



## What's Next For Nature: Perspectives on Political Ecology

*Nature and Democracy*

### Democracy Built on Care

The phone call was always brief. “Come get some moose soup,” my *tsook’al* (grandmother) would say, or “I baked bread.” The click of her hanging up echoed in my ear before I could respond. Even as a young child, I understood what it meant: get over there quickly. There might be cinnamon rolls.

Three blocks separated our house from hers in Fairbanks, Alaska. Her house was a cedar-sided split-level in a city neighborhood with paved streets but not fancy enough for sidewalks. My *tsook’al’s* kitchen table sat partially in the tiny galley kitchen, partially in the living room beside the wood stove. On bread-making days, aluminum muffin tins and oiled loaf pans lined up in neat rows. Steam rose from fresh loaves, melting the yellow Land O’Lakes butter we smeared across warm chunks.

That table held more than food. My *tsook’al* did her beading there, wrote an entire book longhand on yellow legal pads in determined, swirly cursive. Our large family gathered there for holidays and frequent potlucks. Alaska Natives from smaller communities and villages visited when they came to Fairbanks, sharing traditional foods they missed in the city. The table became a place where bonds formed and strengthened over cups of Lipton’s black tea.

It was also where my *tsook’al*, my grandfather, and close friends dared to dream. A single seed of an idea joined others. They created the Fairbanks Native Association (FNA) to address the inequity and racism they experienced daily as Alaska Native people. In the 1960s, restaurants displayed “No Natives” signs in their windows. There were no places to gather outside homes.

What began as conversation over tea became an organization that changed discriminatory policy. The young people who gathered at FNA in those early years later created the non-profit Tanana Chiefs Conference in 1962 to serve Tribal health and social needs, and the statewide Tribal organization Alaska Federation of Natives in 1966. Such efforts provided momentum for the Alaska Native land claims efforts, in 1971 establishing Doyon Limited, one of the twelve private, for-profit Alaska Native regional corporations. These entities work together for the benefit of Indigenous communities in the Interior and across Alaska. Today, FNA continues serving Fairbanks in ways grounded in Alaska Native culture.

My *tsook’al* climbed the long flight of stairs to her second-story entrance daily until she passed away at 96. She was an artist, author, and advocate for public policies supporting fair treatment of Alaska Native peoples. I still meet people across the state who share stories of visiting her house, that gathering place where relationships formed the foundation for everything else.



By Dr. Nikoosh Carlo  
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The work that began at that kitchen table expanded from civil rights to land claims, and is now shaping conservation stewardship. Indigenous-led efforts have the potential to transform how Alaska approaches care for lands and waters, recognizing that place, culture, and climate are inseparable. This is what I carry forward: every single one of us can take action, no matter how small, to address the climate crisis. Bringing these actions together, sharing and cultivating ideas that center caring for each other and the land makes all the difference.

### **Enoughness**

Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book *The Serviceberry*, writes of this principle she calls enoughness: recognition that we have what we need, that our value lies not in how much we have but in how much we care for others and give away. She draws this lesson from the reciprocal relationship between the serviceberry bush and the Cedar Waxwings. The bush offers abundant fruit. The birds, in eating, spread seeds that grow new bushes. Neither proves worthiness or earns permission, they participate in a cycle of mutual care and regeneration.

This principle extends beyond material resources to our own participation in the work of caring for each other and the land. Many of us labor under the belief that we must continuously prove we belong, that our place in conservation spaces depends on flawless execution. We work into dark hours, convinced that one misstep will confirm we do not deserve our seat at the table.

What if enoughness meant trusting that our presence in this work is already legitimate? Effectiveness still requires data, strategy, and sustained effort. But these tools are strengthened, not weakened, when our participation comes from care and integrity rather than from proving our worthiness. Democracy rooted in care requires us to extend this principle to ourselves and each other: you already belong here. Your contribution already matters.

At its core, democracy should uphold human rights to food, shelter, healthcare, and representation. We have enough to meet these needs when we prioritize care for each other over endless accumulation. This requires centering relationships as the foundation for how we govern ourselves.

### **Remembering Forward**

Joy Harjo in her poem "The Rabbit" writes of a "world long before this one, where there was enough for everyone, until somebody got out of line". We lost track of purpose and reason. We forgot our songs, our stories. "We could no longer see or hear our ancestors, or talk with each other across the kitchen table."

This forgetting severs our understanding of relationship with the natural world. When we lose this connection, conservation becomes something we do to or for the land, missing the deeper truth that we already are in relationship with it. Strong conservation work emerges through co-creation, where Indigenous Knowledge and academically trained science work alongside each other, each bringing essential understanding.

Remembering, then, requires more than acknowledgement. It asks us to learn the story of the land where we stand, to show up in community beyond our professional roles, to practice land relationship without agenda. My father taught this through summer afternoons watching grebes

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build their nest, hatch eggs, navigate a neighborhood pond with their chicks. Patient observation builds the knowledge that informs authentic partnership.

Remembering where we are rooted, to whom we are connected, the place where we live—this stabilizes our lives' foundation. Indigenous Peoples take a holistic view of the complicated matrix of connections among people, place, and planet. This remembering forward offers a path through our current unraveling.

### **Innovation Scales**

Lasting change grows from specific ingredients: place-based knowledge, academically trained science, communities of care. The kitchen table where my grandmother and her friends imagined the Fairbanks Native Association demonstrates this. Local understanding met with determination and collective care. The work they began at that table grew into regional organizations serving thousands.

Scaling requires trust built at the pace of relationship, not crisis. In the village of Igiugig, at the headwaters of the Kvichak River in Alaska, the Bristol Bay Guardians monitor freshwater systems vital to the world's largest wild salmon fishery. The Igiugig Village Council leads this program, which was built on community priorities and local leadership. In Southeast Alaska, the Seacoast Indigenous Guardians Network strengthens communities through training, youth programs, and collaborative stewardship of traditional homelands and waters. These Alaska programs were inspired by and adapted from Guardians programs formed by coastal British Columbia First Nations more than 20 years ago. The model demonstrates this principle of scaling, growing and evolving as each community shapes it to their own contexts and priorities.

These programs work because they honor what communities already know about their lands and waters, bring this knowledge together with scientific understanding, and invest in relationships over time. Innovation is not just bringing new ideas to communities. It is creating conditions for community-led solutions to flourish and scale. What starts small and rooted in place can grow when nurtured by care and connection. This is how we find our way forward by going back.

### **Stewardship**

The principles of Indigenous worldview can steward democracy toward health. A democracy that measures its strength by the connections formed among its people, the degree of collaboration in solving hard problems, the health of the environment, and how well we care for all our relatives—whether they call the land or water home.

In Fairbanks and communities where winter darkness and extreme cold shape daily life, survival depends on a particular kind of preparedness. Not anxious stockpiling, but the deeper readiness that comes from knowing when to show up for your neighbor, and when they'll show up for you. When over 650 Alaska Native peoples evacuated after ex-Typhoon Halong struck Southwest Alaska in October 2025, this principle held: community networks quickly mobilized response and support. This wisdom traveled from fish camps and trap lines into city kitchens and community centers: we find our way forward by going back to what has always sustained us, each other, and the land that holds us all.

Climate resilience works the same way. Social infrastructure built through seemingly small connections (community gardens, volunteer work, annual cleanups) creates the foundation that makes larger climate initiatives possible. This relational preparedness practiced daily, not just during crisis, allows communities to adapt and respond when challenges emerge.

Kimmerer reminds us in this [NY Times opinion](#), *The Turtle Mothers Come Ashore to Ask About an Unpaid Debt*: “The Earth asks that we renounce a culture of endless taking so that the world can continue. We need more than policy change; we need a change in worldview, from the fiction of human exceptionalism to the reality of our kinship and reciprocity with the living world.”

Our current capitalist systems were built on foundations of growth, taking, and exploitation. The democracy we inherited grew from these same roots. Transformation doesn’t require abandoning everything these systems have generated (e.g. medical advances, innovations, infrastructure, etc.). It requires returning to the core belief of enoughness to reorient what we prioritize: relationship alongside efficiency, care alongside growth, regeneration alongside extraction. This shift begins where all lasting change begins, at tables where people gather to imagine something different. In our organizations, policies, and daily work this is reflected through the choices we make: measuring community well-being alongside project metrics, centering Indigenous leadership in conservation decisions, designing programs that build relationships rather than just deliver services, investing in long-term partnerships over short-term wins.

The serviceberry offers its fruit without proof of worthiness. The waxwing spreads its seeds in return. This is the invitation before us: to participate in caring for each other and the land, to measure success not by how much we control but by how well we care for what we steward. To recognize that meaningful climate work, like all lasting work, grows from the relationships we tend, the tables where we gather, the care we cultivate together.

#### Further Reading/References

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