



What's Next For Nature: Perspectives on Political Ecology

Nature and Democracy

Guardians of Land and Democracy: The Essential Role of Tribal Nations in Conservation



By James Rattling Leaf, Sr.
January 2026

Across the United States, the movement to protect land, water, and biodiversity increasingly intersects with questions of justice, sovereignty, and democratic participation. Tribal Nations—long excluded from national conversations about land management—are now recognized as indispensable leaders in conservation and climate resilience. This growing acknowledgment is not only about ecological expertise; it is about restoring relationships, governance systems, and responsibilities that Indigenous Peoples have carried for millennia.

Today, Tribal Nations' leadership in conservation affirms a powerful truth: when Indigenous Nations lead, democracy grows deeper, stronger, and more inclusive. Their efforts show that ecological stewardship and democratic renewal are interwoven, rooted in sovereignty, relational accountability, and a profound responsibility to future generations.

Re-centering Tribal Nations as Conservation Leaders

Before colonization, Indigenous Nations stewarded the lands now known as the United States through complex governance systems rooted in kinship, reciprocity, and place-based knowledge. Indigenous stewardship shaped forests, grasslands, rivers, and wildlife through practices such as cultural fire management, rotational harvesting, ceremony, and careful monitoring of ecological cycles. These were not merely tools for survival—they were holistic governance systems grounded in collective wellbeing and ecological balance.

The arrival of European settlers brought removal, forced assimilation, allotment, and widespread ecological disruption. Tribes were severed from ancestral homelands, and ecosystems suffered through industrial extraction, overgrazing, fire suppression, species eradication, dam construction, and uncontrolled agricultural expansion. Biodiversity declined rapidly. Keystone species, including the buffalo, were driven to the edge of extinction. Yet Indigenous governance systems endured.

Today, Tribal Nations are reclaiming their rightful roles as stewards of their territories. Through land repatriation, co-stewardship agreements, revitalization of TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge), Indigenous Guardians programs, buffalo restoration efforts, and comprehensive Tribal climate adaptation planning, Indigenous leadership is restoring ecological health while strengthening democratic governance grounded in sovereignty and Indigenous lifeways.

Their resurgence is reshaping conservation across the continent—demonstrating that leadership grounded in Indigenous Knowledge is essential for meeting the intertwined challenges of climate change, species loss, and ecological fragmentation.

Ethical Space: A Democratic Framework for Conservation

A defining contribution of Tribal leadership in national conservation efforts has been the creation and expansion of ethical space, a concept rooted in Indigenous philosophies and popularized by Cree scholar Willie Ermine. Ethical space describes the field of engagement where Indigenous and Western knowledge systems meet as equals—neither dominating the other—and where mutual respect, accountability, and shared responsibility guide decision-making. Ethical space is not simply a tool for collaboration. It is a democratic practice.

It embodies principles vital to democratic life:

1. Inclusion

Indigenous Peoples—long excluded from scientific, governmental, and land-management arenas—are recognized as full decision-makers, not stakeholders or consultants.

2. Accountability

Institutions are called to acknowledge historical injustices, ongoing power imbalances, and the responsibilities owed to Tribal Nations through treaties, trust obligations, and ethical commitments.

3. Transparency and Consent

Partnerships must align with Tribal sovereignty, Indigenous data governance, and community-defined protocols.

4. Shared Governance

Decision-making processes are collaborative and relational, guided by both Indigenous and Western ethics, rather than dominated by one worldview.

Ethical space transforms how agencies, universities, and conservation organizations engage with Tribal Nations. It invites all partners to co-create solutions, listen deeply, and share power—reconfiguring the conservation landscape so Tribal Nations can exercise political authority and cultural values that were once suppressed.

In this way, ethical space represents a form of democratic restoration, where the voices and responsibilities of Indigenous Nations strengthen governance at local, regional, and national scales.

Conservation as a Democratic Act

For Tribal Nations, conservation is not only ecological—it is profoundly democratic. It is rooted in sovereign rights, collective governance, community wellbeing, and intergenerational responsibility.

1. ***Sovereignty Strengthens Democratic Governance***

Tribal Nations are sovereign governments that predate the United States. When conservation strategies respect and uphold Tribal sovereignty—through co-management, treaty rights, land stewardship, and the protection of sacred sites—they reinforce the democratic principle that governance must reflect the authority and interests of its peoples. When Tribes are recognized as equal partners in conservation and land management, democracy deepens. When their rights are denied or diminished, democracy erodes.

2. ***Indigenous Knowledge Expands Democratic Participation***

TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) offers nuanced, place-based understanding developed over thousands of years. When TEK is valued alongside Western science, the range of perspectives and decision-making processes in public life expands. Indigenous governance contributes frameworks rooted in humility, relational accountability, consensus-building, and long-term responsibility.

This broadens democratic participation—inviting more diverse voices, restoring Indigenous authority, and enriching national conversations about land and climate.

3. ***Conservation Creates Space for Youth Leadership***

Across Indian Country, conservation has become a galvanizing force for youth empowerment. Tribal youth programs in land stewardship, GIS mapping, buffalo restoration, ecological monitoring, and climate adaptation planning cultivate future leaders grounded in both scientific knowledge and cultural teachings.

Youth empowerment strengthens democracy—ensuring that emerging generations carry not only ecological expertise but also the values of kinship, responsibility, and community-driven governance.

4. ***Conservation Strengthens Food Sovereignty and Community Wellbeing***

Tribal-led conservation models are inseparable from food sovereignty, economic self-determination, and cultural revitalization. Healthy ecosystems support healthy communities, and communities directly involved in land stewardship reinforce democratic engagement at every level.

The Buffalo as a Framework for Conservation and Democracy

One of the most powerful expressions of Tribal-led conservation is the movement to restore buffalo to Tribal lands. Buffalo restoration is not simply ecological—it is cultural, spiritual, economic, and political.

It represents:

- The restoration of Tribal governance
- The revitalization of ceremony and cultural identity
- The regeneration of food systems grounded in Indigenous teachings
- The renewal of human–Earth relationships
- The return of a keystone species vital to grassland health
- The repair of intergenerational trauma
- The strengthening of Tribal self-determination

Buffalo are teachers of resilience, generosity, and collective strength—values core to Indigenous democratic traditions.

For many communities, buffalo restoration is a living expression of sovereignty and a path toward ecological democracy. It reinforces Indigenous principles of shared responsibility, community-led governance, and stewardship grounded in respect for all beings.

Boundary Spanning as Democratic Practice

Across Tribal Nations, many leaders serve as boundary spanners—individuals who carry the cultural fluency, institutional knowledge, and relational skill needed to bridge the worlds of Tribal, federal, academic, and conservation institutions. Boundary spanning is not passive; it is an act of political leadership and democratic transformation.

Boundary spanners:

- Translate across worldviews and knowledge systems
- Build trust between institutions and communities
- Foster ethical collaboration
- Uphold Indigenous sovereignty in national conservation efforts
- Bridge scientific and cultural frameworks
- Bring historically excluded voices into decision-making spaces
- Boundary spanners strengthen democracy by expanding who participates in governance and by ensuring that Indigenous perspectives shape the policies and practices that affect Tribal lands, waters, and communities.

Democracy Rooted in Indigenous Values

Where Western democratic traditions often emphasize individual rights, Indigenous democracies emphasize relationships—between people, the land, the waters, the non-human world, and future generations.

Many Indigenous governance systems teach:

- Kinship with the natural world
- Responsibility to future generations
- Consensus-based decision-making
- Humility in leadership
- Shared authority and collective wellbeing
- Ethics of reciprocity and respect

These teachings offer essential guidance for democratic governance in a time of climate upheaval and social fragmentation. They invite the nation toward a more relational democracy grounded in responsibility rather than extraction, reciprocity rather than domination, and community wellbeing rather than individual gain.

The Path Forward: Conservation as a Foundation for Democratic Renewal

As climate change accelerates and ecological systems strain under unprecedented pressure, the United States faces a defining choice: continue an extractive conservation model rooted in

colonial histories, or embrace a future where Tribal Nations lead, Indigenous Knowledge is honored, and democracy is rooted in shared responsibility.

Tribal leadership—through ethical space, TEK, buffalo restoration, co-stewardship models, and boundary-spanning diplomacy—offers a transformative path forward. This leadership shows that conservation is not only about protecting species and habitats; it is about repairing relationships, restoring governance systems, and rebuilding democratic institutions grounded in justice and respect.

Conclusion: Toward a Shared Future of Respect and Relational Governance

The work of Tribal Nations across Turtle Island reveals a profound truth: Indigenous Peoples are not just stakeholders in conservation—they are foundational leaders whose sovereignty, knowledge, and values offer essential pathways for ecological restoration and democratic renewal.

Through ethical space, ecological stewardship, cultural revitalization, collective governance, and a deep commitment to land and community, Tribal Nations demonstrate that conservation is inseparable from justice and that democracy can only flourish when it embraces Indigenous Nations as equal partners.

Their leadership invites the country toward a future of relational democracy—a governance system grounded in respect, reciprocity, shared responsibility, and the recognition that all beings are connected in a single web of life.

In this future, Tribal Nations lead not only in conservation but in shaping the ethical and democratic horizons of the United States itself.

About the Author



James Rattling Leaf, Sr. (Sicangu Lakota) is the Principal of Wolakota Lab, LLC and Co-Founder, Indigenous Engagement Institute, a trusted leader in Indigenous engagement, climate resilience, and data sovereignty. Drawing upon over 25 years of experience working at the intersection of Indigenous Knowledge and Western science, he serves as a bridge-builder between Tribal Nations, federal agencies, and research institutions to advance equitable partnerships grounded in respect, reciprocity, and shared stewardship.

James works with organizations such as the University of Colorado Boulder's ESIL, CIRES, and the North Central Climate Adaptation Science Center (NC CASC), where he supports efforts to integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into climate adaptation, drought planning, and environmental monitoring. He is a founding member of the U.S. Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network, a steering committee member for the NASA Indigenous Peoples Pilot, and a key collaborator with the National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy on co-stewardship and conservation learning initiatives.

His work focuses on ethical space frameworks, Tribal data governance, and capacity building for the next generation of Indigenous scientists and leaders. James has led numerous national and international collaborations—including with NOAA's National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) and the NASA Earth Science Division—to ensure Indigenous peoples are recognized as equal partners in science, research, and decision-making.

Rooted in Lakota values of Wolakota (peace, balance, and harmony), his work envisions a future where Indigenous Knowledge and Western science are braided together to address climate change, sustain cultural landscapes, and empower Tribal Nations to lead solutions for their communities and the Earth.