



What's Next For Nature: Perspectives on Political Ecology

Nature and Democracy

The possibilities and precarity of re-centring Indigenous stewardship in Parks Canada

As a young democratic nation, Canada and its parks have grown up together. In that sense, national parks are not just protected landscapes—they are public institutions that reflect who we understand ourselves to be, whose voices matter, and how democratic authority is exercised. Our first National Park—Banff—was created just twenty years after Confederation. From that single park in the Rocky Mountains, the network of National Parks expanded steadily from coast to coast to coast. By 1911, the Dominion Parks Branch had become the world's first National Park Service, and by 1998, the Parks Canada Agency had a presence in every province and territory in Canada.¹



By Allison Bishop
January 2026

Canadians cherish the iconic landscapes of Pacific Rim, Nahanni, Grasslands, and Cape Breton Highlands (among many others!), along with the diverse species that live there. These are places where Canadians make lasting memories—and where we welcome the world. Even the beaver logo has become a beloved symbol. Canada's national identity is deeply intertwined with its parks.²

Like many Canadians, I grew up seeing national parks as places of wonder—sites of family trips, wilderness, and pride. Only later did I begin to understand that the places I loved had more complex, difficult histories that deeply affect the present.

In whose interest? Protecting and conserving Canada's ecological and cultural heritage in the national interest

As a public institution, Parks Canada's mission is to "protect and present Canada's natural and cultural heritage in the national interest." At first appearance, this mandate feels straightforward. But it raises questions about what protection and presentation mean in practice, how the national interest is determined, and who is considered part of the nation. These are fundamentally democratic questions—about representation, participation, and whose interests are legitimized through public institutions. As a country with a settler-colonial past and present, these questions become all the more important.

For more than a century, Canada built its parks by claiming jurisdiction over Indigenous territories and removing or displacing the peoples who lived there.³ Many Indigenous Nations were cut off from their territories, unable to fulfill their rights and responsibilities to care for the Land.⁴ Scholars

and Indigenous Peoples often refer to this as *fortress conservation*, in which an invisible wall is erected around an area in the name of conservation.⁵

Fortress conservation reflects a worldview that separates people from nature—a legacy of European Enlightenment thought. It seeks to protect pristine wilderness from supposedly destructive human activity.⁶ Yet, not all human presence was deemed unwelcome: Banff was created to secure access to hot springs and outdoor recreation. Millions of visitors continue to enjoy the parks recreationally every year.

This history of conservation mirrors the broader story of Canadian colonialism. Early treaties such as the Peace and Friendship Treaties, the Guswentha (Two Row Wampum Belt Covenant), and the Royal Proclamation of 1763 were grounded in Nation-to-Nation relationships between Indigenous and Crown authorities.⁷ These agreements reflected distinct but legitimate systems of governance—systems that predate and challenge narrow settler understandings of democracy itself. But over time, the doctrine of discovery and *terra nullius* justified settler expansion and land acquisition. The idea that the land was empty and that newcomers could own it became one of the nation's founding myths. Colonialism is not a relic of the past; it continues to shape how conservation is practiced and imagined.

The wilderness we think of as untouched is a cultural construct.⁸ Indigenous Peoples have long shaped landscapes Canadians value through relational land care, guided by ethical frameworks that value abundance and balance rather than managing for scarcity. Today, evidence shows that Indigenous approaches to conservation are as effective, if not more effective, than state-led efforts because they emphasize reciprocity and interconnectedness among all beings.⁹

As we collectively face extreme changes to the global climate and biodiversity, it is clear that Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship hold tremendous potential to improve our approach to caring for the Land, waters, and all beings that rely on them.¹⁰ There is a compelling argument that re-centring Indigenous-led conservation in Canada is not only just and fair, but is in the public interest.

Reimagining conservation

As evidenced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, public institutions, such as Parks Canada, can play an important role in elevating Indigenous leadership. However, truly elevating Indigenous leadership in National Parks, protected areas, and cultural heritage sites will require moving beyond the democratic principles of inclusion, equity, and fairness. It also requires recognizing that democracy in a settler state cannot be strengthened through inclusion alone, but through the respectful coexistence of multiple governing systems. Many Indigenous Nations continue to practice systems of governance and legal orders that have long-predated Canada. Truly re-centring Indigenous-led stewardship and conservation will require reimagining and transforming conservation practice. This work is already underway in Parks Canada.

Over the past several decades, Parks Canada has taken meaningful steps to recognize Indigenous leadership in conservation. In the 1970s, the agency began creating National Park Reserves in areas where land claims were being negotiated, acknowledging that Indigenous rights and title could not be ignored. Since then, partnerships have deepened in places like [Gwaii Haanas](#) and [Thaidene Nëné](#), where co-governance models have shown what shared stewardship can look like in practice. New initiatives such as the National Urban Parks and Ecological Corridors

programs signal a shift away from viewing Parks Canada as a landowner toward understanding it as a convener of collaboration—one that depends on relationships of trust with Indigenous Nations.¹¹

These changes, while significant, have often been constrained by structures inherited from Canada's colonial past. Within the current legal framework, ultimate authority over parks still rests with the federal Minister, a system designed to preserve Crown control. This means that even in places where collaboration is strongest, Parks Canada can only go so far before it reaches the limits of ministerial power. The result is a tension between the agency's stated commitments to partnership and the legal reality that decisions must still rely upon the Minister, ultimately undermining Indigenous governing authority and self-determination. This concentration of authority reflects a democratic paradox: while Parks Canada is accountable to the public, decision-making power remains centralized, limiting shared governance. Overcoming this tension will require both legislative and cultural change within the agency to create space for Indigenous and Crown decision-making to peacefully and respectfully coexist.

In recent years, however, momentum for more profound change has grown. Decades of Indigenous advocacy, landmark court cases, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 2015 report have helped Canadians reckon with this legacy and imagine new possibilities for shared care of National Parks.¹² Within Parks Canada, employees are moving beyond conservation rooted in control and exclusion toward one grounded in partnership and responsibility. This shift is now guided by two key initiatives: the 2024 [Indigenous Stewardship Policy](#) and the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Action Plan](#) (UNDA Action Plan, 2023–2028).

Re-centring Indigenous stewardship: Changing structures, views, and practices

In the short term, the Indigenous Stewardship Policy gives Parks Canada the authority to do everything possible within existing frameworks to support Indigenous stewardship. This includes expanding access to harvesting, building co-governance agreements, and redistributing resources to Indigenous partners. In the longer term, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Action Plan (UNDA Action Plan) provides a pathway for structural change. Parks Canada can work with Indigenous governments to address persistent legislative barriers, such as those in the [National Parks Act](#). This has the potential to address how Ministerial authority over Parks Canada places has been interpreted in ways that undermine Indigenous authorities. Change-makers within the agency hope that the UNDA Action Plan measures will enable Indigenous Peoples to practice their legal orders and governance systems.

This structural work is complemented by efforts to change the agency's culture. Indigenous employees and members of the Indigenous Stewardship Circle are identifying competencies (knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors) that all Parks staff need to support Indigenous stewardship. Each employee will develop a personalized learning journey, informed by their role and the Lands where they work. These journeys might include mentorship, courses, and land-based learning with Elders and Knowledge Holders. Hiring processes will also evolve to reflect these competencies, embedding the support for Indigenous stewardship into the agency's values.

Finally, Parks Canada is embedding collaborative planning across the agency. The Indigenous Stewardship Policy directs operational and policy units to co-create an Indigenous Stewardship Plan or Strategy with Indigenous partners. This will support relationship-building in areas where

pre-existing connections with Indigenous Nations and communities are not already strong, while also benefiting existing partnerships. Parks Canada will also be able to holistically and cooperatively prioritize activities across all functions at a particular site. Indigenous Nations will have a significant opportunity to shape operational decision-making, including resource allocation, in ways that support their goals and visions for maintaining and renewing relationships with their territories. Importantly, the Indigenous Stewardship Policy also extends its reach beyond field units or site administration by requiring areas without direct responsibilities for administering Parks Canada places, such as human resources and finance, to collaborate with Indigenous organizations that hold expertise in their respective domains.

Possibilities and precarity

The work Parks Canada is undertaking to support Indigenous stewardship is an inspiring example of a Canadian public institution working to create space for legal and jurisdictional pluralism between Canadian and Indigenous governments to strengthen conservation practice and outcomes. However, 10 years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, signs indicate that public support for reconciliation is fading. This shift threatens to stall the transformative potential of the work underway within Parks Canada. In a democracy, sustained transformation depends not only on policy change, but on public legitimacy and trust.

Recent reporting by The Narwhal shows how Parks Canada's efforts to share authority through the Ecological Corridors program have faced pushback from local communities worried about livelihoods and perceptions of elite control.¹³ At the [2025 Minister's Roundtable](#), conservation leaders agreed that Parks Canada is taking meaningful steps toward Indigenous-led stewardship, but they also warned that these changes remain fragile in a polarized climate. As one participant put it, "we need to tell new stories to get ahead of politicization and address local fears." The recent [Federal Budget](#) shows a significant divestment in efforts to address the climate and biodiversity crises, including support for Indigenous-led conservation.

The Indigenous Stewardship Strategy depends on re-storying relationships between Indigenous Peoples and Parks Canada—and sharing those stories widely. As political attention turns toward economic priorities, it's vital that Canadians see Indigenous leadership in conservation as essential to the nation's interests. Moreover, it is important to demonstrate that our democratic and public institutions are adaptable enough to coexist alongside Indigenous governance systems. Without that shared understanding, the transformation Parks Canada and Indigenous Peoples from coast to coast are striving for may fall short.

Hope for healing and renewal in our National Parks

During a recent visit to Point Pelee National Park, I had the privilege of witnessing Indigenous stewardship in action. Members of Caldwell and Walpole Island First Nations welcomed a delegation of Indigenous Peoples from around the world alongside Park staff. Together, we learned about shared efforts to care for this remarkable place—a vital bird migration route, home to rare plant species, and a place of healing for people. Watching young Indigenous people work alongside Elders, Knowledge Holders, and Parks Canada staff to reimagine what it means to care for more-than-human relations was profoundly moving.

I left feeling hopeful. If there is anything we must protect, it is not only the Parks themselves but the relationships taking root within them—relationships built on trust, learning, and reciprocity. The future of conservation in Canada depends on sustaining these connections.

Reconciliation in Canadian parks will not be achieved through policy alone. As visitors, citizens, and caretakers, we each have a role to play in protecting the relationships that sustain life. Through re-centring Indigenous stewardship in conservation, we can begin to move closer to the spirit of the Nation-to-Nation relationship we initially committed to in our early agreements with Indigenous Peoples. In doing so, conservation can lead Canada to a new kind of nation building, one where National Parks can truly become places of healing and renewal—for all our relations. This is the kind of Canada, and the kind of democracy, I hope to contribute to.

Author Note

This essay is based on a forthcoming paper by Allison and co-authors, Drs. Robin Roth and Carla Rice, both Professors at the University of Guelph. The forthcoming paper is entitled: “We need to build a new foundation from the ground up: Parks Canada, Indigenous stewardship, and decolonial change”.

References

1. Campbell, Elizabeth Claire. 2011. *A Century of Parks Canada 1911–2011*. Vol. 1. Canadian History and Environment Series. University of Calgary Press. <https://books-scholarportal-info.usl.proxy.openathens.net/uri/ebooks/ebooks3/upress/2013-05-06/1/9781552385272>
2. Mortimer-Sandilands, Cartriona. 2009. “The Cultural Politics of Ecological Integrity: Nature and Nation in Canada’s National Parks, 1885–2000.” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 39–40: 161–89. <https://doi.org/10.7202/040828ar>
3. Binnema, Ted, and Melanie Niemi. 2006. “Let the Line Be Drawn Now’: Wilderness, Conservation, and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada.” *Environmental History* 11 (4): 724–50. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1093/envhis/11.4.724>
4. Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Sabina Trimble, and Peter Fortna. 2023. *Remembering Our Relations: Dēnesų́níné Oral Histories of Wood Buffalo National Park*. University of Calgary Press.
5. Sandlos, John. 2007. “Federal Spaces, Local Conflicts: National Parks and the Exclusionary Politics of the Conservation Movement in Ontario, 1900–1935.” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 16 (1): 293–318. <https://doi.org/doi:10.7202/015735ar>
6. Youdelis, Megan, Roberta Nakoochee, Colin O’Neil, Elizabeth Lunstrum, and Robin Roth. 2020. “Wilderness’ Revisited: Is Canadian Park Management Moving beyond the ‘Wilderness’ Ethic?” *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes* 64 (2): 232–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12600>
7. Karine Duhamel. “The Two Row Wampum.” Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Published November 14, 2018. <https://humanrights.ca/story/two-row-wampum>
8. Cronon, William. 1996. “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *Environmental History* 1 (1): 7–28.
9. Domínguez, Lara, and Colin Luoma. 2020. “Decolonising Conservation Policy: How Colonial Land and Conservation Ideologies Persist and Perpetuate Indigenous Injustices at the Expense of the Environment.” *Land* 9 (3): 22.
10. Moola, Faisal, and Robin Roth. 2019. “Moving beyond Colonial Conservation Models: Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas Offer Hope for Biodiversity and Advancing Reconciliation in the Canadian Boreal Forest.” *Environmental Reviews* 27, no. 2: 200–201. <https://doi.org/10.1139/er-2018-0091>
11. Roth, Robin, and Allison Bishop. 2024. *Elevating Indigenous Governance and Leadership in Urban Parks: Possibilities, Challenges, and Pathways*. <https://ipcaknowledgebasket.ca/elevating-indigenous-governance-and-leadership-in-urban-parks/>
12. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. 2015. *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Government Report. https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_Web.pdf
13. Rutgers, Julia-Simone. 2025. “Indigenous-Led Conservation Plans in Manitoba Have Sparked Backlash. There’s Also a Path Forward.” *The Narwhal*, April 4. <https://thenarwhal.ca/manitoba-indigenous-conservation-plans-arborg/>

About the Author



Allison Bishop (she/her) is a fifth-generation Canadian whose maternal and paternal ancestors left the United Kingdom (largely England) to settle in the territories of the Williams Treaty Nations (Central Ontario). Her work has spanned public policy, education, research, and knowledge mobilization, with a focus on social justice and decolonial change. Allison is a doctoral candidate in the Social Practice and Transformational Change program at the University of Guelph. Her doctoral work explores how non-Indigenous conservation actors are responding to a resurgence of Indigenous leadership in conservation, and the decolonial possibilities emerging from those encounters. From 2019–2025, Allison served as manager of the [Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership](#), a national Indigenous-led network that helped support and catalyze Indigenous-led conservation in Canada.

Disclaimer: We are pleased to share this material from an external expert, presented as a contribution to public discourse. The thoughts expressed herein belong solely to the author, reflect the judgment of the author as of the date of publication, are subject to change, and do not necessarily represent the official views or values of the Salazar Center.