

Moving beyond colonial conservation models: Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas offer hope for biodiversity and advancing reconciliation in the Canadian boreal forest¹

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Introduction

Canada's boreal forests contain significant habitat for imperiled wildlife, such as woodland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*), and provide globally significant ecosystem services, such as carbon storage and the provision of freshwater (Andrew et al. 2014; Anielski and Wilson 2005). While historically ignored as a conservation priority owing to their relatively low species richness compared with tropical and sub-tropical regions of the planet, the boreal forest is currently in the conservation spotlight. Over 1500 scientists have signed an open letter to policy-makers calling for the protection of half of the Canadian boreal forest in a system of formally designated parks and protected areas² and governments have enacted legislation and initiated land use planning processes to conserve large swaths of boreal wilderness, such as in Ontario's far north (Wilkinson and Schulz 2012). Indeed, the Canadian boreal zone is among the few places on the planet where proactive land-use planning to protect biodiversity can still occur in advance of large-scale development decisions, given that much of the region remains intact and relatively undisturbed by industrial activity. For example, while more than 75% of the Earth's ice-free surface shows evidence of alteration as a result of human residence and land use (Ellis and Ramankutty 2008), a recent inventory of remaining intact forest landscapes (IFLs; containing large contiguous patches of forested and (or) naturally occurring treeless ecosystems) has found that approximately a quarter of remaining global IFLs are found within the northern boreal zone of North America and mostly in Canada (Potapov et al. 2017). While the boreal's relatively harsh climate and relative inaccessibility have largely spared it from human development and fragmentation to date, its vulnerability to climate change and expanding industrial activity at its southern edge have heightened calls for its protection (Andrew et al. 2014; Carlson et al. 2015).

While recognizing the significant and timely opportunity for large-scale conservation in the Canadian boreal, we should not lose sight of the fact that conventional conservation policy, such as the establishment of state-run parks and protected areas, have long played a role in the displacement of Indigenous Peoples. Throughout the world, conservation policy has disconnected Indigenous Peoples from sources of traditional foods and important cultural sites while criminalizing livelihood activities (Stevens

1997; West et al. 2006). Canada particularly struggles with a legacy of colonial conservation policy. Many of the country's national, provincial, and territorial protected areas were established without regard to Indigenous rights or Treaty and resulted in the displacement of Indigenous Peoples, their loss of livelihood, and their access to spiritual sites (Binnema and Niemi 2006). One of the most egregious examples of this was the establishment of Ontario's Quetico Provincial Park in 1913. Until the establishment of the park, the boreal lands and waters in around Quetico were used extensively by local First Nations to hunt, trap, gather berries, and practice other traditional activities. However, in 1915 provincial authorities forcibly relocated the Lac La Croix First Nation reservation from lands within the park³. Despite an official apology in 1991, Quetico Provincial Park continues to be managed as a wilderness-class protected area, which strictly limits use of traditional lands in the park by impacted First Nations (Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry 2018).

Thankfully, the international conservation community has begun to recognize the importance of supporting governance arrangements that better incorporate Indigenous Peoples, their world views, and their knowledge systems in the designation and management of protected areas. For example, the Pathway to Canada Target 1 process—a federal initiative meant to help Canada achieve its international and domestic obligations to protect a minimum of 17% of terrestrial and inland waters and 10% of coastal and marine areas under the Convention on Biological Diversity—has adopted the establishment of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) as a cornerstone of its strategy. Significantly, this process involves First Nations, Inuit, and Metis and commits to engaging both western and traditional ecological knowledge in the manner in which protected areas are established and managed.

A number of IPCAs, including Tribal Parks, already exist in the Canadian boreal and others are in the process of being established with the support of the Canada Target 1 process. For example, four Anishinaabeg First Nations along the border of Manitoba and Ontario have recently protected one of the largest areas of untouched boreal wilderness left in the world with the support of the governments of Manitoba and Ontario. Known as Pimachiowin Aki ("the land that gives life") in the local Ojibwe language, the

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²Scientists' letter: <https://www.borealbirds.org/publications/1500-scientists-worldwide-call-protection-canadas-boreal-forest>.

³Statement by Norman Jordan, Chief of Lac La Croix First Nation, Quetico Provincial Park Management Plan (2018): <https://www.ontario.ca/page/quetico-provincial-park-management-plan-published-2018>.

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29 040 km² boreal region was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2018 for both its cultural and ecological richness.

Tribal Parks and other IPCAs are particularly important in regions of the boreal that have been highly impacted and altered by industrial development because they protect remnant wildlife habitat as well as secure traditional lands that are critical for the exercise of Treaty and Aboriginal Rights, such as hunting, fishing, and the gathering of medicinal plants. One of the best examples of this is the 90 000 ha K'ih tsaa'dze Tribal Park, which has been established by Doig River First Nation in the heart of one of the biggest natural gas plays on the continent—the Montney shale formation, which contains reserves of 449 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and more than one billion barrels of oil in the Peace Region of northeastern British Columbia and neighboring Alberta. Over 67% of the Peace Region has already been developed as a result of the cumulative impacts of forestry, agriculture mining, hydro, and oil and gas development (Lee and Hanneman 2013) and thus K'ih tsaa'dze and other proposed Tribal Parks, nearby are among the few remaining places where local Dane_zaa and Cree First Nations can still participate in traditional activities as their ancestors did for thousands of years before European colonization—activities crucial to maintaining their cultural and spiritual identity and connection to the land, while ensuring the stewardship of sensitive boreal ecosystems and resilience to climate change.

Indigenous-led conservation, such as Tribal Parks and other IPCAs, represent a turning point in Canadian conservation that we applaud. Conserving lands and waters in partnership with Indigenous Peoples is the best way to protect biodiversity in the boreal that is consistent with our domestic and international ob-

ligations to respect and uphold the rights of Indigenous Peoples who call this globally recognized region home.

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