think it's an important topic to shine serious scholarly light on, even imperfectly, because of how politicized it is. I see people on the left side of the aisle perpetuating the stereotype uncritically all the time, and some of the only public-facing voices I hear challenging these misconceptions are from the far right.

Racists understand that the trope of the Ecological Indian is the flipside of the trope of the "Savage Indian." Indigenous people's closeness to nature, they believe, also makes them more prone to barbarity.

Flip the coin, and the "Ecological Indian" trope dehumanizes indigenous people by embedding them inseparably within the processes of nature. It makes a virtue of primitivity, which Native Americans historically did not share, and strips countless vibrant human cultures of all their agency and personality.



**Catherine Klein:** Yeah, I do see this, especially as someone who's spent a lot of time in left spaces. I think it stems from good intentions, but that doesn't make it harmless and people just assume that because it's a positive stereotype rather than a negative stereotype, it's not racist. But I actually think that positive stereotypes reinforce racism because they uphold this idea that race is real in the sense that there are these inherent differences between the races that are, you know, beyond physical characteristics like skin color.

This concept is often referred to as essentialism. So like. This is the basis of racism and other forms of discrimination, and we can highlight various indigenous ecological philosophies and practices and acknowledge the contributions indigenous people have made to the environmental movement without mythologizing them as heroes, possessing this innate wisdom about ecology.

I think many indigenous people like live in modern society, shop at grocery stores. And of course, there are still indigenous tribes that live in these remote locations and kill to survive. But these are not the people that animal rights activists are really targeting with their messaging. And this idea that indigenous people are just one with nature and reject all things modern kind of contributes to their erasure because indigenous people are not just some relic of the past. Most of them want like representation, and governments and access to healthcare. They don't necessarily want to be left alone to fend for themselves in the fucking woods.

**Sequoyah Hunter-Cuyjet:** So maybe at this point would come full circle. We can find a pathway forward

Counterculture needs something to counter, and even the repudiation of culture is culturally informed. But again, let's not fall into the essentialist trap of "western equals bad". While these philosophies are undeniably western, to dismiss them as neo-colonialism purely on that basis is in my opinion incurious, unfair, and unproductive.

And, you know, cultural fallibility cuts both ways. Makah wisdom holds that in order for a whale to be taken by the tribe, the whale needs to offer themselves up to the hunter, and they won't do that unless the hunter observes the proper rituals and displays the proper respect for the animal's sacrifice. Obviously that's meant more cosmologically than literally, but we still have to reckon with the fact that this understanding is contradicted by direct observation. When whales get harpooned, they flee, they struggle, they fight. They clearly don't want to die.

It makes no difference to the whale whether they are being harpooned by a 200 foot industrial Norwegian whaling vessel or by a Makah hunter in a canoe saying all the right prayers — to them the experience of being harpooned is AAAHHHH AHAHH OHH GOD!

The act of killing is unpleasant enough, but with Native American conceptions of animals as having personhood, it becomes downright criminal. It seems reasonable to assume that it would then be necessary to come up with some sort of cultural justification that psychologically reconciles violence with veneration.

Ethically, if killing a whale is wrong, then it's also wrong when indigenous people do it. To suggest otherwise is, frankly, fucking racist. It's the racism of low expectations. We don't hold the Makah to the same moral standard as we do more "civilized" people who know better. How is that not racist? Please, someone tell me in the comments, how is that not horrifically fucking racist?



Since the most common challenges to the Ecological Indian narrative are peppered with hateful colonialist stereotypes, I get the impression that the rest of us are hesitant to cede any ground in discussions about this topic. But we *need* to talk about it. The trope of the Ecological Indian is meant to be complimentary, but that's actually what makes it so pernicious.

Situating indigenous ecological practices solely as a foil to European rapaciousness is a form of cultural erasure. It obfuscates the complexity of their intellectual traditions, and minimizes the profound impact historical Native Americans did have on their environment. And what few impacts we do acknowledge, we fetishize as being wholly positive and "sustainable".

Within this stereotype of the stoic, selfless, treehugger Indian, indigenous people are not allowed to be selfish capricious idiotic fuckups. In other words, they're not allowed to be human.

## 1. The Makah Whale Hunt

On September 8th 2007, five men of the Makah nation of northwestern Washington state paddled out in two boats to the middle of the Strait of Juan de Fuca looking to kill a whale – any whale.[2]

The men were angry. The tribal leaders of the Makah had been attempting to resume their traditional practices of whale hunting since the mid-90s, resulting in a years-long legal battle. Whales were fiercely protected under federal and international law, and public opinion was overwhelmingly anti-whaling.

While some indigenous exemptions for subsistence hunting had been granted since the International Whaling Commission's blanket ban of commercial whaling in 1986, grants for waivers remained behind a stout bulwark of bureaucratic red tape.

[2] Eric Wagner. "*Savage Disobedience: A Renegade Whaler Rocks the Boat in the Makah Struggle for Cultural Identity*". Orion Magazine. <www.orionmagazine.org/article/savage-disobedience>

These five Makah men did not want to wait for approval from environmental agencies. They did not care that most of the American public was opposed to what they wanted to do. Their people had been whaling in these waters for 1500 years – this was their land and their waters, and they would do with them whatever they pleased.

But the Makah had not regularly hunted whales in more than 80 years, and there had only been one Makah whale hunt during the lifetimes of the five would-be whalers who went out to the strait that morning in 2007 trying to pick a fight. Much of the ancestral knowledge had been lost, and these five men were total amateurs.

Soon enough, at around 10 AM, a male gray whale curiously approached the two boats. Accustomed to whale watch boats and friendly scientists, the whale showed no fear and probably came up intending to socialize. He was a summer resident of the strait who had been observed migrating to the area for several years up to that point.

Researchers dubbed the whale "CRC-175". He was noteworthy because of his close friendship with another whale, CRC-178, who scientists had nicknamed Freedom. Highly intelligent and deeply emotional animals, whale species have been observed to organize in complex familial and social groups. Different pods and clans around the world exhibit distinct cultural traits. And most notably with sperm whales, they communicate with each other using vocalizations that may be nearly, or just as, complex as human language, complete with regional accents.[3]

The Dominica Sperm Whale Project is currently working on deciphering the language of the Eastern Caribbean clan of sperm whales. Direct linguistic communication between whales and hu-

[3] Kelly Struthers Montford & Chloë Taylor. *Colonialism and Animality: Anti-Colonial Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies* (2018). E-Book through the Ted K Archive.

<www.thetedkarchive.com/library/kelly-struthers-montford-and-chloe-taylor-colonialism-and-animality>



Shepherd has nothing against the Makah personally, they do challenge the notion that culture is a reasonable justification for domination. It would be inexcusable for a Makah man to say "it's okay if I'm a misogynistic slaveowner because it's part of my culture," so why is it so different to kill whales using the same reasoning?

Despite the Makah's historical and political circumstances, oppressed people can absolutely still be oppressors of others, and the central injustice in this case is not Western colonial supremacy over the

Makah, but human supremacy over other animals and the natural world.

Personally I agree with the sentiment, and have nothing but respect for the work Sea Shepherd does, but it still strikes me as a bit arrogant to believe that your moral framework completely transcends the influence of culture and tradition. I was recently telling a Japanese friend something along these same lines, basically that culture is a shoddy basis for morality, and she said, "That's a very individualistic American thing to say." And you know what? She's absolutely right!

While this by no means devalues the merit of the philosophy, it's absolutely true that preservationist environmentalism has western origins. It's a countercultural 20th century reaction to environmental degradation caused by heavy industry in the developed world. So therefore when the Makah say that environmentalists are trying to impose a Western colonial moral framework on indigenous culture, they're technically not wrong.

The anti-whaling argument that I find most convincing – that the whale has a right to life – has European enlightenment thinking written all over it. The very notion of the inalienable rights of the individual is a fundamentally Western belief. Militant

environmentalism is a child of American transcendentalism and the New Left. Animal rights has distinct influences from Christian pacifism, 1940s British counterculture, and the 1990s punk scene.

*was their tradition to kill every Redskin in the way. 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian,' they believed. I also want to keep faith with my ancestors."*[37]

No wonder then that the Makah had their hackles raised and sensed that neo-colonialist sentiment underlied this seemingly benevolent concern for gray whales. This suspicion was well founded. How many missionaries or mountain men throughout history came to live among native people, saying "I come in peace, don't worry, I'm one of the good ones," only to secretly further colonial interests, or even outright stab their native friends in the back? Well-intentioned colonialism is still colonialism, and indigenous people have been down that road many times.

**Sequoyah:** The right of like the cultural preservation of traditions, is really, really important. That's something that I don't think that there was a a perspective and that the environmentalists took seriously.

For their part, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, the most famous anti-whaling group in the world, fiercely denied that their goals had any basis in colonialism, or even in the framework of human culture itself. As their mission statement declares:

*"Sea Shepherd operates outside the petty cultural chauvinism of the human species. Our clients are whales, dolphins, seals, turtles, seabirds, and fish. We represent their interests … We are not anti-any nationality or culture. We are pro-ocean and we work in the interests of all life on Earth."*[38]

As far as Sea Shepherd activists are concerned, the real conflict here is between anthropocentrism and biocentrism. While Sea

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.



man beings is a question of if, not when. It's probably going to happen in our lifetime.

When CRC-175 had gotten close enough to the boats, the whalers, drawing on Makah spiritual understandings of ceremonial hunting, declared that the animal had offered himself up to be killed. They then shot him with at least four harpoons, ensnaring him in their lines and preventing escape.

Andy Noel, who was incidentally the tribe's official whaling commissioner, then picked up an elephant gun loaded with massive .577 Tyrannosaur cartridges and took aim at the whale's head.

The gun misfired. In the chaos of the scrambling men and the huge thrashing whale, the rifle slipped from Noel's hands and disappeared into the black salt water. Some of the other men had brought a shotgun and a lower caliber rifle with them – desperate to put the suffering leviathan down, the men shot him at least sixteen more times, but several shots missed the head, and those that found their mark were not nearly powerful enough to get through the skull.

The sound of the gunshots alerted the local Coast Guard, who had a base on the Makah reservation. The would-be whalers were detained and the injured whale secured to the response boat. It was clear to everyone that the whale needed to be put out of his misery, but because the whalers had attacked him illegally, the Coast Guard's hands were tied. No one could deliver the coup de grace now without bureaucratic approval, or they could face jail time.

It took all day for the legal permission to be granted, and by the time the Coast Guard boat got the green light at 7:15 PM, the whale was already dead, having bled out in excruciating pain for over ten hours. The carcass was cut loose and sank in over seven hundred feet of water to the bottom of the strait.

News of this senseless killing brought a firestorm of condemnation down upon the five whalers and the entire Makah nation. Though the men were arrested, and the tribal council put out a statement officially disavowing the rogue hunt, many Makah re-

garded the killers as folk heroes, and the council was ultimately reluctant to punish them. Eventually all charges were dropped.

Gray whales had been nearly eradicated in the Pacific by European and American whalers in the early 20th century, and their population had not yet fully recovered by the 90s and aughts. Conservation laws like the international commercial whaling ban were the primary reason several whale species had been pulled back from the brink of extinction, and noncompliance with those laws — such as in Japan and Norway — remained the biggest threat to unstable whale populations.

In the aftermath of CRC-175's death, environmental groups argued that the Makah were both enacting and encouraging real ecological harm. Giving even one indigenous group even a relatively minor pass would establish a legal and moral precedent for whaling, which large commercial interests would exploit.

Whales were protected by law, but it was a fragile and uncertain victory. Pro-whaling nations like Japan were constantly attempting to find legal loopholes in the International Whaling Commission's policies, and had often used the IWC's aboriginal subsistence exemption as a pretext to gain exemptions of their own. If it was difficult for the Makah to obtain permission to whale, it was because the system needed to be foolproof – the lives of entire species were on the line.

Animal protection groups like the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society also weighed in, raising ethical concerns. In the years since they had first applied for a whaling exemption, the Makah had carefully curated a scrupulously eco-conscious, animal-friendly public image for themselves, which the five amateur whalers had shattered overnight. Animal advocates argued that whales deserve significant moral consideration and have a right to life. The brutal and pointless killing of this intelligent creature was nothing less than murder.

The Makah's legal fight for whaling hinged completely on treaty rights the United States government had granted them in



almost every other species on earth as a crude resource – such as pigs, cows, chickens, and 99% of sea life.

Those filthy Indians killing those intelligent and emotionally sophisticated whales, they make me so mad! Anyway, where's my ham sandwich?

And yet many anti-whaling advocates at the height of the controversy had the temerity to suggest that because the Makah were not conforming to their stereotypical, largely mythical ideal of the Ecological Indian, they were betraying their very indigeneity. In the tone deaf words of one non-native activist:

> *"The Makahs are the cowboys here … and we're the Indians."*[36]

Many of the environmentalist organizations involved in this controversy were careful to remain both pro-whale and pro-indigenous in their messaging. However, most people around Washington state were not nearly so respectful. According to one survey, non-natives around Seattle opposed the whale hunts 10 to 1, and much of the public discourse around the issue was tinged with racism. As some Washingtonians told one journalist:

> *"Publish this article but don't use our last names. We wouldn't want to lose our scalps."*
>
> *"These idiots need to use what little brains they have to do something productive besides getting drunk and spending federal funds to live on."*
>
> *"I am anxious to know where I may apply for a license to kill Indians. My forefathers helped settle the west and it*

[36] Kelly Struthers Montford & Chloë Taylor. *Colonialism and Animality: Anti-Colonial Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies* (2018). E-Book through the Ted K Archive.
<www.thetedkarchive.com/library/kelly-struthers-montford-and-chloe-taylor-colonialism-and-animality>

by 2048. Government subsidies allow this ecocide to continue even when fishing corporations are unprofitable, contrary to our economic system's supposedly free market values.[33]

The federal government also gives about $38 billion dollars in subsidies a year to the meat industry, which kills 80 billion animals annually and is the leading cause of global deforestation, terrestrial habitat destruction, water waste, and land overuse, with almost 25% of the surface of the planet used for animal farming – compare that to all human settlement and urban sprawl, which accounts for only 1%.[34]

And here's the real kicker. Subsidies given to the fossil fuel industry – the leading cause of climate change, the probable death of us all, the arch-nemesis of all that is green and good and living, total a staggering 757 billion dollars a year. Put simply, the United States government is the most ecologically catastrophic force on planet earth since the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs.[35]

Even though environmental agencies and the general American public were working to protect animal life in the Makah whaling case, arguably even the most murderous Native nation has a far more advanced conception of animal personhood than Western culture does. As we talked about, Native American culture broadly believes that all animals are sentient individuals worthy of respect, even if they also consider those individuals to be edible. Western culture ascribes personhood and moral consideration to a very narrow number of animals – like whales, dogs, and cats – and treats

[33] John Roach. "*Seafood May Be Gone by 2048, Study Says*" (2006) National Geographic.
<www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/seafood-biodiversity>

[34] David Gillette. "*The True Cost of a Hamburger*" (2022). American Institute for Economic Research.
<www.aier.org/article/the-true-cost-of-a-hamburger>

[35] Molly Brind'Amour. "*Fact Sheet | Proposals to Reduce Fossil Fuel Subsidies*" (2024). Environmental and Energy Study Institute.
<www.eesi.org/papers/view/fact-sheet-proposals-to-reduce-fossil-fuel-subsidies-january-2024>



1855, which secured the Makah's quote "right of taking fish and of whaling or sealing at usual and accustomed grounds."

Inspired by a revival of traditional Makah culture during the 1970s and the political agitation of the American Indian Movement, the right to whale had become a symbol of Makah self-sovereignty by the late 1980s. But the renewal corresponded with a groundswell of environmentalist activism, including the highly successful "Save the Whales" campaign and a popular Star Trek film with an anti-whaling message, leading to a decisive cultural shift among Westerners, who began to regard whaling as cruel and outdated.

From 1987 to 1993, the Makah were closely involved with the National Marine Fisheries Service in lobbying efforts to have the gray whale delisted from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species list. Once the grays were delisted in 1994, the Makah aggressively pursued permission to whale under the IWC's aboriginal subsistence exemption.

But behind closed doors, tribal leaders were seriously entertaining using their exemption as a pretext to hunt whales commercially. The IWC's indigenous exemption regulations allowed the sale of arts and crafts made from non edible whale products, which provided a legal gray area between subsistence and commercial whaling that could be exploited.

In 1995, the Makah entertained plans to open a processing plant to sell whale meat to Japanese and Norwegian markets, and began negotiations with officials in both countries. In communiques to the NOAA and the state department, tribal council members additionally defended their rights under the 1855 treaty to whale commercially, and stated for the record that applying for an subsistence exemption did not waive that right. The Makah's public relations insistence that they only meant to hunt for ceremonial and local subsistence purposes was clearly a farce.

In 1996, over three hundred environmental and animal protection groups put their names to an open letter to the Makah nation, urging them to reconsider.

> "*The undersigned groups respectfully appeal to the Makah Nation to refrain from the resumption of whaling. People from many cultures worldwide hold whales to be sacred and consider each species a sovereign nation unto itself, worthy of respect and protection. Gray whales migrate vast distances each year and bring joy to many thousands of whale watchers. They only briefly pass through Makah waters. … The resumption of the slaughter of these benign and trusting beings would bring to your nation swift and ongoing worldwide condemnation. We submit that important spiritual traditions must be observed in the context of a planet whose wildlife are being destroyed by habitat reduction, human overpopulation and exploitation, competition for food, and the proliferation of toxic chemicals. As global neighbors also committed to healing our spiritual connection to the natural world, we appeal to you to work with us to pursue creative alternatives to your planned whaling, avoiding a conflict that will have no winners.*"[4]

Makah leaders repudiated such pleas as a form of neo-colonial domination. One fishing captain even bizarrely compared anti-whaling protestors to the murderous colonial tradesmen who gave Natives blankets infected with smallpox.

But many other Native Americans felt differently. While the vast majority of the indigenous community fiercely supported the Makah's *right* to whale, they questioned their uncompromising intent to *carry out* that right.

In the midst of the Makah controversy, their downshore neighbors, the culturally similar Quileute nation, announced plans to open a whale watching business using historic whaling canoes, and

[4] Ibid.



> food like it's. Unrealistic expectation put on native people and then when like tribes go into like. Gaming or like you know, it's huge in New York for cigarette sales. And I question it I I question sort of what are we selling we're selling you know. Addiction and what were we sold? We were sold addiction. But like what opportunity do we have? Do we then sell like the land that we have left? Is that what we're supposed to do?

Like the Haudenosaunee with the fur trade and the Cherokee in the deerskin trade, material uncertainties introduced by the global market economy often creates circumstances that necessitates a native nation's participation in that economy. It's a similar conundrum faced by nations who have invested in casinos or cigarette sales. Are these businesses helping the world? No. But is it really fair to stand in judgment of severely impoverished people's efforts to make money and live happy, prosperous lives?

And of course the hypocrisy of non-indigenous Americans judging Native people's harmful capitalistic business ventures is simply astounding, given… gestures broadly at everything…

Especially in terms of Makah whaling. There is a rich irony in the fact that the tribe unfairly and illegally needs to get permission to kill one or two whales a year from agencies within the United States government, an organization that pays 35 billion dollars in subsidies to the fishing industry annually.[32]

The fishing industry kills trillions of fish every year, including marine mammals through bycatch and bottom trawling. It is the number one cause of marine species extinction and habitat destruction on the planet. According to some estimates, if the current rate of overfishing continues, the oceans will be emptied of marine life

[32] Daniel Pauly. "*Ask Dr. Pauly: Why are we giving subsidies to the fishing industry?*" (2023) Oceana.
<www.oceana.org/blog/ask-dr-pauly-why-are-we-giving-subsidies-to-the-fishing-industry>

A gray whale is a highly intelligent and emotionally sophisticated creature. He or she is also 1,000 pounds of fresh meat rich in omega 3 fatty acids. While I would argue that a whale certainly has an inalienable right to life, any serious ethical discussion of the Makah controversy needs to weigh that against the Makah's right to escape an early death due to heart disease or cancer from a lifetime of fast food poverty meals.

> **Loren:** Indigenous people have been trying to find a way to live within this economy that we've been forced into. In most cases. I mean, it's still true across the nation that indigenous people are the most impoverished people in this country. So when I look at. That sort of self determination and economic development and they were going to utilize a traditional hunting form. I could understand why they would choose to do so or at least contemplate doing so.

I'm sure most people would agree that killing a whale for sustenance when there are few or no other food options available can be morally justified. But how about the Makah's initial plan to sell whale meat commercially? On one hand, yes, it's a completely different ethical category, and on some level, it is a bit of a deal with the devil – on the other, it's a highly attractive financial prospect for an impoverished nation.

> **Sequoyah Hunter-Cuyjet:** Indigenous planning is about pairing cultural preservation with economic development and sovereign people like have an inherent right to fight. Like how they can make money for their people and to preserve their land. So part of what becomes this like problematic dichotomy is that living one with the earth and, you know, using everything that you have like, only growing like your



began a new tradition, the annual Welcoming of the Whales ceremony, where tribal members and the public can greet pods of gray whales each spring as they pass through Quileute waters during their annual migration north to Alaska. As one Quileute elder remarked, the whales were more valuable to the tribe "living than hunted."

Even some Makah were outspoken in their disagreement with the tribe's attempts at whaling – especially Makah women. Traditionally, whaling had been the exclusive province of Makah men, specifically the patriarchs of slaveowning families. Historic Makah culture was, in actual fact, a highly misogynistic slave society with a strict caste system, of which whaling was an integral part.

The male slaveowner's domination of the whale also signified his domination over his women and his slaves. It was considered degrading for a Makah patriarch to do any work beside whaling, and his social stature increased with every whale he killed. Religious beliefs and ceremonies surrounding whaling were deeply informed by gender and class inequalities, including one custom which demanded that the women lie perfectly silent and still during a whale hunt to ensure their husband's success.

Ironically, the same treaty which secured whaling and fishing rights also abolished Makah slavery, and led to the long term decline of whaling among the tribe. The disappearance of the social structures which reinforced whaling, as well as a precipitous drop in whale population caused by European and American industrial fishing, both contributed to the Makah's eventual cessation of whaling in the 1920s.

There is evidence that the sexist elements of Makah whaling were part of the late 20$^{th}$ century cultural revival. When the Makah finally did receive permission to kill one whale in 1999, women were discouraged from becoming part of the whaling crew. Before the hunt, men instructed women on their traditional responsibilities, and when the killing was actually taking place several girls at

the local school interrupted class to lie motionless and silent, apparently on instruction from their fathers.

Makah elder Alberta Thompson was particularly outspoken in her belief that the tribal council was more motivated by greed and pride than tradition and self-sovereignty.

In a 1997 whale watching trip in Mexico, Thompson had the extraordinary experience of socializing with a gray whale when a mother rose out of the water right under her hand and held eye contact with her. Humans who have met whales often remark on the impact of this experience, which often impresses on them the whale's sense of personhood, sapience, and individuality. Thompson later recalled that the experience changed her life.

Thompson put her name to a dissenting petition penned by six other Makah elders, many of them descendants of the original signatories of the 1855 treaty:

> *"The whale hunt issue has ever been brought to the people to inform them and there is no spiritual training going on. We believe they, the council, will just shoot the whale, and we think the word 'subsistence' is the wrong thing to say when our people haven't used or had whale meat/blubber since the early 1900s … For these reasons we believe the hunt is only for the money."*[5]

But Makah women who raised ethical concerns, even those among the elders, were silenced and ostracized. Once Thompson publicly opposed whaling, she was fired from her job on the grounds that she had spoken to Sea Shepherd while at work. Her dog was kidnapped and killed, her grandson was bullied at school, and the Makah tribal council made it illegal within the reservation for anyone but hired PR representatives to speak to the media.

The Makah tribal council's dogged efforts to resume whaling paid off with the aforementioned legally sanctioned hunt in

[5] Ibid.



This is to say nothing of the fact that the United States has been continually violating the terms of the treaty almost since the ink dried. In the 1870s, the government established a boarding school for Makah children and made attendance compulsory – parents who failed to enroll their kids were imprisoned. At this school, white teachers intentionally indoctrinated the children, forbidding them to speak the Makah language or wear traditional clothing, and forcing them to adopt Christianity and conform to colonial culture.

The Makah tribal council itself was an invention of federal agents, who wanted to conform their national government into something more resembling their own. They aggressively pushed for the dismantling of traditional longhouses and promoted the construction of single family homes. They gave the Makah agricultural implements in an attempt to transition them to a more "civilized" mode of subsistence. The Makah accepted the tools and turned them into hooks and harpoons.

European diseases devastated the Makah at the end of the nineteenth century, killing three quarters of their population, as European and American overfishing reached dizzying heights of butchery, devastating the ecosystem of the Pacific Ocean and threatening the Makah's primary food supply.

The cumulative result of these calamities has led to a sad state of affairs all too common among North American native nations. With their social systems corroded, their national sovereignty disrespected, their economic livelihoods imperiled, and their ecological systems destroyed, the Makah fell into poverty and ruin.

In 2007, the year of the illegal whale hunt, Makah unemployment was at 51%. The average household income was only $11,000 a year. 40% of reservation households were below the poverty line. Health problems linked to poor diet continue to be endemic on the rez, and the cause is obviously Western processed foods, like refined sugar, flour, and – surprise surprise – our old buddies alcohol and beef, both class 1 carcinogens.

bounds of their current reservation. While the Makah were willing to accommodate many of the Americans' terms, they emphasized the importance of their continued access to maritime resources. It's clear that Stevens' assurances that the Makah would retain full whaling, fishing, and sealing rights was central to their acceptance of the treaty.

Indian nations and reservations have always occupied a weird gray area in terms of US law. By right these are sovereign nations, but in practice… ehhh… kinda, not really. Not as far as the United States government is concerned. So the exercise of treaty rights is so much more than a cultural curiosity. It's a practical and fiercely political assertion of their national independence as guaranteed by law.

The Makah have brilliantly navigated the extensive bureaucratic requirements to resume whaling under federal and international law. They have crossed every T and dotted every I. Apart from the 2007 killing of CRC-175, which again, for the record, the tribal council swiftly condemned, the Makah have been extremely accommodating to the American government and the international community, and all of their official actions pursuant of legal whaling have been completely above board.

And yet, by rights clearly stated in the 1855 treaty, this entire hullabaloo should be completely unnecessary. Technically, the Makah should be able to go and kill whales in their traditional waters any time that they feel like it. In terms of fishing and whaling, the Makah should not be beholden to the authority of the American government in absolutely any way, shape, or form. Every time the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration makes them jump through another bureaucratic hoop, they are actively violating the terms of the 1855 treaty. Without question.

The Makah people living on the reservation are not subject to the authority of the United States government. They are an independent sovereign nation.



1999. But the joy of their victory was soured by the protests and widespread public disgust that accompanied the killing, and full whaling rights that would enable them to hunt regularly remained elusive.

So the Makah continued to agitate. In June 2024, just three months ago as of this filming, the NOAA finally approved the Makah's long-sought whaling waiver and adopted finalized regulations governing the proposed hunts. Though animal welfare nonprofits will probably tie the decision up in court for a while, it seems likely that at some point soon, the Makah will be granted permission to hunt a small number of gray whales every year.[6]

Native American historians, activists, and specialists have long maintained that indigenous people are uniquely qualified in dealing with environmental issues by virtue of their cultural background. While it's certainly true that indigenous ecological practices are extremely sophisticated, incidents like the Makah whale hunting controversy serve as a powerful reminder that cultures are developed by humans… and humans are fallible.

It also reminds us that in the modern day, there are multiple schools of thought about how to best live in harmony with the world around us… and many of those new ideas differ from traditional indigenous knowledge in important ways.

Over the next – while, however long this video is going to be – we're not only going to explore the clash between indigenous and colonial ecological practices, but also ponder the question: what does it really mean to live in balance with nature?

Historical Native American answers to that question were incredibly complex, often contradictory, and basically have no resemblance to anything you were taught in school. Buckle up.

[6] "*Description of the USA Aboriginal Subsistence Hunt: Makah Tribe*." International Whaling Commission.
<www.iwc.int/management-and-conservation/whaling/aboriginal/usa/makah-tribe>

## 2. The Biological Cathedral

There's clearly some truth to the ecological Indian stereotype:

> **Drew Shuptar-Rayvis:** You have to remember Eastern Woodland people generally are animistic in their belief systems and practices. Meaning that everything is related to you, from the ground to the stars. So, everything has a soul, everything has a spirit, everything is alive, even rocks and sand, rivers and things like that. They're living physical objects.
>
> **Loren Spears:** There's a truth in the fact that indigenous people lived in more balance with the land, and that's being in relationship with the plants, the animals, the ecosystem as a whole, and it's about living in balance and using what you need and not taking excess. It's a system of reciprocity, of using what you need and giving back to that same system. The idea of the ecological Indian, I feel that that's used more as a stereotype and maybe even a little bit of a demeaning term to indigenous people and not thinking of us as complex people with complex economies and complex political systems and complex lifeways. It's just that we had a completely different system than what was brought here.

The creation stories of Eastern Woodlands people are an important reflection of pre-colonial ecological sensibilities. In Haudenosaunee mythology, the North American continent was created by a sky goddess with the help of several other animals like loons, otters, beavers, sturgeon, muskrats, and of course the cosmic turtle upon whose back the world was grown.[7]

[7] Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013). Milkweed Editions, Page 3–7.



> There were a lot of nations who lost, were told that they were not a nation because in order to become federally recognized. A tribal nation has to prove. Who they are, right. And the US government can say yes, we do think you are. You have enough documentation to prove this or no you don't. This is dependent upon trees, right?
>
> **Drew:** You know my community Pocomoke Indian nation, who are not state or federally recognized. We are historically acknowledged tribe in Maryland but we are not formally recognized. We historically had several treaties with the colony of Maryland and at times they said oh, this is to not be infringed and then did you really. In it and. Then they would take it away.
>
> **Sequoyah Hunter-Cuyjet:** Whenever there has to be a when a tribe has to be in a position to also like, use that as part of their defense. There's always a risk involved in that, right, because that opens, that opens a lot of the polls for then a question of whether that they are actually still people or not. And also saying to the US government like, no, you don't have jurisdiction here, right? As they should, as indigenous sovereign nations need to assert themselves, and that that is in fact who they are, because you would have the same conflict, right? Because it is a nation versus a nation. It is not state to state it is not like these. These people and their land and their water rights are outside of federal jurisdiction, as it should be.

The Makah are not a conquered people – they negotiated the 1855 treaty with Governor Isaac Stevens of the Washington Territory to sell most of their lands and confine themselves to the

So it seems to me the argument that the Makah plan on doing real ecological harm with their whale hunting doesn't really hold much water anymore, and the idea that this'll somehow inspire the Japanese and Norwegians to exploit some legal loophole strikes me as worrying about something that hasn't happened yet, and honestly, it seems pretty unlikely to happen.

The much more compelling argument to me is that whales have a right to life, and to kill them unnecessarily is wrong. As the Quileute definitively demonstrated with their whale watching festivals, the Makah don't actually need to hunt whales to make money off of them. You could say that whaling is of much more symbolic importance to them than it is material.

So do the symbolic desires of a group of humans outweigh a whale's right to life? The environmentalists who protested the Makah certainly thought not. The Quileute and many Makah women agreed with them. But from the perspective of a pro-whaling Makah person, the premise of that question is completely flawed.

To them, there is absolutely nothing "symbolic" about treaty rights, and to suggest that there is incredibly belittling, not to mention historically ignorant.

> **Drew:** Treaty rights for hunting, fishing and trapping. All of those things are really important to native people. Communities.
>
> **Loren:** We should uphold treaty rights and enforce the sovereign rights of indigenous nations #1. You know, kind of like stop.
>
> **Sequoyah Hunter-Cuyjet:** Part of the complexity is even just defining like who is a tribe and who is not, who is recognized as a tribe, who is not, whether it's through the federal government or through their state.



In a similar Ottawa story, a humanoid demigod created the continent with the help of a fox and built humans from out of the corpses of animals – animals who then became the totems of various human clans.[8]

An animal totem was much more than a clan group's sigil – it was their direct ancestor. Early colonial European trappers and traders sometimes noted how indigenous people would become indignant or offended when the Europeans talked about hunting their totem animals. For a clan member, eating their own totem was akin to cannibalism.

Clans believed they had inherited physical, psychological and spiritual traits from the animal totems from which they were descended. Deer clans might be more sensitive and gentle, bear clans more passionate and courageous, wolf clans more bloodthirsty and cunning. Animal ancestry informed how people expressed themselves both as individuals and communities.

A commonality of many Eastern Woodlands genesis stories is the culture hero, a character who is usually either the first human being or one of the first, who establishes critical moral prescriptions about environmental relations. The Anishinaabe tell a story of a lake-dwelling heron teaching their culture hero Nanabozho how to efficiently fish, but cautioned him to take only what he needed. Nanabozho ignored him and greedily killed all the fish in the lake. He was punished for his insolence when a fox got into his winter stores, leaving him with nothing.[9]

In another story, a horticultural tribe fails to treat their corn with adequate respect, harvesting their crop thoughtlessly, without the proper rituals of thanksgiving. So a manitou being called the Corn Spirit departs from their village and the next crop fails. After a harsh winter of starvation and deprivation, the chastened vil-

[8] Ross Kenneth Harper. *To Render the God of the Water Propitious: Hunting and Human-Animal Relations in the Northeast Woodlands* (1999). University of Connecticut, Page 18–35.

[9] Kimmerer, Page 179–188.

lagers learn the value of ecological gratitude and resume the corn ceremonies, whereupon the Corn Spirit returns and grants them a good harvest.

In the genesis stories of nations in what is now northern New England and the Canadian maritimes, the culture hero Glooskap teaches humans and animals how to responsibly hunt and forage, and slays eldritch monsters who consume too much and threaten ecological balance. But eventually humans and animals become ungrateful and evil, so Glooskap curses them. Up until then, all animals – including humans – could speak to each other, but Glooskap gives them the old Tower of Babel treatment and sings a song which gives every species a different language. This sets all the animals at war with each other, which won't end until Glooskap returns to earth to establish an apocalyptic golden age.[10]

An 18th century Moravian missionary noted how this interspecies warfare informed Eastern Woodlands hunting practices. On one occasion, he witnessed a Lenape hunter shooting a bear. When the bear cried out in pain as he died, the hunter rebuked him, saying that a warrior should die with more dignity. By treating the bear not as an inferior form of life but rather as a warrior of an enemy tribe, the hunter is acknowledging animal sentience and situating human-animal relations in a social context. The bear is a community member subject to the same code of martial conduct as humans.

These foundational cosmological understandings blurred the categorical line between human and non-human forms of life and strongly established a belief in the personhood of plants and animals. In Eastern Woodlands cosmology, everything in nature – even things like minerals or water or fire – is an animate being.

Since food sources were imbued with personhood, the act of resource extraction was conceptualized as a ritualized exchange of gifts. When humans met for a social gathering, it was considered

[10] Harper, Page 291–293



lucrative government contracts to graze cattle and sell beef on the reservations, where they hocked the lowest quality cuts at hiked up prices to people who were literally starving to death.

It was technically illegal, but who was gonna make a stink, really? They were only Indians.

## 5. The Makah Whale Hunt, Revisited

So if any of you already knew the story of the Makah whale hunting controversy before watching this, you've probably been white-knuckling your armchair for like forty five minutes. Some of you have probably already taken to the comment section to say something mean about how I totally fell off after Checkmate Lincolnites, or something. Well, calm down. I've got a lot more to say.

For those of you who hadn't heard of these events, I didn't lie to you. Everything I said in that earlier section was the truth. It just wasn't… the whole truth.

The first thing you should know is that the number of whales the Makah intend to kill every year, in the event that their full rights are restored to them, is a grand total of 1. They haven't been pursuing commercial whaling, publicly at least, for almost thirty years. They're almost certainly not going to do it.

Now, I doubt that will make much of a difference to the whales who have the bad luck of running into a Makah fishing boat, and I don't mean to trivialize the importance of the life of even one intelligent sentient being – but when the Makah resume whaling, they will clearly go about it in a highly environmentally conscientious way.

The NOAA's recommendations for minimizing the environmental impact of the Makah hunts are more than 2,000 pages long, so it seems that robust restrictions will be in place to ensure that the hunts do not put significant pressure on gray whale populations or have adverse effects on the ecosystem more generally.

> *done in the last thirty years. They are destroying the Indians' commissary … Let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo is exterminated. Then your prairies can be covered with speckled cattle and the festive cowboy who follows the hunter as the second forerunner of an advanced civilization."*[31]

By 1880, the American military, business interests, and individual big game hunters had effectively exterminated the American bison of the Great Plains. All that remained of the once great herds were a few hundred stragglers, and millions of bones stretched out over the continent, bleaching in the sun.

Commercial scavengers began gathering the bones, which could be ground up into phosphorus fertilizer or bone char to refine sugar. American colonizers didn't use every part of the animal, but they sure as shit didn't let anything go to waste that could make them money.

This "white harvest" as the bone trade was called is the origin of this famous photograph that you've probably seen, of a pile of bison skulls at a refinery outside Detroit, which really drives home the sobering scale of this catastrophic ecocide.

Among those picking through the heaps of bones dotting the prairies were, tragically, Native Americans with no other options. Their sovereignty had died with the bison. Starving and defeated, whole nations limped onto reservations, where, like countless others before them, they became completely dependent on colonial capitalism to sustain themselves.

Instead of bison, they ate beef from the cows that had taken their place. American beef was now a billion dollar industry, and at the dawn of the next century it would rise to become one of the top contributors to the gross national product and the second largest employer in the country. Cattlemen fell over themselves acquiring

[31] Ibid.



polite to bring something along to give to your friends, in much the same way as you might bring a bottle of wine to a dinner party. The same etiquette applied to gathering nuts or cultivating corn.

> **Loren:** Everything that you harvested you did in ceremony you did in Thanksgiving, if you will, you're giving to the land and to that plant or that animal and giving thanks for that gift. And I think when you think of things in that way as a gift, it gives it a different perspective or light in the way that you receive it. It's not just stuff. It's important things, living things, plants, animals. And so therefore we look at it more holistically.
>
> **Nathanael Fosaaen:** Indigenous ecological knowledge is really interested in systems, right? They're looking at how things interact with. Each other. It's one of the biggest differences between indigenous natural science or natural philosophy and western natural philosophy is that Western science wants to take everything and like, break it up into its own individual parts and look at everything individually so we can isolate our variables. But the way that indigenous philosophy and thought seems to work is really looking at how things. Are influencing each other and the relationships between these things.

When an Eastern Woodlands farmer would harvest her field of what they called the Three Sisters – interlocking stalks of corn, beans, and squash – she would ask the plants for permission to reap them. Sometimes the farmer would intuitively feel that the answer was no, especially if she had failed to observe the proper ceremonial conventions. If the answer was yes, she might sprinkle tobacco at the base of the plant to reciprocate the gift.

Linguistics reinforced this understanding. In the Potawatomi language, animals and plants are referred to as a "who" rather than a "what", a "he" or "she" rather than an "it." When I was typing up this script, Google Docs attempted to autocorrect my description of gray whale CRC-175 from "he" to "it." The way we refer to non-human beings in English betrays a foundational belief of human exceptionalism which underlies how Anglophone cultures relate with nature.[11]

Though variations on the concept of non-human personhood are fairly common in indigenous animism across the world, including in Europe, they're pretty striking when contrasted with the ecological ideas of Native American religion's primary competitor, early modern Christianity.

Compare those creation myths with this passage from the Book of Genesis:

> *"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.*
>
> *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.*
>
> *And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.*
>
> *And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every*

[11] Kimmerman, Page 55–56.



> *"Kill every buffalo you can. Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone."*[29]

The railroad companies did their part in the genocide by advertising mobile bison hunts from the comfort of a moving train, which proved highly popular with easterners. As one observer remarked:

> *"The rate per mile of passenger trains is slow upon the plains, and hence it often happens that the cars and buffalo would be side by side for a mile or two … During these races the car windows are opened, and numerous breechloaders fling hundreds of bullets among the densely crowded and flying masses. Many of the poor animals fall, and more go off to die in the ravines. The train speeds on, and the scene is repeated every few miles."*[30]

New rail tracks continued to crisscross the plains, enclosing the commons for bison and Native Americans alike. As ranchers moved into areas newly depopulated by hunting, the cows picked clean hundreds of square miles of grassland, outeating the remaining bison, and consequently starving indigenous groups who were in the midst of a desperate fight for survival against the United States Army.

In an address to the Texas legislature, Sheridan marveled at the stunning success of their genocidal strategy:

> *"These [buffalo hunters] have done … more to settle the vexed Indian question than the entire regular army has*

[29] J. Weston Phippen. *'Kill Every Buffalo You Can! Every Buffalo Dead Is an Indian Gone'*. The Atlantic .
<www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/05/the-buffalo-killers/482349/>

[30] Ibid.

Civil War heroes William Techumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan were architects and champions of this strategy. In 1868, Sherman wrote to Sheridan, suggesting that:

> *"I think it would be wise to invite all the sportsmen of England and America [out west] this fall for a grand buffalo hunt, and make one grand sweep of them all."*[27]

In his role as Commanding General of the US Army, Sherman gave logistical and material assistance to wealthy big game hunters from the east coast and from Europe to come out west and shoot bison in almost unfathomable numbers. Unlike Native hunters, most didn't chase the animals on horseback, but instead fired from cover several yards away in what was called a "still hunt," shooting at bison who could neither see nor smell them, and were apparently too confused to run away.[28]

The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 forever separated the American bison into northern and southern herds. In the early 1870s, a horde of hunters systematically swept across the southern plains, killing bison by the millions with shiny new Winchester '73 repeating rifles. Some killed for meat; some for hides; others just did it for fun.

Bison hunting in Native American treaty-guaranteed land preserves was technically illegal, but many army officers, including Sherman's close associate Colonel Richard Irving Dodge, encouraged them to do so anyway. When one British hunter confided in Dodge after a hunt that he felt some guilt about shooting defenseless herbivores, Dodge balked and replied:

[27] J. Weston Phippen. *'Kill Every Buffalo You Can! Every Buffalo Dead Is an Indian Gone'*. The Atlantic .
<www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/05/the-buffalo-killers/482349/>

[28] Isenberg, 123–155.



> *tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat."*[12]

Fuck, that's intense! "Dominion over every creeping thing?" "Subdue" the earth?? This Yahweh guy has some serious fucking issues. When can we expect his 4chan manifesto? Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the single most important defining characteristic of colonial European ecological practices is anthropocentrism – the cosmological or moral belief that human beings are inherently superior to all other forms of life. Indigenous American ontology, on the other hand, tends more toward biocentrism, which is both an observational understanding of ecology as an interconnected and non-hierarchical community, and an ethical perspective which extends innate moral worth to all living beings.

Of course, Genesis has its own cultural context, and Abrahamic religion is not the source of this ideology. Additionally, Jewish, Christian and Muslim philosophers have all sharply critiqued anthropocentrism from a religious point of view.

But even so, in Europe Christianity had informed the development of a mode of subsistence tantamount to ecological fascism. Humans were

made in God's image, who had created the earth solely for their benefit. There was nothing sacral about the natural world; it was simply there for pillage and plunder. When they came to America, Europeans brought this ideology with them, which is why they couldn't comprehend indigenous land management practices, and why their lifeways transformed the ecology of the Eastern Woodlands so completely, in such a short period of time.

The supposed rationalism of the emergent secular Enlightenment wasn't any more democratized. Rene Descartes famously denied the sentience of animals, declaring that they were nothing

[12] *Book of Genesis 1* (King James Version).
<www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=KJV>

more than biological automata, and that humans were the only entities with minds and subjective experiences. If a Narragansett storyteller had told him that there were spirits in rocks, mushrooms, and corn stalks, he would have laughed in her face.

Though anthropocentric ecological practices were not historically confined to the Old World, thanks to European colonialism they are now globally dominant. Today, anthropocentrism defines almost all modern humans' relationship with nature and is a load-bearing ideological pillar of our current economic system.

Ironically, one of the most important colonial exports – the scientific method – has largely confirmed the objectivity of indigenous ecological beliefs. Our current scientific understanding looks a lot more like Algonquian mythology than 17th century Protestantism.

I mean, indigenous North Americans found out that humans were descended from animals centuries, maybe millennia, before Darwin did. The theory of evolution itself seems to vindicate biocentrism – all life on this planet is just one big dysfunctional family. The more we learn about animals, the more intelligent they seem, and recent research has indicated that plants and fungi may be able to sense and integrate environmental information in surprisingly sophisticated ways. Native Americans' only biological blind spot is the existence of microorganisms, but otherwise, it's not too far off.

But this binary of European anthropocentrism versus indigenous biocentrism may be a little too simple and convenient. The fact is, despite the environmentalist values Native American myths and parables clearly impart, the day to day prevalence of enlightened biocentrism among historical indigenous people is very much a matter for debate.

European accounts are full of instances where Eastern Woodlands people expressed anthropocentric viewpoints, and there is mountains of evidence to suggest that they could be negligent or self-serving in their ecological practices, even before European contact. And most importantly, despite their reciprocal view of nature



> *so make it impossible to bring any more buffalo into a pound."*[25]

In any case, as brutal as indigenous people could be toward bison, it was nothing compared to the slaughter that was coming.

In the time of the Early Republic, most Americans had little regard for the resource potential of the western range. For much of the 19th century, it was simply a sand trap on the way to California, a dangerous obstacle to be crossed to greener and richer lands beyond the Rockies. But after the Civil War, another usual suspect peered west and sensed opportunity – that perennial colonizer, animal agriculture.[26]

The war had depleted the northern states' supply of beef, and southern cow herds had been trapped west of the Mississippi when the Union Army had captured the river, where, to cattlemen's delight, they were thriving. Western wild grasses were drought resilient and didn't need to be cured in barns over winter, meaning that cows could graze on them all year round.

So the ranching industry, railroad companies, and the United States government put their heads together and tried to figure out how to turn the Great American desert into the largest tract of pastureland on planet earth. They had two obstacles to this goal, one ecological – the area was filled with millions of bison – and one political – despite the US government's longstanding claim to the land, it was in every practical sense still sovereign Native American soil.

The plan they came up with was simple, but devastatingly effective. The Indians relied on bison. Kill the bison, and you kill the Indians.

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[25] Shepard Krech. *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999). W.W. Norton and Company. E-Book through the Ted K Archive.
<www.thetedkarchive.com/library/shepard-krech-the-ecological-indian-myth-history>

[26] Rifkin, Page 67–80.

ideas were what took hold in pop culture, thanks to revisionist westerns like Little Big Man and Dances With Wolves, and are a key pillar of the Ecological Indian myth.

> **Nathanael:** It's not like these are societies of absolute 0 waste. They are societies that are concerned with not throwing things too far out of whack so that it comes back to bite them later. But it's also entirely possible, and I don't know if. Those planes groups had observed positive environmental benefits to occasional bison drive mass kill offs that. We don't observe today because we don't have enough bison to do that anymore, and also we're talking about a society that's probably got certain elements of, like ritual, spell specialist and spiritual specialists who are saying, OK, it's appropriate to do this right now or no, it's not a, this, this is not an appropriate time to do this. And they're watching the health of the herds and making sure that. You know, now's a good time. No, now's not a good time. We're going to do this some other at some other point. As opposed to having a government saying kill everything insight.

Though it's impossible to prove definitively, I find myself being persuaded by the scholars who have argued that the callous indigenous overhunting of bison in the 18th and early 19th century weakened the species and was detrimental to the plains ecosystem overall. But ironically enough, it may be that the indigenous understanding of animal personhood informed their senseless slaughter. As some Cree hunters told a Canadian missionary:

> *"Not one buffalo is allowed to escape. The young and the poor must die with the strong and fat, for it is believed that if these were spared they would tell the rest, and*



and their gift economy with the land, indigenous people across the contiguous United States managed their environment in fundamentally anthropocentric ways.

It is now widely understood that the pop cultural conception of America as a sparsely populated virgin wilderness, an empty continent ripe for the taking, is inaccurate. Before epidemics from Europe wiped out upwards of 90% of the population, many Eastern Woodlands communities were actually relatively large. Supporting the subsistence needs of so many people inevitably put pressures on the environment and necessitated complex systems of land management.

The main way Native people did that was by fire. In 1632, a Dutch mariner described the eastern seaboard of America as a land that is smelt before it is seen. Huge plumes of smoke from enormous conflagrations started by indigenous people drifted miles out to sea, and once the shore came into view, sailors were often confronted with a charred and smoking landscape stretching as far as the eye could see.[13]

In southern New England, Native people deliberately set fire to large tracts of forest twice a year – in spring and fall – to accomplish a number of goals. The burns, which were more like ground fires than forest fires, cleared away understory, creating landscapes of tall old growth trees spaced widely apart. English colonists understood that this facilitated travel and made hunting much easier, just as it did in the manicured royal deer parks back home.[14]

> **Drew:** Burning is really, really common. A lot of Europeans kind of they, they kind of have a love.

[13] Shepard Krech. *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999). W.W. Norton and Company. E-Book through the Ted K Archive.
<www.thetedkarchive.com/library/shepard-krech-the-ecological-indian-myth-history>

[14] William Cronon. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (2003 Edition). Hill and Wang Page 48–51.

> Hate relationship with? It so they love it because it makes it way easier for them to travel their. Horses through the woods. And then you have some Dutch documents that say, will they burn in the spring and in the? All but the problem is that their burns get so big that they encroach upon our barns. They encroach upon our fences, and it causes these things to burn down, which makes the settlers really unhappy.

But the burns also had subtler ecological effects that the English never quite grasped. The elimination of shrubs and small trees allowed more light to reach the forest floor, making conditions more favorable for the growth of delicacies like strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries.

Frequent fires increased the rate at which forest nutrients were recycled in the soil, causing these plants to grow larger and faster than they normally would. One 17th century colonist in the mid-Atlantic reported that during strawberry season, it was impossible to take a walk in the woods without dying your shoes red. This abundance was a direct result of Native people shaping the life cycles of the biome around them to fit their needs.

> **Loren:** Our ancestors managed the land we did controlled burns to manage the forests, to reduce the undergrowth and allow certain species to grow up.
>
> **Drew:** And it's just the soil, the carbon and ashes, the white ash. The Lie ash is very, very. Good for the soil, my mom's father. To always say that lime makes the. Bill suite that's in very old, you know, knowledge that people had lime and that white ash that pot ash is excellent for soil. Charcoal is really good for soil so it rejuvenates it.



where they had been slaughtered. In 1804 Meriweather Lewis witnessed the Mandan wipe out whole droves of buffalo only to take the choicest cuts of meat and let scavengers take the rest. In 1809, another explorer remarked how the Blackfeet only butchered the quote "good cows" despite having killed a large number of bulls as well.

Multiple accounts describe indigenous hunters massacring entire herds and only taking their tongues, which they regarded as a delicacy. Paul Kane, a Canadian artist who traveled west to paint scenes of Native American life, described how:

> *"[The Indians] destroy innumerable buffaloes, apparently for the mere pleasure of the thing. I have myself seen a pound so filled up with their dead carcasses that I could scarcely imagine how the enclosure could have contained them while living … One in twenty is used in any way by the Indians … Thousands are left to rot where they fall."*[24]

So it's important to keep in mind that when we read these accounts, we're seeing the bison hunts through the eyes of colonizers. Again, Europeans often misinterpreted indigenous ecological practices, and lest we forget, most of these men were intensely racist. The implicit bias of indigenous people as bloodthirsty savages may be coloring what they're saying.

However, these accounts are much too numerous and much too similar to ignore. Clearly there is some truth here, and it directly contradicts 20th century Native oral tradition which remembered the hunts as respectful, waste-free affairs and emphasized the bison's spiritual and cultural importance to Plains nations. These

[24] Shepard Krech. *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999). W.W. Norton and Company. E-Book through the Ted K Archive.
<www.thetedkarchive.com/library/shepard-krech-the-ecological-indian-myth-history>

Once indigenous hunters had run a herd off a cliff or into an enclosed pound or dead-end canyon, men, women, and children alike began the bloody work of killing and butchering the trapped animals. The mass slaughter was a visceral scene of unimaginable carnage and total pandemonium. Several late 18th and 19th century European observers remarked on the sheer brutality of the bison hunt, and frankly, when Anglo-American colonists are saying "Whoa, that violence is a little bit excessive" then you know it was really fucking gnarly. As British cartographer Peter Fidler remembered:

> *"The young men kill the [buffalo] with arrows, bayonets tied upon the end of a pole … The hatchet is frequently used and it is shocking to see the poor animals thus pent up without any way of escaping, butchered in this shocking manner, some with the stroke of an ax will open nearly the whole side of a buffalo and the poor animal runs sometimes a considerable while all through the pound with all its internals dragging on the ground and trod out by the others, before they die."*[23]

The carnage even made big game hunters squeamish, who derided the cull as improper and unsporting. Various observers described the hunts using words like "revolting", "disgusting", "diabolical" and of course the racially charged pejorative "savage." One French missionary remembered with dismay how he witnessed native children quote "devouring the meat still warm with life."

Primary source and archaeological evidence both suggest that most of the animals killed in these culls were uneaten. Fidler described how a group of Piegan hunters left over two hundred and fifty dead bison untouched and piled atop one another in the pound

[23] M'Gillivray, *The Journal of Duncan M'Gillivray,* 44; Fidler, "Journal of a Journey over Land," 28; Alice Kehoe, personal communication, September 23, 1997.



Burns helped propagate animal life, too. The profusion of easily accessible nutritious plants made these forests extremely attractive habitats for deer, rabbits, porcupine, grouse, and turkey. And wherever herbivores congregate, carnivores are sure to follow – soon predators like wolves, mountain lions, and birds of prey were drawn to these areas by the sudden surplus of readily available meat. Humans then hunted all these animals for food and clothing.

When settlers arrived in southern New England and wrote of the incredible numbers of animals dwelling in what they believed was a pristine state of nature, they were actually stumbling upon a meticulously planned and deliberately implemented man-made artificial ecosystem.

But in high-population areas like southern New England, prescribed burns accomplished an even more important task – clearing land for the cultivation of corn, beans, squash, and a number of other domesticated plants, which supplied the overwhelming majority of the community's calories.

Indigenous women, socially expected to perform farm work, would find a site with rich soil, then clear it by stacking dry wood around tree trunks and setting them ablaze. This would not only kill the trees and open the area to the sun, but the intense heat of a full forest fire also stymied the spread of blights that could threaten the crop.

Almost as important as knowing where to burn was knowing where not to burn. Certain tree species with great utility to humans like maple and beech grew better where soil was moist, which uncontrolled undergrowth helped promote. Native communities with a taste for maple syrup therefore probably chose, for instance, oak forests to burn and turn into hunting grounds, but left maple groves alone to maximize their production of sap.

Other portions of forest might be left fallow for trapping. Roger Williams described how after the autumn harvest, the Narragansett would move to hunting camps and systematically

lay up to fifty traps within the bounds of carefully measured zones of forest, which had been designated for just that purpose.[15]

Biocentric indigenous cosmological beliefs have given rise to the persistent idea that pre-colonial Native Americans were the ultimate environmental stewards. But in viewing their land management holistically, it's hard not to think of them instead as master manipulators.

That's not meant to be a moral judgment – arguably Eastern Woodlands people implemented the most environmentally friendly ecological practices of any populous society in history. The living sculpture they created out of the North American wilderness could be considered as a beautiful work of ecological art built on a staggering scale – a biological cathedral, just as elegant and awe-inspiring as the stone cathedrals of Europe.

But Native land management still clearly could have deleterious effects. The Haudenosaunee were known to move their village every ten or twelve years due to soil exhaustion from intensive horticulture, overhunting, and timber shortages. This was probably quite common across the Eastern Woodlands.

18th century European explorers in Canada reported that indigenous fires inadvertently killed large numbers of animals and frequently got out of control, burning old growth trees as well as underbrush until burning out at the shore of a lake or the edge of a swamp. In the aftermath of the fires, tradesmen in the Great Plains frequently came across entire herds of bison who had been horrifically burned. British explorer David Thompson noted that:

> *"This devastation is nothing to the Indian … His country is large."*

Though these definitely seem like callous screw-ups, it's important to keep in mind that we're seeing these events through the eyes of Europeans, and often colonists didn't quite know what they

[15] Cronon, Page 52–64.



ecological niches that were quickly filled by other invasive species. And behind them galloped the Spanish horses, animal companions that would completely transform human life on the Plains forever. Unbeknownst to the native people of the region, Spanish colonizers had done this intentionally, with one 17th century expedition to east Texas deliberately leaving a breeding pair of cows and horses at every river crossing.[22]

A trained horse's utility in hunting was plainly obvious, and various Plains nations started domesticating them almost immediately. Equestrianism revolutionized the bison hunt. Now hunters could range after herds for miles, riding them down individually or cavalry charging hundreds of them at a time into pounds for slaughter. Meanwhile, our old friends the fur traders arrived, bringing with them diseases like smallpox, measles, and the market economy.

It was the same old story. Sucked into the spider web of capital by the temptation of trade goods, Plains nations abandoned the diverse lifeways of their subsistence economy and began to commercially specialize, particularly in hunting for fur-bearing animals. By the end of the 18th century, many bands had transitioned into fully nomadic horse-powered teepee-dwellers – the quintessential American Indian culture of the 19th century American West.

In this new way of life, Plains nations depended on bison for almost everything. They ate the meat, sold the furs, used the hides to cover their tents and waterproof their boats, made rope of the sinews and carved toys from the bones.

There were doubtless many uses for every part of a bison's body – but contrary to popular belief, indigenous hunters did not historically have a cultural prescription to utilize every part of the animal. Moreover, primary source accounts strongly suggest that bison drives were characteristically profligate and often quite cruel.

[22] Jeremy Rifkin. *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture* (1992). Dutton Books, Page 45–51.

> **Nathanael:** There are multiple sites where you find these arroyos. These drainages and fulsome people late Paleo just after Clovis are driving these herds into the Arroyo and there's a chirp. Point in these like valleys. And they can't get up. And so they end up stampeding over each other and you just have this mass pile of bison carcass that have fulsome spear points sticking out of them. And what's missing is not the entire animal when they get butchered, they're taking select choice pieces of meat. But this is not a normal way to hunt. This is happening at times of social convergence when lots of people from around Oklahoma are meeting up during the bison migrations and they're getting together to do this as part of a big Community Action. Normally you get hunters going out and killing one or two bison. And that's good for their, you know, small community. And that's fine when you have the this like big gathering, this is what they're. Doing. To produce this surplus so they can try possibly make it to panic and so on and so forth. But they're going after these, especially gourmet cuts. It's a seasonally prescribed thing that happens, and even though they're not using absolutely everything, there is a subsistence and social basis to.

But in the 16th and 17th centuries, the landscape of the Plains started to change as new species from across the sea began to slowly invade the grasslands, a dark portent of another invasion yet to come. Native groups who had never even seen a European suddenly noticed a proliferation of new plants and animals.

Honeybees buzzed in from east of the Mississippi. Wild longhorn cows, the bison's dwarven, short-haired little Spanish sisters, munched their way up from Mexico, clearing thousands of acres of native grasslands, competing with the bison and creating



were looking at when it came to indigenous land management. The Native people in question may have known something that these chroniclers did not.

There's also a convincing argument to be made that this destruction was the exception that proves the norm – I mean, parables about culture heroes getting punished for greedy exploitation of the environment don't come out of nowhere, right?

But even if these incidents were relatively rare, ultimately, sustainable human meddling in nature is still meddling. Oh, I'm sorry. "Sustainable!"

> **Loren:** Managing the land is not just looking at it and keeping it tidy. Managing the land is utilizing the gifts and having gratitude for those gifts.

Native American land management was not environmental preservation in any modern sense. It could possibly be described as conservation, which I would differentiate from environmentalism in several important ways.

Conservation, which is inherently anthropocentric, advocates a form of land management which is not opposed to the extensive exploitation of nature, but seeks to do it in thoughtful and "sustainable" ways that leave enough resources intact that ecosystems can recover, and future generations can make use of them too.

> **Sequoyah Hunter-Cuyjet:** There's something in that indigenous thought process, it's this idea of vision and future, this idea that decisions that are made do have these repercussions for the future. The future is not five years, it's not ten years, it's 30 years, it's 50 years, it's 75 years, it's 100 years.

Conservationism embodies the philosophy of people like Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, who founded the US

Forest Service, and whose ideas continue to guide American conservation policy to this day.

Environmentalism, on the other hand, is more holistic and biocentric. It rejects the idea of nature as a mere utility for humankind and advocates wilderness preservation for its own sake, as far as is practical and possible – this view has gotten more popular since the onset of the climate crisis. The most militant form of environmentalism, also sometimes called deep ecology or green anarchy, opposes commercial exploitation of any kind and instead works toward minimizing human impact on the natural world down to only what is necessary for sustenance.

American environmentalism was pioneered by figures like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Appalachian Trail founder Benton Mackaye, idealists and artists who dreamed of humanity reconnecting with nature. Deep ecology got going in the 1960s and 70s, with the radical advocacy of anarchist Edward Abbey, the Earth First movement, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, the Earth Liberation Front, and many other groups and figures.

While this is definitely on some level the narcissism of small differences, for me, this dichotomy cuts to the heart of the central question of this video. Did Native Americans live in balance with nature? What does it mean to live in balance with nature? Is good stewardship compatible with interference?

I won't even pretend to have concrete answers to these questions. But it seems to me that there's no possible angle you can look at indigenous ecological practices and call them environmentalist. Just definitionally. Not even if you squint. Not even if you cock your head.

Before the colonial era, the only regions of the North American continent which weren't completely transformed to fulfill the needs and desires of humans were places where the population was simply too small to make a discernible impact. And not every human-made ecological transformation in America was as elegant as the biological cathedral of the Eastern Woodlands.



In contrast, nations which lived in the heart of the Plains led a far more meager existence. The Great Plains was and is an extremely hostile environment – it's bone-dry, it's scorching in the summer and freezing in the winter, and it's prone to electrical storms, tornadoes, and other extreme weather events.

And on the plains, humans were a mammalian minority. Before 1800, an estimated 30 to 60 million bison roamed this region. Well into the colonial period, we hear accounts of herds as big as seas rumbling across the grasslands, their brown-black coats darkening the landscape all the way to the horizon.

It might seem like people with ready access to tens of millions of megafauna would want for nothing, but that idea is deceptive. Bison drives yielded an astonishing quantity of meat, yes, but they were also extremely difficult and dangerous to pull off on foot. As ingenious as indigenous hunting strategies were, there was always a substantial risk of stampede, of fires getting out of control, or of these notoriously unpredictable animals changing course and escaping the trap set for them.

There's a reason why the vast majority of people throughout history have gotten most of their calories from plants. Gathering food is usually much easier than hunting it. Farming food is even easier than that, and that's also why all the most materially successful human societies are built on agriculture, because that's simply the most efficient way to maintain a caloric surplus.

Even nations that did eke out a living from the arid Plains depended on plant foods to supplement their diet. Despite being consummate bison hunters, the Cheyenne nation lived a semi-sedentary lifestyle before the nineteenth century and were known to build permanent maize-growing villages. The Comanches and Utes hunted large numbers of bison seasonally but were nonetheless dependent on trading or raiding corn grown by the Pueblo people of northern New Mexico.

## 4. Plains, Trains, and Buffalo Meals

You've probably heard that indigenous hunters on the Great Plains used every part of the bison they killed – that they used the animal, in a word, "sustainably." Though a common practice among midwestern Native nations today, historical indigenous bison hunting was in fact incredibly wasteful – and Plains Indians' material dependence on bison was not an ancient lifeway, but rather a relatively late cultural adaptation made in response to the ecological imperialism of the Columbian exchange.

Before the colonial period, Native Americans hunted bison on foot, using the same tried and true strategies of teamwork and trickery that humans have always used to take down bigger, faster, stronger animals. They lit fires that funneled bison herds off cliffs or into narrow arroyos where they could be trapped and slaughtered; sometimes they dressed up as wolves or other bison to drive the big bovines down pathways lined by logs and thickets leading toward rocky choke points, hidden archers, and their doom. Hunts like this were a common sight on the Great Plains for fifteen thousand years or more.[21]

But Plains dwellers were also horticulturalists and gatherers, and relatively few groups utilized bison as their primary meat supply. Prior to 1492, most Plains nations, especially those living on the western and eastern edges of the grasslands, had lifeways that were not so radically different from their cousins in the Eastern Woodlands.

For example, the Sioux nation, whose original homelands are in what is now Minnesota, migrated seasonally between prairie and forest, utilizing resources from both biomes. By exploiting a wide variety of plant and animal foodstuffs over a large and ecologically diverse geographical area, the Sioux grew populous and powerful.

[21] Andrew C. Isenberg. *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (2000). Cambridge University Press, Page 1–36.



The mound complexes of the Mississippian culture probably put strains on the environment that were just as intense as those of medieval European cities. The ecological pressure of high population density may have contributed to the decline of Cahokia, the largest pre-Columbian city north of Mexico, in the 13th and 14th centuries – with extensive horticultural activity, logging and water use gradually degrading the ecosystem and depleting its resources.

> **Nathanael:** When Europeans first get to North America, this is a couple of 100 years after Cahokia gets abandoned, right. So we're dealing with the population that just got done with whatever that was that kind of like super centralized capital city kind of thing where all these resources are coming from the hinterlands and being dropped down into this one massive super powerful city. And when I say done with it, I mean like they left, they were done with that shit. We actually know that people left Cahokia came down to north of Nashville, TN around Dunbar Cave had a new Mississippian mound there, and kept traveling E this like Cahokia and Project whatever it was, was rejected. At a certain point. What? About the fragmented. Decentralized nature of indigenous politics and governments that we're seeing at that flash point. When Europeans first show up is a result of a rejection of something Cahokia in, and what kind of echoes are we in, like butterfly effects? Are we seeing and only just catching the kind of tail end of because of when Europeans? Or show up on the continent we don't. Know, but it does. Seem like there was a pretty stark shift.

Of course the great empires of Mesoamerica had no compunction at all about plundering nature ruthlessly for their own ends.

So what differentiates Aztec ecology from Haudenosaunee or Wampanoag or Cherokee ecology? What caused the development of conservationist land management in the Eastern Woodlands?

Is it purely population size? While the Eastern Woodlands were far more populous than was previously supposed, they were still completely dwarfed by the teeming masses of humanity in Central and South America's urban centers. Is enlightened ecological consciousness simply a privilege that only cultures with low populations can afford?

A holistic view of human history seems to suggest… maybe not.

> **Jack Ivie:** A lot of people tend to think. That the drivers of things like climate change that are going on now are maybe substantially different than they were 200 to 300 years ago. The things that are the main drivers of climate change now are industrial factories, deforestation, the land clearing and changing loss of habitat, which removes native species. And then you specifically got things like, you know, cows and livestock which are their own greenhouse gas factories, along with encouraging those things, and those things were all present back during that time period. As long as you're talking about around the industrial revolution and even pre industrial revolution, you're having things like emissions into the atmosphere which changed the composition and how the atmosphere functions. That goes all the way back to things like the Roman era, where you can actually see in glaciers there emissions frozen in gas bubbles. So that's really, really old.

We're all accustomed to seeing graphs measuring global warming measured against graphs of global population – both take off in the early 19th century before rising to truly dizzying heights at



tural starvation, and acted accordingly? If so, they weren't wrong. As English colonies bled out from the coast and oozed inexorably westward, European trade goods became as necessary to indigenous survival as meat or corn had ever been.

While Native Americans were certainly culpable in perpetuating the catastrophe of the fur trade, and to a lesser extent animal agriculture, any honest reckoning of colonial era ecological destruction should place the majority of the blame squarely on the shoulders of European mercantilism. The most profound and damaging transformation that colonization brought to the Eastern Woodlands was not technological, social or cultural. It was economic.

This process repeated itself, over and over again throughout American history, as manifest destiny chewed its way west to the Pacific Ocean.

In the 18th century, the same colonial market pressures reached the nations of what is today Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. A British, then American, demand for deer skin led Chickasaw, Choctaw and Creek hunters to slaughter so many white-tailed deer that their populations in the region were periodically eradicated. By the end of the century, some groups were ranging as far as three hundred miles to find white-tails, and hunting parties trespassing on other nations' traditional hunting grounds started wars. Caught in a tailspin of economic dependency, political instability and ecological catastrophe, the nations of the Deep South were easy pickings for the federal government's ethnic cleansing of the area in the 1830s.

In the mid-nineteenth century, American colonizers took a break from slaughtering indigenous people to briefly slaughter each other. But as soon as they recovered from the post-coital afterglow of that fraternal orgy of carnage, they hungrily turned their sights toward the sunset once again. With the Pacific Coast firmly in their grasp, there was only one region left to conquer.

> **Jack Ivie:** If you remove one species, it makes everything worse and so everything that the European colonialists would have done would have done stuff like that and then obviously deforestation. It's the same issue we have today or it doesn't take carbon out of the atmosphere. You're burning things no matter what it is. If it's wood organics charcoal, that's going to release carbon into the atmosphere. So that is already starting that classic excess CO2 climate change issue that we think of as being so modern that starts way back then.

Now, there's ample evidence to suggest that even at the height of the fur trade, Eastern Woodlands hunters consciously used practical game management strategies to conserve animal populations. In the mountains of northern New England, Abenaki hunting grounds were carefully circumscribed and frequently rotated so as not to put too much pressure on any one given area. The Haudenosaunee forbade the killing of the females of certain game species during certain times of year, and the Mohicans had a cultural prescription that the consumption of animals should not exceed their increase. In New France in the late 17th century, Native hunters reportedly regarded killing all the beavers within a single dam to be a "capital crime."

But the fact remains that these ethical principles were largely abandoned during the frenzy of indigenous hunting of fur-bearing animals during the 17th and 18th centuries. In every place the fur trade touched, beaver populations plummeted, often to the point of regional extermination, and shortages started conflicts like the Beaver Wars which redrew the map of indigenous North America – recursive socio-economic shockwaves of the material affecting the ecological affecting the political.

There was precedent in Native culture for abandoning conservationist policies in times of starvation. Maybe hunters regarded the economic and political pressures of colonization as a kind of cul-



the end of the 20th. Market demands to provide for the needs of an eye-wateringly large human population are doubtlessly a factor in the escalating industrial activity of the past two hundred years, and vice versa. Industrial technology creates a material surplus, which raises the population, which then requires an even bigger material surplus to sustain itself, et cetera.

But much more than just a high population can cause environmental degradation. We tend to forget that pre-industrial societies were also perfectly capable of inflicting extreme ecological damage, and that the current climate crisis came about in the specific historical context of colonial capitalism. The 19th and 20th century economic culture of infinite fiscal growth had no ideological incentive to adapt industrial practices which accommodated environmental preservation.

It's hard to divorce the historical association of industry with capital. But high-intensive industrial activity, even in maintenance of an enormous human population, could conceivably be ecologically friendly with the right conditions of adaptive technology and environmentalist, anti-capitalist values. The notion of humanity necessarily being a burden on nature is itself a modern Western cultural assumption that people in the pre-colonial Eastern Woodlands would have disagreed with.

That said, history shows us that if humans think that destroying the environment will give them resources that will make their lives better, they generally will – cultural prescriptions for ecological balance be damned. Indigenous Americans did this themselves several times, both before and after European contact. Like all human societies, they clearly often failed to live up to their lofty ethical principles.

> **Nathanael:** We're talking about human beings who have a certain philosophical tradition that they're coming out of, but there's going to be a wide range of. Of

how faithful people are going to be to that philosophical tradition because they're people.

To the extent that Eastern Woodlands people did have biocentric beliefs and conservationist lifeways, I think factors like population size, culture, and religion are of secondary importance to – and were in fact directly informed by – the material realities of the indigenous economy. Since these nations were seasonally nomadic, pre-colonial trade was governed not by want but by need.[16]

In precapitalist Eurasia, wealth was measured by the ownership of land. Since land ownership was not a concept among the nomadic people of the Eastern Woodlands, material goods' relation to social status was in trade goods, typically ornamentation, that could be worn or carried. It makes no sense to hoard large non-portable quantities of valuable stuff when your whole society moves villages every six months.

European colonists often marveled at how indigenous people, who lived amongst so much natural abundance, seemed to be so personally impoverished. To quote anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, "want is satisfied by either accumulating much or desiring little," and most indigenous Americans had a limited definition of "want," because there was no social incentive to accumulate large amounts of resources within their mode of production. So class authority came to be defined more by kin networks than by material ownership.

An economy with a material incentive to extract as many natural resources as possible to accumulate wealth and status have a vested interest in anthropocentrism, which justifies environmental destruction in the name of human supremacy. A subsistence economy without those pressures is free to dabble in biocentrism. Moreover, concepts like the personhood of plants and animals become materially advantageous. When survival depends on leaving

[16] Cronon, Page 94–107.



Three Sisters system had. Since pigs and cows roamed freely, English farmers substituted feces manure with a fertilizer made from fish carcasses, leaving cornfields across New England reeking of rotting guts.

The age of the biological cathedral was over. The age of the Route 9 strip mall had begun.

**Jack Ivie:** Over a couple of generations, the habitat file wouldn't even be the same thing. You were you're. You were used to anymore to be different trees to be different animals, the. Ways the rivers run would be different. Beavers especially. They also do things like control wildfires, the areas that they would create would flood more often. They'd have be a lot more wet and they would stop big fires and so. If you take out all the Beaver, then you're gonna have forest fires that are gonna sweep through a whole area, destroy all the resources. Obviously, but they might just kill you all.

**Loren:** They're actually doing Land Management for us, right? They are ensuring that some trees can grow really tall and strong because you're getting rid of some of. The smaller ones around they are also making sure that through the way that they tunnel, that water gets out into the ecosystem. One of the scientists that I've was on a panel with about Beavers was showing aerial photographs across the country where we've been having all these wildfires due to climate. Change and the places that have Beavers have resisted some of the fires because of the way that they tunnel into the ecosystem out of the, you know, the pond area, they kind of spread the water into spaces that they need to be in. So every animal, every creature, every being that's on this planet. Has a role and a responsibility to the whole.

now becomes a food source. And by the 19th century becomes an integral part of these communities.

The overall effect was that Native nations abandoned their pre-colonial subsistence economy and began to specialize their labor to fill the mercantile niches of the global network of commerce. The more beaver they trapped, the more quahog they unearthed, the deeper they entrenched themselves in their dependence to European markets, and helped capsize the ecosystem of North America in the process.

> **Loren:** There's this sort of notion that just the native people were trapping and then trading with them. That's not a truth that there were a lot of Europeans that were getting mixed into this ecosystem. That was New England and up into Canada as well that were. Also trapping and also trading these furs with us. You know, when you kill off the whales and the seals are just placed and the bear is moved and the moose is moved all of a sudden you're left with less and less food sources and then that forces you into their economy, into their market economy.
>
> **Jack Ivie:** And so you have this like feedback loop where you now have a reduced ability of Native Americans to retain their index. Attendance. Due to degraded ecosystems, which is where they get a lot of their resources from.

By the outbreak of King Philip's War in the 1670s, beavers were almost completely gone in southern New England, and their population has never recovered. Sites which had traditionally been seasonally burned were left to choke with weeds and brambles. The woods were overhunted, the bays overfished. Monocultural plow farming exhausted fields much more quickly than the more delicate



enough fish in the lake for next year, then an understanding of animal personhood can inform a powerful ethical taboo against unnecessary killing.

Now, Eastern Woodlands cultures are not a monolith, nor are they static. Their ecological beliefs and practices clearly varied widely historically, and continue to do so today. Let's keep in mind that Native Americans' relationship with their land does not necessarily define them as a people, and it's important that we don't try to hold them up to a ridiculously high environmental standard because of that Ecological Indian stereotype.

At the same time, it makes complete sense that non-indigenous Americans would take a special interest how Native people managed the environment of this continent – just because of how spectacularly we fucked it up.

## 3. The Commodity of Nature

Traditionally, Native American concepts of human "ownership" of an animal began at the moment of the animal's death. They believed that animals would not allow themselves to be hunted unless they consented to be killed, as a reward for the hunter's spiritual purity and observance of proper ritual.

French settlers in the 18th century reported that the indigenous people of eastern Canada believed in the existence of animal "gamekeepers," huge eldritch monsters who ruled over each species of game animal. The gamekeeper of the moose was said to be so large that other moose were like ants in comparison, and had a massive human arm extending from his shoulders. Every time a human successfully hunted a moose, it was because the gamekeeper had instructed that particular moose to allow herself to be taken.

The only animal Eastern Woodlands people systematically domesticated was a large hound-like breed of dog that Europeans frequently mistook for wolves and foxes. Like their European counter-

parts, Native Americans viewed dogs as servile working animals, and seemed to value wild animals with more respect and consideration, possibly because some myths held that dogs had earned their enslaved status due to dishonorable conduct in the primordial past.[17]

Dog sacrifices were an important religious tradition among northern Algonquian groups like the Ojibwe, who also used dog body parts to practice magic. The Haudenosaunee's midwinter ceremonies featured the sacrifice of carefully bred white-furred dogs, who were strangled and then burned as an offering to the Creator. The practice of killing and eating dogs before battle was extremely common throughout the Eastern Woodlands – the meat was thought to imbue the warriors with the spirit of war.

Though it was probably not a widespread practice, Native Americans also sometimes captured and tamed wild animals for both utility and companionship. In the early 17th century, European explorers noted that the Haudenosaunee kept bears in cages, sometimes for years at a time, to be killed for ritual consumption.

Later in the century, Roger Williams observed the Narragansett capturing hawks and keeping them near corn fields to prevent other birds from raiding their crops. Various accounts also describe people from all over the Eastern Woodlands keeping bears, otters, beavers and turkeys as household pets.

It's important to understand that brutality toward animals is not necessarily incompatible with biocentrism; indigenous people were not pacifists, and again, if they conceptualized different animal species as enemy nations, then we shouldn't be surprised that the

Haudenosaunee ritually tortured, killed, and ate a bear. After all, they sometimes did the exact same thing to human enemies.

But ultimately Eastern Woodlands culture had a strong moral and cultural understanding of animal sentience and autonomy,

[17] Harper, Page 306–325.



Over the course of the 17th century, animal skins were largely replaced by cotton, linen, and wool in the daily dress of Algonquian people.

This new environmental and economic paradigm forced indigenous people not only to adapt their livelihood, but their culture. Since the fur trade and animal agriculture were Europe's two biggest ecological exports, partaking in these industries required, to some extent, a more anthropocentric outlook in regard to animal life.

Clearly Eastern Woodlands people were not so biocentric that they couldn't wrap their heads around the idea of animal ownership. When cows rampaged through their fields, they held English farmers responsible, not the bovines themselves. And within fifty years of the founding of Plymouth Colony, several Wampanoag villages had taken up pig farming as a profession, and they were so successful at it that, in an ironic twist, Native American pigs eating English crops became a major source of frustration for some Plymouth colonists.

> **Drew:** You know, one of the things, at least I know as the Pocomoke person for my community and what happened on the Eastern Shore is that the Indians had to find alternatives. And So what we know by 16, nineties is that Pokémon people are recorded with like. Horses and pigs so that they're raising livestock because they can't do this seasonal round anymore because uh oh, someone's living at that place where you were hunting turkeys or gathering Hickory nuts or harvesting oysters. And if you go there, they could shoot you. And then you're gonna shoot back. And now that's a whole conflict. And so to kind of mediate that, you do see some native people adopting some domesticated animals by the end of the 1600s, which

Meanwhile, nations of the continental interior sensed opportunity. With their traditional lifeways disrupted by animal agriculture's inexorable march west, indigenous men spent less time hunting for food and more time hunting commercially for the fur-bearing animals that Europeans so desired. As alcoholic beverages like rum began to be widely traded throughout the Eastern Woodlands, indigenous alcoholics became dependent on hunting beaver to maintain their addictions, a weakness that was often consciously exploited by unscrupulous European fur traders.

Though the impact of technology in transforming Native American lifeways has frequently been overstated, it's undeniable that the introduction of European metallurgy and firearms made the acquisition of muskets and steel weapons a matter of national survival. Sachems understood very well that nations who didn't have guns would quickly be overwhelmed by nations that did. Though several 17th century colonies outlawed the sale of firearms to indigenous people, it was not hard to find backwoods tradesmen who were only too happy to offer up a matchlock in exchange for a handful of beaver pelts.

> **Drew:** The introduction of firearms and alcohol really severely changes woodland culture. It's incredible. Detrimental and Europeans weaponize it. They know it's detrimental. They talk about it in the documents. They understand it's a problem, you know, but it makes the Indians more pliable in trade. You know, it makes them easier to deal with. It makes them sell more of their land and do things that they wouldn't do otherwise.

To make matters even more desperate, pigs and cows hadn't just deprived indigenous people of traditional food sources – they'd out-eaten native deer populations, whose numbers were steadily declining. This meant that indigenous people had to become dependent on the European fur trade for the very clothes on their backs.



which again, served the highly pragmatic material function of encouraging conservation. In contrast, much of European life revolved around a concrete legal and social cogitation of the "ownership" of animals during their entire life cycle, from the eugenic mastery of their reproductive cycles all the way to their premeditated commercial slaughter.

When large waves of English settlers began migrating to the eastern seaboard of what is now the United States in the early 17th century, they brought with them lifeways that had never been seen before on this continent. Now, the cultures did have some similarities, mainly in their cultivation of plant resources. In places like New England, New York and Virginia, farmed crops like corn were each culture's primary food source, providing 80% or more of their calories.

But the English had four important things the Natives did not: cows, pigs, sheep, and chickens, whose domestication was a fundamental part of European life. Animal agriculture arguably constituted the single most impactful ecological import colonists brought with them to the Eastern Woodlands, and beyond, and its transformational effects on the land can't be overstated.

The importance of farmed animals to English settlers in the 17th century wasn't so much because of their meat, but rather their lactations. Like their indigenous neighbors, colonists mostly only ate fresh mammalian meat in the autumn, but hen-laid eggs and dairy products like butter and cheese were important caloric sources year-round.

Since almost all western European foods made from land animals were the result of domestication, they considered hunting to be a leisure activity – in England it was an aristocratic sport. Since Algonquian culture's gendered division of labor assigned farming to women and hunting to men, English accounts are full of bewildered exclamations about the laziness of indigenous men who

spent all day chasing game while their women were in the fields doing the "real" work.[18]

Horticulture and prescribed burns for the purposes of hunting were the only indigenous land management practices that the English could perceive – and as far the Puritans of New England were concerned, these improvements were insufficiently advanced to give Native nations a civil right to the possession of their land. To the English, land "improvement" – which is itself a very telling phrase – meant commercial farming, particularly animal farming. As Massachusetts Bay governor John Winthrop put it:

> *"As for the Natives of New England, they enclose no land, neither have any settled habitation, nor any tame cattle to improve the land by, and so have no … right to those countries."*[19]

Puritan minister John Cotton echoed these sentiments, suggesting that animal agriculture was what demarcated civilization from primitivity:

> *"In a vacant soil, he that taketh possession of it, and bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it, his right it is."*[20]

In the Puritan view, Native Americans were essentially just feral humans, and we can see adumbrations of the Ecological Indian trope in their negative perceptions of indigenous closeness to nature. Anthropocentrism, they believed, was what defined a

[18] Cronon, Page 128–141.

[19] John Winthrop. *Reasons for the Plantation in New England* (ca. 1628). Winthrop Society.
<www.explorehistory.ou.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Winthrop-Plantation-1629.pdf>

[20] Indian vs English Views, Regarding Rights to the Land, Focus Points 3, "Attitudes and Latitudes".
<www.salemdeeds.com/NAD/focuspoints3.aspx>



land Sound, adopted wampum as the de facto currency of the fur trade. In 1622, a Dutchman introduced wampum to the Plymouth Pilgrims, and its use as tender quickly spread across New England.

> **Drew:** European populations are coming to the Americas. European nations realize, oh wait, we can't give them all this currency, because if that vote sinks, there goes half our nation wealth in like gold or silver or whatever. So they were limited in what denominations they could bring. They were only allowed to bring. Very small amounts. Of coins and very low denomination coins so. If it fell into the big drink. Nobody cared. The problem was you get places like Maryland where you almost didn't see currency at all because it was just few and far between. This happens also in the Netherlands, where currency is really, really hard to come by like actual coins, really hard to come by. So what do you do when you realize that native people value beaver skins and want them. You don't really know why, nor do you really care to understand the in your mind esoteric reasons why they care about these things, why they're valuable to them. You just realize they will trade anything for wampum or Beaver skins. And so the Dutch are the ones that make this currency to run their colony off of Beaver skins and wampum beads, so the Dutch are heavily invested in this because they need the wampum they need the Beaver skins in order to make the capital of their society work.

Wampum was made of the shells of quahog clams, and its production was limited to indigenous coastal villages – faced with an explosion in region-wide demand, those villages started putting more and more time and labor into bivalve hunting and bead crafting, which made them dependent on food imports for sustenance.

For the ultra-anthropocentric Europeans, every living thing had a price tag. Nature itself was a marketable commodity, from the meat and milk of pigs and cows, to the furs of bears and beavers, to the oil and blubber of whales, to the timber of towering New England white pines. For many indigenous nations of the Eastern Woodlands, still reeling from their near-eradication by apocalyptic epidemics, the choice was clear: they could either benefit from this new economic reality or be destroyed by it.

This process had begun across the northeastern seaboard of North America even before large-scale settlement. As far back as the first major voyages of exploration to the eastern seaboard of what is now the United States, Europeans had realized that the continent was brimming with fur-bearing animals like beavers. Europe had long since exterminated its own populace of fur-bearing animals, and was reliant on long, expensive overland Siberian trade routes for much of its current supply. Starting in the 16th century, European sailors and Native hunters began exchanging beaver pelts for common Old World tools like kettles and steel knives.

These were goods that each side considered to be rather cheap and mundane – but the consequences of those early exchanges were earth-shattering. With their own institutions greatly weakened by the epidemics, and with colonies sprouting up like weeds up and down the Atlantic coast, Native Americans found themselves irrevocably trapped in an enormous trans-oceanic web of international market forces.

The intrusion of European capital into indigenous American lifeways changed the economy of the Eastern Woodlands almost overnight. Trade goods had always been a sign of status in Algonquian culture, but now the most exotic trade goods were European, giving indigenous sachems a strong social incentive to begin commercializing.

Dutch tradesmen from New York, seeing how culturally significant wampum beads were for the coastal nations of Long Is-



civilized human society. A lifeway was not culturally and legally legitimate if it did not involve exerting control over non-human forms of life.

Theory led to practice, and pretty much as soon as the ships landed, animal agriculture became the primary means by which Puritan colonists asserted their political and ecological dominion over their corner of the continent.

Throughout the 1630s, a shocking proliferation of new English settlements popped up across Massachusetts Bay, usually because of, in the words of the founders of Sudbury, Massachusetts, the

"straightness of accommodation" in already established towns. But the population of the colony was infinitesimal compared to the number of Massachusett people that the same area had comfortably supported before the epidemics. Elbow-room was needed not because of the number of humans, but because of the number of cows and pigs.

Animal agriculture requires an enormous amount of land, and it was the single biggest material incentive for 17th century New England settlers to venture out from their seaside toeholds and expand further and further inland, deeper into the ancestral territories of indigenous nations. And wherever they went, they pulled down the biological cathedral and rebuilt it in the image of Essex, Wiltshire, or East Anglia.

> **Drew:** European thought at this time is very much taming a wildlands because wild landscapes are where the devil lives. That's where these evil spirits that's for witches. And so to tame the landscape is to bring it to God. If you're successful with this clearing the landscape, farming it, making a New England that it's because. God favors you.

It wasn't long before groups like the Massachusett and the Wampanoag began to feel the squeeze. In the early years of

colonization, English settlements and Native villages were in relatively close proximity. Since it was more efficient for the English to throw up fences around crops to protect them from farm animals than vice versa, cows and pigs roamed freely through the countryside, largely feeding themselves. Native farmers, who did not fence their crops, were soon faced with the massive problem of hungry, unsupervised English animals devouring their next harvest.

> **Loren:** The Hogs and pigs and cows came. It was destroying like the pigs were digging up our clams and the clam beds. It was destroying the understory of the forest. That's where you know you're, buries are and you're sassafras, which is medicinal. And you know, you're different shrubbery, if you will. That's in the forest that gives you so many gifts of medicines. And of useful materials for making things. Whether that's, you know, arrow shafts or materials for weaving or what have you, it's destroying that landscape. It's disrupting those ecosystems.

When Natives came to the English with these complaints, the colonists offered a simple and as far as they were concerned obvious solution – just build a fence. But when indigenous farmers did build fences, it committed them to a specific place, divorced them from their nomadic lifeways, and permanently entrapped them within the European agricultural system.

Pigs were the most rapacious farmed animals to come to New England in the 17th century. Intelligent and resourceful, with a quick reproductive cycle, they quickly multiplied, taking full advantage of the biological cathedral's curated abundance. As the pigs stripped entire forests of fruits, berries, and nuts, they came into direct competition for gatherable foodstuffs with the region's declining indigenous human population.



English animal farmers had no incentive to manage the pigs' range or herd size – on the contrary, letting them run rampant was in their direct financial interest. As soon as the pig population exceeded English communities' subsistence needs, their meat became a viable international export. For ten months out of the year, pigs did all the farmers' work for them, fattening themselves up and proliferating freely. In October and November, farmers would then simply gather the semi-wild pigs up by the thousands and drive them to port towns, where they would be slaughtered, packed in salt, and then shipped overseas to Caribbean markets.

As portable, moveable forms of private property, pigs, cows and chickens were important forms of early capital in 17th century New England. Commercial animal agriculture played a pivotal role in transforming the fledgling colonies from uncertain toeholds to serious players in the pan-Atlantic market. As sugar cultivation intensified in places like Barbados, and larger numbers of enslaved Africans were shipped in to work the plantations in generating ever-higher yields, animal farming in Massachusetts expanded to meet the demand, putting more pressure on the environment and intruding further into indigenous lands.

The nascent system of global capital generated a recursive form of environmental destruction – the degradation of Barbadian ecology informed the degradation of Massachusetts ecology, and vice versa – which was inextricably linked with colonial exploitation.

> **Loren:** When Europeans came here, where they changed the system to a system of commodification and excess, and. Umm. Wealth and wealth in this way of we want to be a billionaire today. Wealth, right? And that's not living in balance. There's plenty of resources here on this earth that we all as humans and all living things could live in balance in in this space, if you didn't have that kind of. Economy that is very extractive.