"We have that vision of the future": Indigenous womxn's resistance as environmental protection in the U.S. Southwest

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Abstract

Widespread recognition of the effectiveness of Indigenous land stewardship has largely been met by attempts to instrumentalize Indigenous environmental governance in the service of global conservation goals. Instead, and in response to calls to decolonize conservation and identify alternatives to the neoliberalization of nature, I ask how anti-colonial Indigenous approaches should shape the future of environmental protection. Drawing on in-depth interviews and a Feminist Political Ecology approach, I argue that Indigenous womxn resisting settler colonialism in the U.S. Southwest are theorizing and practicing a distinct environmental paradigm, which I call Indigenous feminist environmental protection. Indigenous feminist environmental protection is defined by commitments to decolonization, nature as kin, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, spirituality and ceremony, womxn's leadership, and a radical approach. My analysis reveals the incommensurability of Indigenous practices and knowledges with colonial, capitalist environmental policies, indicating the need for a shift to decolonial environmental praxis.

Keywords: Indigenous women, decolonial resistance, neoliberal conservation, decolonial conservation, U.S. Southwest

Résumé

La reconnaissance généralisée de l'efficacité de la gestion territoriale autochtone s'est largement heurtée à des tentatives d'instrumentalisation de la gouvernance environnementale autochtone au service des objectifs mondiaux de conservation. En réponse aux appels à la décolonisation de la conservation et à l'identification d'alternatives à la néolibéralisation de la nature, je m'interroge sur la manière dont les approches autochtones anticoloniales devraient façonner l'avenir de la protection environnementale. En m'appuyant sur des entretiens approfondis et une approche d'écologie politique féministe, je soutiens que les femmes autochtones qui résistent au colonialisme de peuplement dans le Sud-Ouest américain théorisent et pratiquent un paradigme environnemental distinct, que j'appelle 'la protection environnementale féministe autochtone.' Cette protection environnementale féministe autochtone se définit par des engagements en faveur de la décolonisation, de la nature comme parenté, du savoir écologique traditionnel, de la spiritualité et des cérémonies, du leadership des femmes et d'une approche radicale. Mon analyse révèle l'incommensurabilité des pratiques et savoirs autochtones avec les politiques environnementales coloniales et capitalistes, soulignant la nécessité d'une transition vers une praxis environnementale décoloniale.

Mots-clés: Femmes autochtones, résistance décoloniale, conservation néolibérale, conservation décoloniale, Sud-Ouest des États-Unis

Resumen

El reconocimiento generalizado de la eficacia de la gestión territorial indígena se ha visto en gran medida compensado por los intentos de instrumentalizar la gobernanza ambiental indígena al servicio de los objetivos

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globales de conservación. En cambio, y en respuesta a los llamados a descolonizar la conservación e identificar alternativas a la neoliberalización de la naturaleza, me pregunto cómo los enfoques indígenas anticoloniales deberían moldear el futuro de la protección ambiental. Basándome en entrevistas a profundidad y un enfoque de Ecología Política Feminista, sostengo que las mujeres indígenas que se resisten al colonialismo en el suroeste de Estados Unidos teorizan y practican un paradigma ambiental distintivo, al que denomino protección ambiental feminista indígena. Esta protección se define por sus compromisos con la descolonización, la naturaleza como parentesco, el conocimiento ecológico tradicional, la espiritualidad y las ceremonias, el liderazgo de las mujeres y un enfoque radical. Mi análisis revela la inconmensurabilidad de las prácticas y los conocimientos indígenas con las políticas ambientales coloniales y capitalistas, lo que indica la necesidad de un cambio hacia una praxis ambiental decolonial.

Palabras clave: Mujeres indígenas, resistencia decolonial, conservación neoliberal, conservación decolonial, suroeste de EE. UU.

1. Introduction

There is now widespread recognition that Indigenous territories protect the environment as well as, if not better than, the capitalist state (Schuster *et al*., 2019; Garnett *et al*., 2018; Corntassel, 2014; UNDP, 2011). While many scholars and activists look to Indigenous stewardship as a radical alternative to capitalist state environmental governance, others look to subsume Indigenous practices under existing management regimes. Efforts to incorporate Indigenous practices into climate adaptation plans (Dhillon, 2021; Whyte, 2018) and ecosystem restoration (Robinson *et al*., 2021), for example, reflect growing efforts to instrumentalize Indigenous ecological knowledge in the service of global environmental goals (Creutzig *et al*., 2022, p. 35; DePuy *et al*., 2022). Perhaps nowhere is this impulse more prominent than within the Anglo-European conservation movement, which has for centuries subsumed Indigenous territories under protected areas (PAs) (Dowie, 2009; Spence, 1999; Grove, 1995). In an apparent break from the tradition of fortress conservation – the creation of PAs through the forced eviction of original inhabitants and the prohibition of traditional resource uses within park boundaries (Brockington, 2002) – many conservationists in recent decades have embraced community-based approaches, which fuse development and conservation goals by allowing communities to remain on their land and/or continue traditional livelihood activities (Tauli-Corpuz *et al*., 2020; Büscher & Fletcher, 2014; Igoe & Brockington, 2007). Current proposals to conserve 30% of the Earth's lands and waters by 2030 (30x30), and 50% by 2050 (Half-Earth), would rely heavily on the inclusion of Indigenous territories within the global PA network (e.g. CBD, 2022; Dinerstein *et al*., 2020).

Amid calls for land and water conservation on an unprecedented scale, political ecologists are rightfully concerned with how to pursue environmental protection without repeating or entrenching the injustices of past conservation efforts. Many critical scholars of conservation are advocating for the use of designations such as "other effective area-based conservation measures" (OECMs) and "Indigenous and Community Controlled Areas" (ICCAs) to avoid widespread displacement in the name of the 30x30 project (Brockington, 2021; Dutta *et al*., 2021; Büscher *et al*., 2017). While neoliberal conservation remains the dominant approach (Apostolopoulou *et al*., 2021; Collins *et al*., 2021; Le Billon, 2021; Büscher & Fletcher, 2019), a growing group of political ecologists is interested in how to decolonize conservation (see e.g. the recent special section on "The challenges of decolonizing conservation," edited by Brockington, Corbera, & Maestre, 2021, in this journal). Much of the recent literature on decolonizing conservation has centered post-colonial states in the Global South (Banerjee & Sharma, 2021; Bluwstein, 2021; Collins *et al*., 2021; Fanari, 2021); less attention has been given to the unique exigencies of settler colonies (exceptions include work on Canada, e.g. Youdelis *et al*., 2021; Bernauer & Roth, 2021, and Australia, e.g. Reardon-Smith, 2025). Because the land[2] and its original caretakers are colonized, the challenge of decolonial conservation is distinct in a settler colony. Thus, calls for decolonial conservation and a conservation revolution (e.g. Apostolopoulou *et al*., 2021; Büscher & Fletcher, 2019) demand careful attention to how such shifts might be realized in different places.

[2] Like Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 5), I use "land" throughout as a shorthand for "land/water/air/subterranean earth."

This article seeks to expand the growing knowledge of the possibilities and challenges of decolonizing conservation by addressing the particularities of the U.S. settler colony. The U.S. is underrepresented in the extant literature on decolonial conservation, perhaps in part due to the dearth of Indigenous-led or -managed conservation efforts compared to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Although the Biden administration committed to pursue the 30x30 agenda (U.S. Department of the Interior, n.d.), the Trump administration has subsequently worked to roll back environmental protections and to increase extraction on federal lands (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2025), indicating the limits of traditional conservation efforts (Corbera *et al*., 2021).

In what follows, I aim to demonstrate why reforms to U.S. conservation practice are untenable in the absence of systemic change, and to offer a radical alternative to neoliberal conservation emerging from Indigenous womxn's resistance to settler colonialism in the U.S. Southwest. Despite significant evidence that conservation affects members of a community differently depending on their gender, class, and racial/ethnic identity (Homewood *et al*., 2022; Ballivián, 2022; Banerjee & Sharma 2021; Robinson, 2021; Gutiérrez-Zamora, 2021; Sen & Pattanaik, 2019), these dynamics remain "remarkably little discussed" in the neoliberal conservation literature (Apostolopoulou *et al*., 2021, p. 252). To date, few scholars have answered calls (e.g. Napoletano & Clark, 2020; Büscher *et al*., 2012) for greater engagement with communities resisting neoliberal conservation (recent exceptions include Torres-Alruiz & Gómez-Liendo, 2024; Ishii, 2022; Hope, 2021; Sylvander, 2021; Thakholi, 2021). In response, I use a Feminist Political Ecology approach (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996), which centers the values and knowledge of female-identifying and non-binary Indigenous resisters leading diverse struggles for land and life in the U.S. Southwest. I find that Indigenous womxn resisting settler colonialism in the U.S. Southwest are theorizing and practicing an alternative environmental paradigm, which I call Indigenous feminist environmental protection (IFEP). Crucially, IFEP demands a very different response to socio-ecological destruction than another environmental paradigm: decolonization.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, I address the past and present convergence of capitalism, settler colonialism, and conservation in the U.S. Southwest. Greater attention to the socio-history of conservation reveals the need to address interlocking systems of oppression that contribute to environmental harm, including colonialism, militarism, and heteropatriarchy, to avoid creating new forms of depredation and injustice. Next, I introduce the concept of Indigenous feminist environmental protection (IFEP), which emerged in the context of fifteen in-depth interviews with Diné, Havasupai, Hopi, Jemez Pueblo, Laguna Pueblo, Mescalero Apache, Oceti Sakowin, Sandia Pueblo, Santa Clara Pueblo, San Carlos Apache, Tesuque Pueblo, Tiwa Pueblo of Ysleta del Sur, and Zuni Pueblo organizers in the U.S. Southwest. I discuss the ways in which IFEP challenges, and contributes to, calls for decolonial conservation, by offering a grassroots alternative dedicated to holistic socio-environmental protection. I conclude with a review of the implications of IFEP for conservation scholars and practitioners.

2. Capitalism, colonialism, and conservation in the U.S. Southwest

The U.S. is often looked to as the founder of so-called "fortress conservation", beginning with the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 (i.e. Reardon-Smith, 2025; Washington *et al*., 2024; Brockington, 2002). Indeed, while American conservationists learned from their European counterparts who first accumulated conservation knowledge in the imperial tropics (Grove, 1995), the scale of Indigenous dispossession in the name of conservation in the U.S. was unprecedented (Spence, 1999). Conservation was, therefore, an important tool of the U.S. settler colonial project. The U.S. Southwest, which includes the states of Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah, illustrates the contradictions of U.S. conservation

policy: it is the site of disproportionate federal land holdings, large Indigenous territories, and rampant resource extraction (see Figures 1, 2).

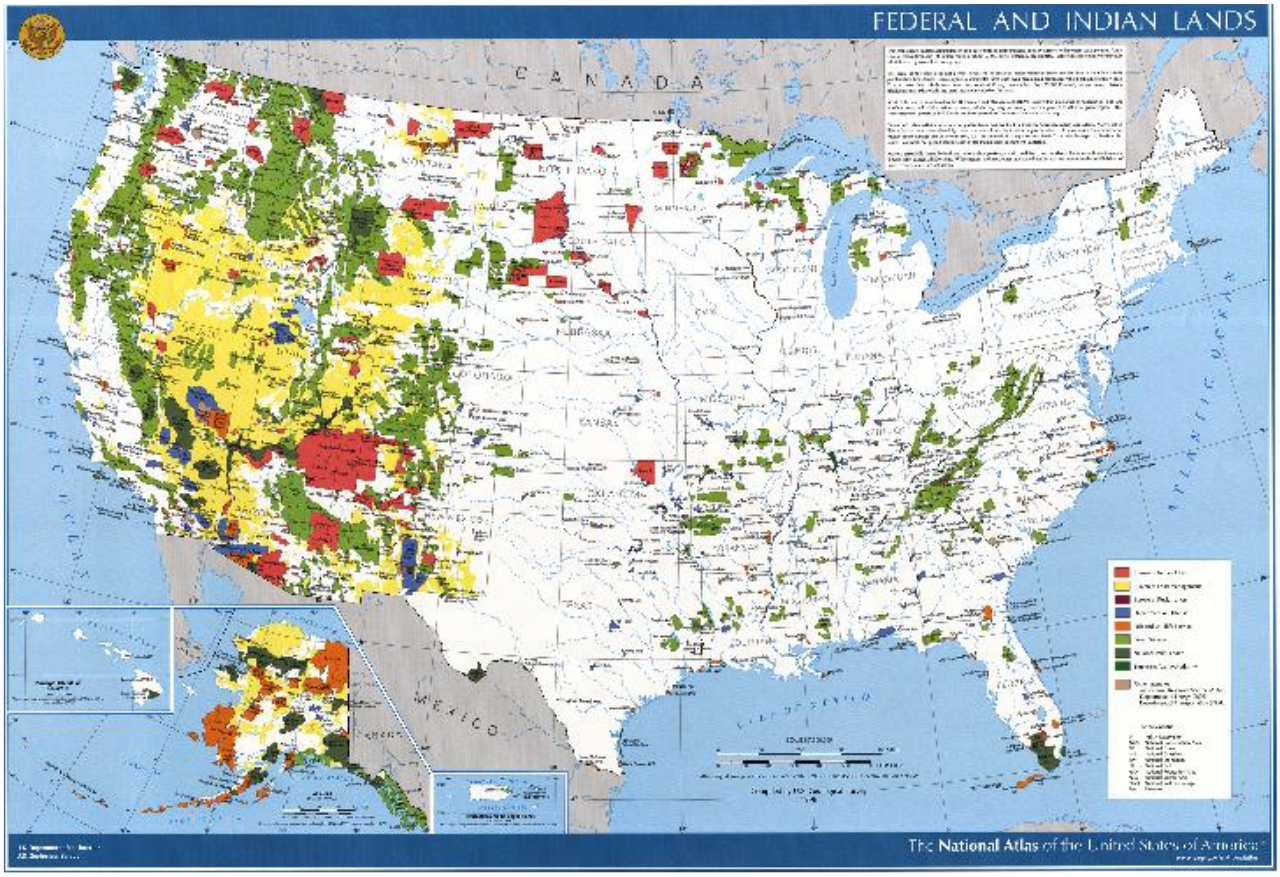

Figure 1: Federal land holdings and Indigenous-controlled territories (in red). Source: U.S. Geological Survey, n.d.

The creation of Grand Canyon National Park (GCNP) is exemplary of the violence underlying early land conservation in the Southwest. The area that today makes up GCNP in Arizona has been occupied and used by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. Indeed, contemporary maps of the Southwest belie the region's long Indigenous history; prior to colonization, the region was home to many Indigenous nations (Figure 3). While it is difficult to represent pre-colonial land relations in a static map, as many nations migrated seasonally and territories often overlapped, it is clear that contemporary landholding restricts the Southwest's Indigenous peoples to a small portion of their original land. This is to say nothing of the many Indigenous nations which were forcibly relocated to reservations far from their original homes, denied reservations, or exterminated (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

Today, the Havasupai, Hualapai, and Navajo reservations all border GCNP, while five other tribes live nearby (Krakoff, 2018, p. 234; Figure 4). GCNP was created through a massive land grab and widespread Indigenous dispossession (Jacoby, 2003). In 1881, the Havasupai were confined to a reservation on a small portion of their territory and ultimately prohibited from practicing traditional livelihood activities, such as hunting, setting fires, and felling timber, within the boundaries of the park (Jacoby, 2003). The Diné, Hopi, Hualapai, Southern Paiute, Yavapai-Apache, and Zuni Pueblo were similarly cut off from sacred sites and other

vital resources by the national park designation in 1919 (Krakoff, 2018).[3] Dispossession was justified by discrediting Indigenous stewardship and erasing Indigenous existence (Taylor, 2016; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Spence, 1999). Importantly, some people were still allowed in the park, namely tourists, guides, and licensed hunters. Business interests were overwhelmingly supportive of early conservation efforts, like GCNP, as they not only ensured a continuous supply of resources like timber and minerals, but also created opportunities for new ventures, such as hotels, railroads, and gear (Taylor, 2000, p. 531). Today, GCNP and the surrounding Indigenous nations remain threatened by past, present, and future resource extraction in the area (Figure 4).

Figure 2: Land uses and landholders in the Southwestern United States.[4] Source: U.S. Geological Survey, 2016.

The criminalization of their lifeways forced many Havasupai into the market economy, sometimes taking jobs as park rangers, tour guides, or gift shop attendants (Jacoby, 2003). Fortress conservation had profoundly gendered effects, as Havasupai women were denied access to both their traditional activities and work in the settler economy (Jacoby, 2003). The co-occurrence of conservation designations and forced relocation to reservations similarly affected Native American nations throughout the U.S., introducing economic dependence, heteropatriarchy, and ecological degradation to formerly thriving socio-ecosystems (Spence, 1999).

[3] Nationally, poor white settlers were also affected by restrictions on resource use, and there was significant resistance to conservation from Indigenous peoples and settlers alike (Jacoby, 2003).

[4] While California is sometimes considered a part of the Southwest, it was excluded from this study.

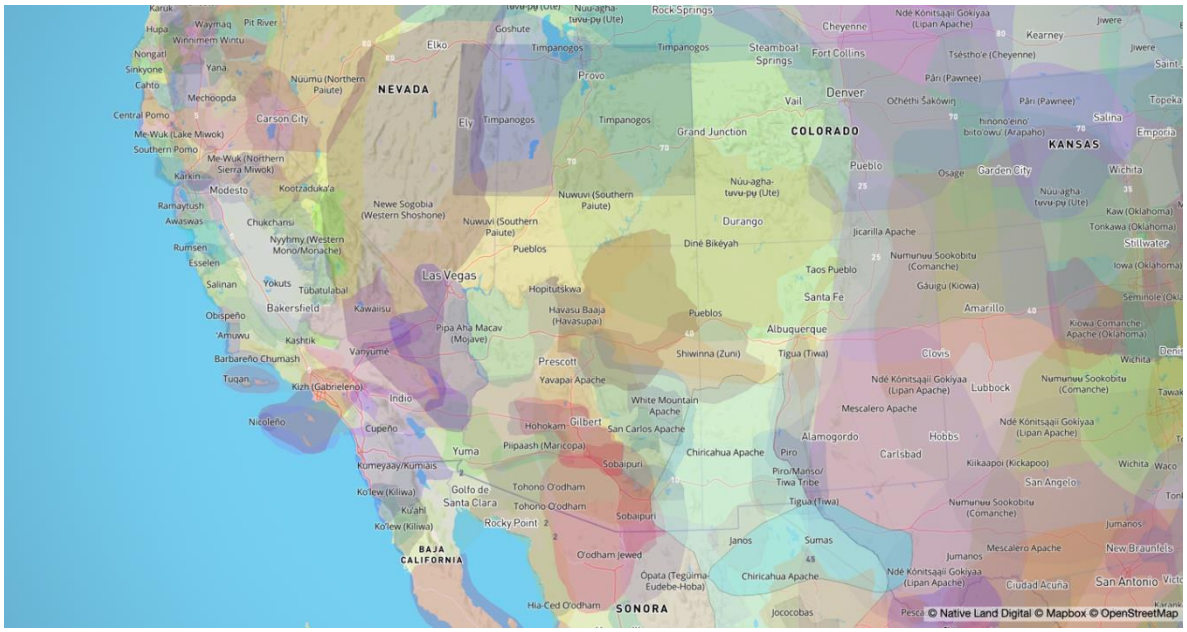

Figure 3: Indigenous territories overlain on current state borders in the U.S. Southwest. Source: Native Land, n.d.

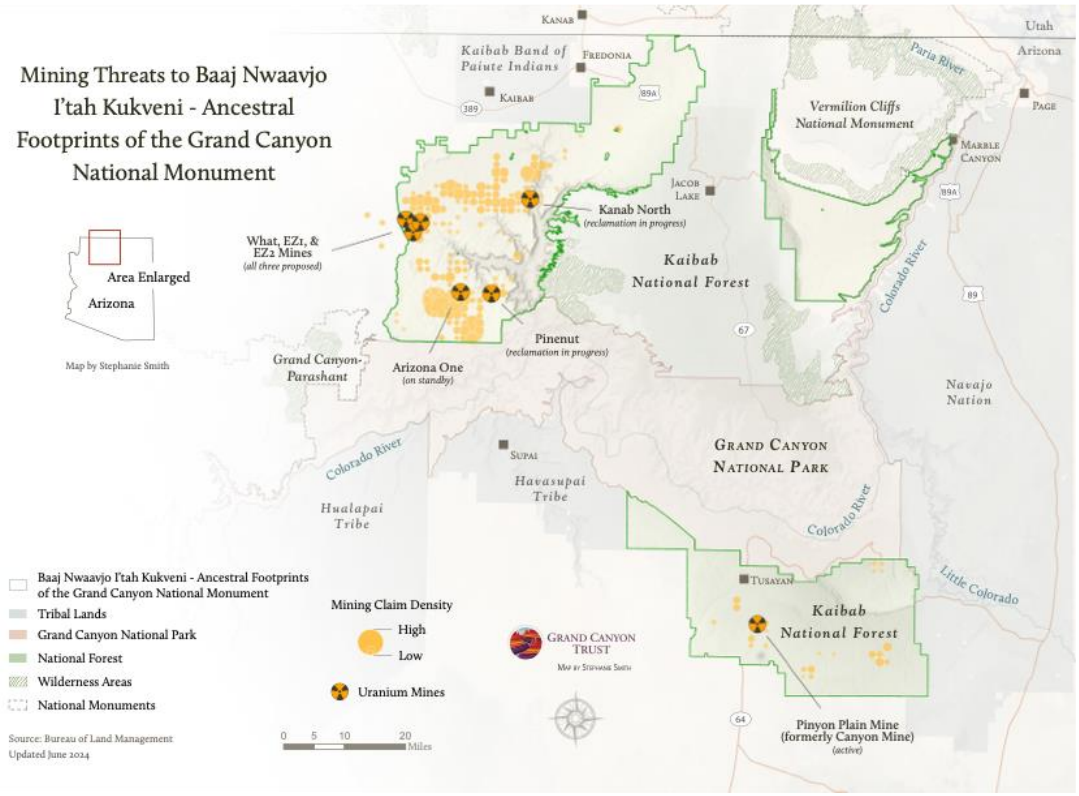

Figure 4: Map of mining threats around Grand Canyon National Park. Source: Smith, 2024.

The spread of protected areas throughout the Southwest not only contributed to capital accumulation via proletarianization and the creation of new business opportunities (i.e. Kelly, 2011), but also by leaving most of the land available for extraction, as the case of GCNP makes clear. In some instances, extraction has been allowed within protected areas, too (a practice President Trump is currently trying to expand) (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2025; Jacoby, 2003; Taylor, 2000). The Southwest is home to valuable mineral and energy resources, including lithium, copper, uranium, coal, oil, and gas.

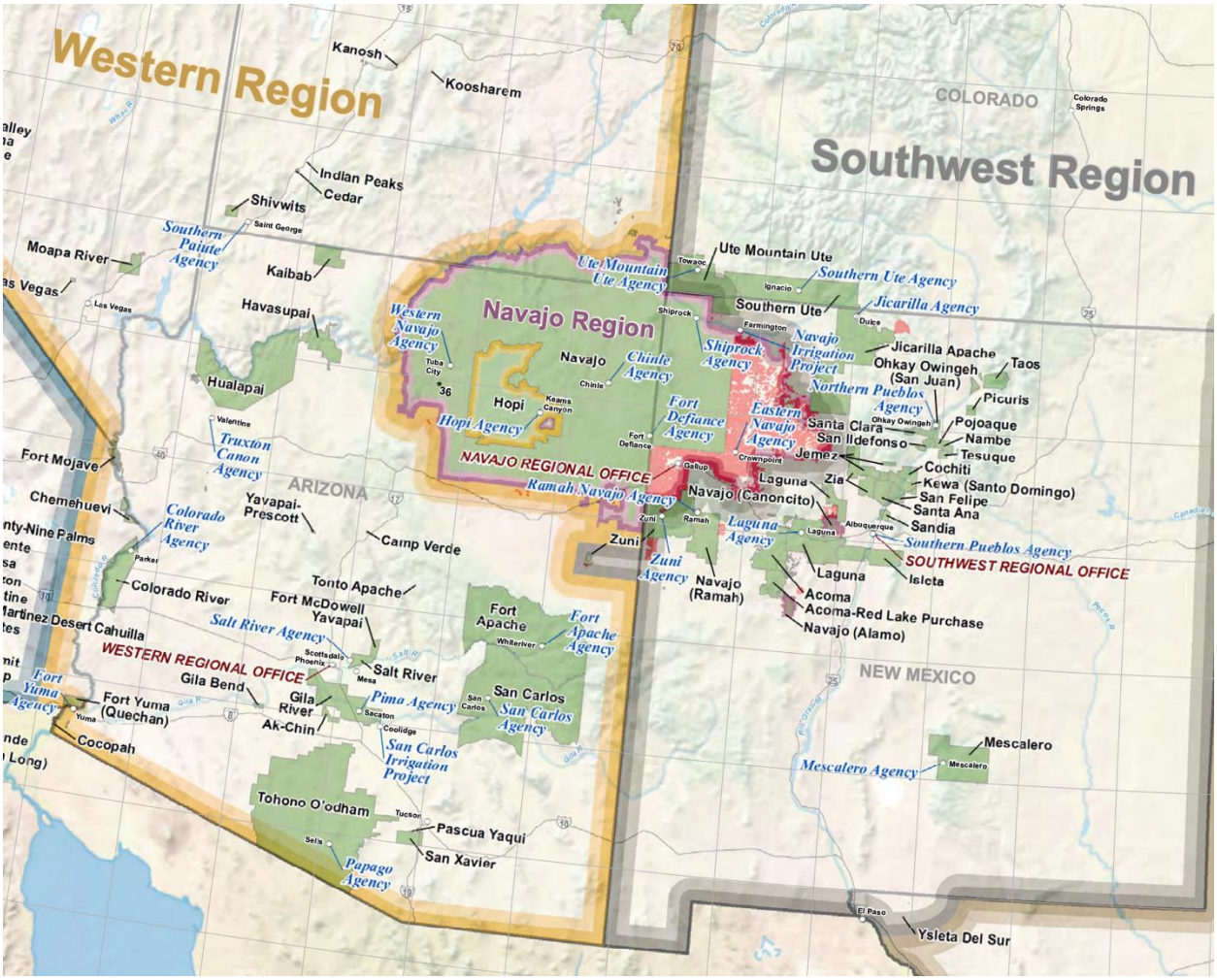

Figure 5: Official tribal landholdings in the Four Corners region. Source: Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2016.[5]

In 1974, the National Academy of Sciences under the Nixon administration warned that developing the energy resources of the Four Corners region – where Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona meet – would render the landscape a "national sacrifice area" (Horning, 2017; McLeod, 1983; National Research Council, 1974) (see Figure 5). However, in the midst of a global energy crisis, the White House viewed the Colorado

[5] Note that reservations are not necessarily consistent with a tribe's traditional territory (i.e. Figure 3) and many tribes do not have reservations.

Plateau's abundant shale, coal, and uranium as the key to the nation's energy independence (McLeod, 1983).[6] Ultimately, significant swaths of the Southwest were sacrificed to boost domestic energy production. Fifty years later, this decision continues to affect the people, places, and more-than-human species of the Southwest (Horning, 2017). Many of the Indigenous activists with whom I spoke still use the language of "sacrifice zones" to explain the particular socio-environmental violence experienced in the Southwest.

The co-occurrence of conservation and capitalist extraction is not unique to the U.S. Southwest, however. Contrary to the popular discourse surrounding conservation, conservation has always been "a companion to, or part of, global capitalist development rather than a reaction against capitalism" (Büscher & Fletcher, 2014, p. 4). The rise of "green grabbing", or "the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends" (Fairhead, Leach, & Scoones, 2012, p. 238), and neoliberal conservation – an explicit attempt to make nature conservation profitable through carbon offsets, payments for ecosystem services, and ecotourism, for example – is not an anomaly in the world system so much as an intensification of earlier capital accumulation via conservation (Apostolopoulou *et al*., 2021; Napoletano & Clark, 2020; Kelly, 2011; Igoe & Brockington, 2007).

With recognition of the injustice of traditional conservation efforts and the failure of protected areas to stop global environmental degradation, scholars and practitioners have increasingly sought alternative forms of environmental protection (Washington *et al*., 2024; Reed *et al*., 2020; Artelle *et al*., 2019; Stevens, 2014). Rights-based conservation efforts, ICCAs, and OECMs have surged in many parts of the world, including other settler colonies like Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (Reardon-Smith, 2025; Youdelis *et al*., 2021). These efforts are not without problems, however, and have led to recent calls for more radical alternatives, like convivial and decolonial conservation (Dawson *et al*., 2023; Corbera *et al*., 2021; Domínguez & Luoma, 2020; Büscher & Fletcher, 2019).[7] In the U.S., Indigenous-managed protected areas remain fraught and scarce.

One of the most prominent recent attempts at Indigenous co-management in the U.S. was the creation of Bears Ears National Monument in Utah (Figure 6). Five tribal nations – the Hopi, Navajo (Diné), Ute Mountain Ute, Uintah and Ouray Ute, and Zuni – have historic ties to the Bears Ears region and had been interested in protecting the area for generations (Krakoff, 2018, pp. 213-4, 240). In 2010, Utah senator Robert Bennett approached the region's Indigenous communities in an effort to protect Bears Ears (Ibid, p. 242). The Navajo community started collecting and documenting Indigenous knowledge of the area and formed the group Utah Diné Bikéyah[8] to oversee the conservation planning process.

In 2015, the five tribes put together a proposal for a national monument designation at Bears Ears. An Inter-Tribal Coalition formed to lead the proposal process, ensuring that Indigenous nations would be at the forefront of the protection efforts. The tribes wanted to ensure that, if a monument was created, they would play an equal role in managing the site (Ibid, p. 245). The Coalition ultimately proposed a form of collaborative management between the tribes and the federal government, which would ensure tribal leadership and elevate Traditional Ecological Knowledge alongside Western science.

After the Coalition submitted its proposal, the Obama administration reviewed and modified it, decreasing the proposed monument's size from 1.9 million acres (768,903 ha) to 1.35 million acres (546,326 ha). The administration excluded a few areas from protection, including a site where uranium mining is permitted, and weakened tribal co-management. The administration did, however, secure Native peoples' rights

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[6] It is worth noting that some tribes and/or tribal leadership willingly participated in resource extraction, often with the expectation that it would lead to employment opportunities and economic development for the community. In many cases, my participants expressed, these efforts failed to garner widespread community support and often fell far short of their promises.

[7] Community-based conservation has been criticized for attempting to turn community members into "eco-rational subjects", thereby altering existing management practices and community norms (Joslin, 2021, p. 4; Sen & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 36; Igoe & Brockington, 2007, p. 442). Enhanced tenure rights for Indigenous peoples and local communities – often seen as a necessity for long-term environmental protection (e.g. Dutta *et al*., 2021) – are also not a panacea, as the creation of exclusive property rights may disrupt community relations and facilitate eventual land loss through expropriation or the market (Sylvander, 2021; Borras & Franco, 2012; Peluso & Lund, 2011; Igoe & Brockington, 2007).

[8] *Diné Bikéyah* means "the land of the Navajo people."

to customary land uses, "including collection of medicines, berries and other vegetation, forest products, and firewood" (Ibid, p. 254). President Obama ultimately established Bears Ears National Monument on December 28, 2016 (Ibid, p. 250).

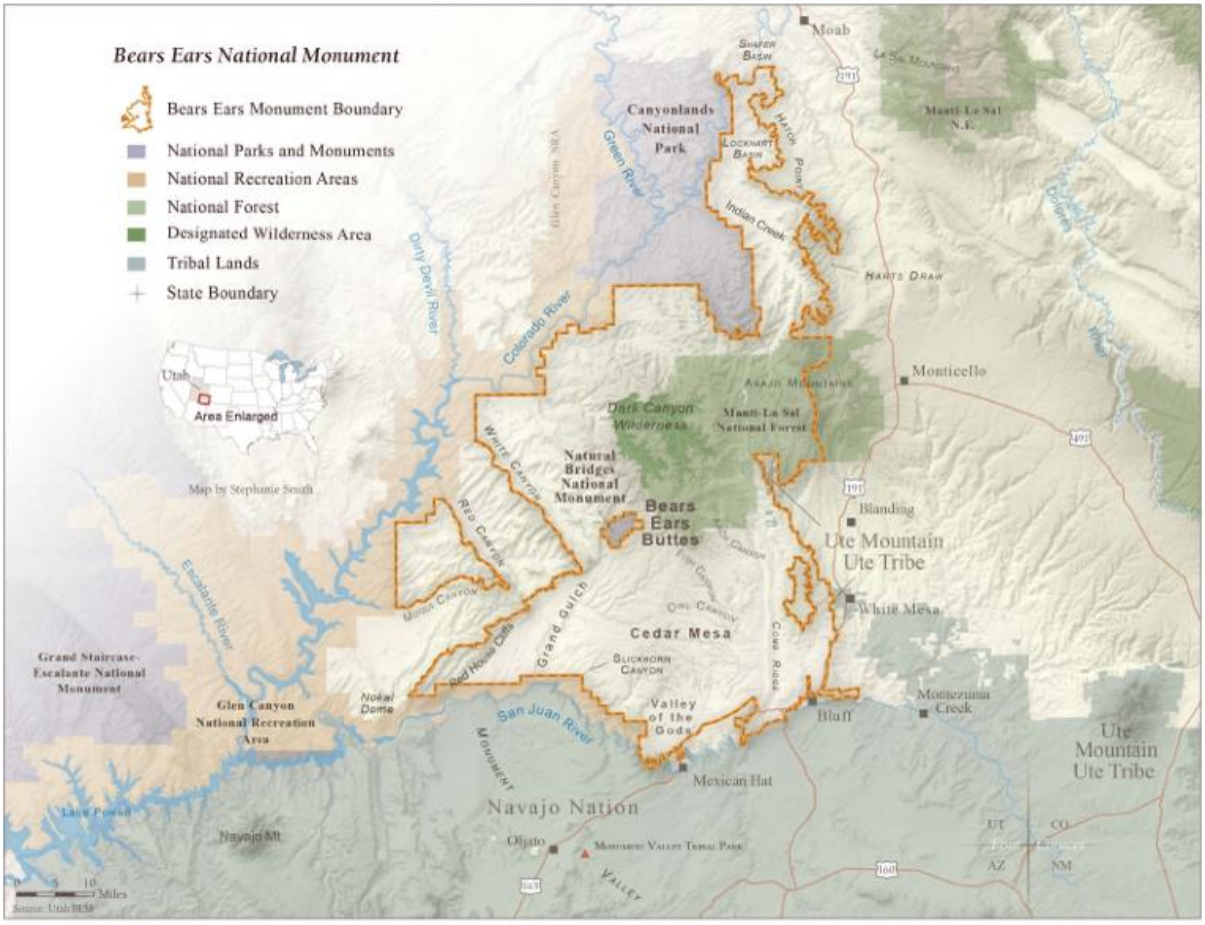

Figure 6: Bears Ears National Monument and surrounding landholdings. Source: Smith, 2017.

Since its creation, Bears Ears has been subject to political whims. When Trump first came to power in 2017, he shrunk the monument's boundaries by 85% (Hegyi, 2020). President Biden campaigned on a promise to restore the boundaries of Bears Ears and other national monuments eroded by the Trump administration. Today, Trump is once again working to shrink the monument – along with others in the Southwest – to allow for energy development (Spring & Grandoni, 2025).

In the absence of widespread Indigenous-led conservation efforts, and given knowledge of its political limitations, many Native American land and water defenders have pursued other paths to environmental protection. Strategies such as grassroots resistance and direct action are much more prominent in the U.S. context, adding nuance to what decolonial conservation might look like. Indeed, as I will show, many of the Indigenous womxn with whom I spoke reject conservation as a concept and practice, indicating the importance of engaging with communities involved in resistance to neoliberal conservation and (green) land grabs to understand their goals. Accordingly, in this article I ask: how do Indigenous womxn in the U.S. Southwest theorize their resistance work and its connection to environmental protection?

3. Methods and data

This study builds on five months of remote interviews with female-identifying and non-binary Indigenous activists in the U.S. Southwest. Research was conducted from August 2020-January 2021, during which time physical distancing measures and travel restrictions necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic precluded in-person fieldwork. Given the virtual circumstances and my identity as a non-Indigenous scholar, I chose the Southwest in part because I consider it home; I have a relationship to the land and a deeper understanding of the area's peoples and history. Interview participants were recruited online, primarily through social media and subsequent snowball sampling. I chose to focus on activists, in part because they tend to have an extensive online presence and because they are more likely to have experience giving interviews to non-Indigenous people like myself. I thought this experience would be helpful considering I would not be able to meet anyone in person. More importantly, I chose to focus on activists because Indigenous womxn are at the forefront of many grassroots organizations and mobilizations for sovereignty and self-determination on Turtle Island (Estes, 2019; Nelson, 2019).[9] This decision was informed by Feminist Political Ecology (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter & Wangari, 1996), which seeks to connect local women-led struggles to global processes. Nevertheless, I make no claim as to my participants' representativeness of Indigenous activists or womxn more broadly.

All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom or phone call (for participants with limited internet access) and lasted from 60-90 minutes. All participants consented to have their interview recorded, and I subsequently transcribed the interviews using NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis software, a secure transcription tool. To overcome the lack of participant observation, I conducted introductory interviews (which were not recorded) with each of my participants at least a few weeks before conducting in-depth interviews, which allowed me to build rapport and trust, and generate guiding questions for full interviews. While each interview was different, I asked all participants about their resistance activities, their relationship to the environment, and their perception of Western conservation.

My research was guided by decolonial methodology, which seeks to interrupt the past of extractive, exploitative research in Indigenous communities by producing scholarly work that contributes to Indigenous liberation (Smith, 2012). As a settler scholar, I was open with my participants from the start about my desire to conduct decolonial research. I was honest about who I was, why I was interested in these questions, and how the information would be used. I asked my participants explicitly how we could create knowledge together and how my research could contribute to their work. I received many different answers to this question, however one theme was consistent: I should make myself and my knowledge accessible. This took different forms: in all cases I provided each participant with a transcript of our conversation to review, the ability to approve specific quotes before use, and a copy of all materials I created based on the interviews (such as this article). In some cases, participants asked me to present my findings to their organizations or work with them to create more accessible, public-facing versions of this research.

Two key elements of decolonial methodology are the co-creation of knowledge between the researcher and participants and centering Indigenous voices in the work (Smith, 2012). I found that in-depth, semi-structured interviews were well-suited to these imperatives. Thus, my analysis is primarily based upon fifteen in-depth interviews and complemented by public statements from other Indigenous womxn resisters across Turtle Island. Because many of my participants are involved in ongoing, sensitive struggles, I have removed all personally identifying information; all names are pseudonyms and none of the organizations they are involved in are named. I did not limit my study to those involved in "traditional" environmental struggles, such as anti-fracking or anti-mining movements, but instead engaged womxn from diverse struggles, including reproductive justice, food sovereignty, and cultural reproduction. These seemingly disparate movements (from the standpoint of Western social movement studies) are unified by a commitment to decolonization and resurgent Indigenous governance (Simpson, 2011). All of my participants connected their resistance work to the protection of the more-than-human world; as Audrey (Jemez Pueblo, she/her), who is involved in a movement for Indigenous

[9] "Turtle Island" is often used to refer to the North American continent, in reference to an origin story shared by several Indigenous nations.

sovereignty and cultural sustainability, told me, "the idea and goal for fighting for liberation and seeking revolution is to gain the land back. It is to have the water back."

4. Indigenous feminist environmental protection

Given the effectiveness of Indigenous environmental protection and the violence of Anglo-European conservation, rather than look at how Indigenous perspectives can inform or be made to fit conservation, I ask how anti-colonial Indigenous approaches should shape the future of environmental protection. In what follows, I consider Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism – which is overwhelmingly led by womxn on Turtle Island – as a radical and plausible alternative to the genocidal histories of colonialism, capitalism, and conservation. The Southwest offers a place on which to focus our lens, to see that anti-colonial Indigenous approaches are radically different and cannot be appropriated piecemeal into Anglo-European conservation. That is, I will suggest the underlying socio-ecological systems that give rise to Indigenous environmental protection are not compatible with the prevailing political economy.

While my participants overwhelmingly do not identify with the concept of conservation, as I will explain below, their work is more closely aligned with alternative environmental paradigms, such as ecofeminism, environmental justice, and the environmentalism of the poor.[10] None of my participants identified as ecofeminists, however they are involved in women, queer, and Two-Spirit-led movements, which draw explicit connections between settler colonialism, violence against the land, and violence against womxn (Bacigal, 2020; McGregor, 2018; LaDuke, 2016). Indigenous organizers on Turtle Island, including many of my participants, often employ the framing of environmental justice to talk about their resistance efforts (e.g. Stop Line 3, n.d.; Pueblo Action Alliance, n.d.). For Indigenous peoples in the Americas, environmental injustice started over 500 years ago with the introduction of colonial ecological violence[11] (Bacon, 2019); settler colonialism, through genocide, dispossession, and assimilation, replaced life-sustaining ecologies with necro-ecologies that devalued and commodified the lives of humans and more-than-human relatives (Estes, 2019; Whyte, 2018; Simpson, 2017). My participants emphasized that their movements are about much more than "the environment", including culture, spirituality, and language, which is consistent with the premise of the environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier *et al*., 2016, p. 743).

Despite clear affinities with other environmental frameworks, my research revealed that Indigenous womxn in the U.S. Southwest, through the practice of resistance, are theorizing and implementing a distinct environmental paradigm, Indigenous feminist environmental protection (IFEP). Though no one I interviewed used the exact term "Indigenous feminist environmental protection," it encapsulates the overriding sentiments expressed to me in interviews. A number of people spoke of an "Indigenous feminist perspective" and/or "Indigenous environmental protection." Several participants articulated the connections between these concepts, emphasizing that their approach to environmental protection is informed by their identity as Indigenous womxn. I chose to combine these two ideas so that it is comprehensible to both my participants and a non-Indigenous audience. I coded my interviews iteratively, identifying both persistent and emergent themes. Ultimately, six themes stood out: decolonization, nature as kin, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, spirituality and ceremony, womxn's leadership, and a radical approach. I came to see these six themes, which I introduce below, as representing the central tenets of IFEP.

Decolonization

There was widespread agreement among my participants that decolonization must be the future of environmental protection, because it will return the land to its original caretakers. Audrey explained, "the liberation of Indigenous people really needs to happen in order for true conservation to happen. It needs to be

[10] It is worth noting that these alternative paradigms have also been subject to criticism from scholars and movements alike and should therefore be taken up with care.

[11] Scholars and activists have also noted that environmental injustice is inherent to the institution of chattel slavery in the U.S., which perpetrated extreme violence on enslaved Africans and the land, while also facilitating imperial plunder on the African continent (Kojola & Pellow, 2021; Pulido, 2017).

put back into the hands of Indigenous people who were the first stewards of this land." My participants emphasized that Indigenous environmental protection is the product of long-standing, deeply-rooted relationships with particular places and species, informed by distinct socio-ecological systems. Moreover, my participants stressed that colonialism is a root cause of environmental degradation, which must be addressed. Raquel (Sandia Pueblo, she/her) told me, "…if we're not addressing colonialism at its core, then we're not fully addressing issues that have to do with white supremacy and climate change and capitalism, imperialism, all of these things come from colonialism." Thus, 'land back' must be accompanied by the resurgence of Indigenous lifeways and governance, which offer a direct response and alternative to the ideologies and systems that allow for the destruction of nature and people, including (settler) colonialism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, militarism, white supremacy and "development."

My participants' perspective is consistent with increasing scholarly recognition that decolonization is an environmental project (Requena-i-Mora & Brockington, 2021): it demands the return of stolen Indigenous lands and waters to Indigenous peoples (Tuck & Yang, 2012). To be sure, decolonization is also a political, economic, cultural, and social project (Estes, 2019; Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014); the return of stolen lands (i.e. land back) must be accompanied by other major shifts in political-economic and socio-ecological relations. Indigenous feminists often refer to "land rematriation" (rather than repatriation) to emphasize that resurgent Indigenous governance must center the leadership and wisdom of Indigenous women, queer, Two-Spirit, and transgender folks, and youth to avoid re-inscribing settler heteropatriarchy (Kuokkanen, 2019; Simpson, 2016), which I will discuss in more detail below.

Nature as kin

One of the most profound differences between an Indigenous perspective and Western environmental paradigms, according to my participants, is that Indigenous peoples understand nature as kin, a relative. Leah (Laguna Pueblo and Diné, she/they) told me, "[we are in] relationship to the land, to the water and to all the living creatures that live in the water, that live in the sky, that live on the earth. Those are also very much important relationships." When nature is understood as a relative, rather than a resource, it must be treated differently. Raquel explained,

> …we know that water is of feminine energy and of a feminine living entity. Knowing that and having that identity reattached and reclaimed to water, surface water, you would totally want to manage that differently. You wouldn't want to view water as a commodity or view water in terms of market-based economics.

Harper (Laguna Pueblo and Mescalero Apache, they/them) said,

> we don't own the land, we're stewards. We take care of the resources so it can continue to give back to us for the things that we need. And we give thanks to whatever, you know, whether it's a plant or an animal. We give thanks to that resource for providing for us.

Participants explained that acts of reciprocity and care can take different forms, from leaving an offering when gathering plants to engaging in direct action to stop a pipeline.

At the core of this philosophy is the idea that "human survival is innately connected to the web of life" (Carla, Santa Clara Pueblo, she/her). This is not simply an affirmation of humans' reliance on nature, however; it is also a recognition that all other life forms need humans, too, which is a significant departure from the logic of fortress conservation. Beth (Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota, she/her) told me, "…the Earth depends on a relationship with humans being there and taking, using." Beth emphasized that she takes only what she needs to survive, always leaving enough behind for other relatives (human and more-than-human). Carla explained that in the process of harvesting foods and medicines, "…we were taking care of a lot of spaces. We knew

where something grew. So we would tend to that space. We knew where we would go hunting. So we would tend to that space."

In contrast to neoliberal conservation, which assumes that environmental degradation stems from the failure to adequately price and sell nature and its services on the market, my participants stressed that ownership is incompatible with protection. As Leah explained, "if you always have that mindset of you need to be the *owner* of something, then you'll never really have a genuine relationship with wanting to protect something." The Western legal construct of private property imagines that individuals can own nature. The rampant exploitation and extraction characteristic of both capitalism and colonialism are rooted in practice that reifies the idea that nature – and certain people not deemed sufficiently "human" – may be commodified and is therefore a source of wealth. My participants articulated a radical alternative to the commodification of nature: water, soil, and trees, for example, are thought of as relatives rather than resources for human consumption and enrichment.

Foundation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge

The participants center Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in their analyses of, and relationships to, the environment. This is not a rejection of Western science, which tends to be the foundation of other major environmental paradigms, but rather a recognition that there are multiple ways of understanding the more-than-human world. While Western science is presented as objective, descriptive knowledge of the world, TEK is a system of relations that has been cultivated and passed down for thousands of years, allowing Indigenous peoples to survive on their traditional homelands and beyond (McGregor, 2018).[12] Jana (Diné, Hopi, and Zuni, she/they) explained,

> Indigenous people have always carried this ecological knowledge, pre-colonization. There's a reason that people lived here for thousands of years pre-colonization and were able to adapt to the climates. I think it's so ingrained in ceremony and it's so ingrained in life.

TEK requires ongoing learning, planning, and management. Harper told me,

> [tribes] have either a tribal historic preservation officer or they have a natural resources person, someone who is dedicated to overseeing tribal hunts and giving feedback on ceremonies that are happening through different times of the year based on the climate, based on the resources that are available.

TEK is not just useful to learn *about* the more-than-human world, however; like all knowledge, it is relational, so it allows communities to learn *from* the more-than-human, too. Carla explained that many Indigenous cultures are modeled on nature. She said,

> …look at a forest. It's a perfect zero loop of use of energy. Consumption is only as needed. Nothing is wasted. Everything is recycled... All the animals play a role in sustaining part of that ecosystem, including humans, as being one of those animals. And that's what we modeled our societies after.

The cooperation and mutual aid perceived by TEK contrasts with the competition and individualism perceived by Western science. This is important, because whether nature is seen as a place of individual competition and

[12] Because of the U.S. government's (ongoing) campaigns of genocide and forced assimilation, many Native Americans no longer live on their traditional lands. Many tribes were forced onto reservations far from their homelands or allowed to occupy only a small portion of their territory.

struggle, or a place of networks and cooperation, will lead to different assessments of how best to manage and relate to nature.

Although TEK might give rise to particular practices such as controlled burns, hunting regulations, or methods for water storage, these cannot be readily appropriated or applied in pieces, as many Western scientists, governments, and conservationists seek to do (Dhillon, 2021; Whyte, 2018; McGregor, 2004). Rather, TEK is a different lifeway; "Acquiring this knowledge means entirely shifting our current patterns of living in the every day" (Dhillon, 2021, p. 900).

Rooted in spirituality and ceremony

Participants emphasized that their relationship to the environment is mediated through prayer and ceremony. Jana told me,

> …so much of my spiritual connection as a person is grounded in the earth, it's inseparable from the earth, you know? When a Navajo person begins a prayer, they open up the prayer with praying to the earth and praying to the sky, because at the end of the day, those are the things that take care of us.

Zoe (Tesuque Pueblo and Diné, she/her) explained,

> Indigenous people, whether it's Amazonian people, whether it's people in the Southwest or in Alaska or up in Alberta, Canada, our languages, our cultural traditions, the ways we pray, the ways we dance and have ceremony and have ritual, they're all connected to the land and water.

Ceremony is an important site for the reproduction of TEK and often functions as a way to regulate appropriate uses of the more-than-human world. Evelyn (Diné, she/her) said, "our world view is with our ceremonies, there's so much knowledge and science based in our ceremonies."

A number of participants are involved in struggles to protect sacred sites from desecration, including at Chaco Canyon (fracking), Oak Flat (copper mining), the Sacred Peaks (a ski resort using recycled wastewater to produce artificial snow), and the U.S.-Mexico border (wall construction threatens burial sites, sacred plants, and a vital aquifer). While endangered sacred sites often draw non-Indigenous allies concerned about environmental impacts, sacred sites are defended primarily on account of their cultural value and spiritual significance. Katie (San Carlos Apache, she/her) stressed that she cannot *be* Apache without Oak Flat. Those defending sacred sites spoke of the difficulty of explaining to non-Indigenous people what it means for a site to be sacred and why that designation demands stringent protection. Raquel lamented,

> …it's always so hard to tell settlers in like BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] or BLM [Bureau of Land Management] or DOI [Department of Interior] or whatever, it's hard to tell them that this landscape is sacred and we would not like you to drill on it anymore. Like they don't understand why it's sacred.

The centrality of spirituality and ceremony is not limited to sacred site defense; it runs through all of my participants' resistance activities. Many participants, when thinking about why they do the work they do, referenced the concept of the seventh generation: making decisions based on how they will impact future relations in seven generations (or, in an alternative interpretation, considering relations three generations prior and three generations ahead). Leah explained,

> …with that same breath and with that same water our ancestors used to pray about us, for our being here. And like, as a Navajo person, as a Diné person and a Pueblo person, that is always something that is considered in your prayers, is the future generation. Because you know that it's not just about you in this physical moment it's about people that are going to be a part of you in the future.

Because Indigenous resisters center both ancestors and future generations, land and water defense are vital, spiritual tasks.

Womxn-led and -centered

IFEP uplifts and centers Indigenous womxn's experiences, knowledge, and leadership. Many participants emphasized that their roles and responsibilities as womxn brought them into resistance work. Carla said,

> I come into this work with a big responsibility as a caregiver to my homelands. Personally, I come into this work as a mother. I have three children and I want them to be able to remain here and have the resources they need. I want them to have seeds and water that's clean and soil that's clean.

Indigenous feminist environmental management, as described by participants, is rooted in nurturing more-than-human relations and teaching children, with the ultimate goal of leaving behind a healthy planet for future generations. Raquel told me,

> …a[n] [Indigenous] feminist perspective is completely different from a patriarchal one. And especially when it comes to these terms like conservation and stewardship, those really mean taking care of the land and being in reciprocity with the land.

A number of participants emphasized that their mothers and grandmothers taught them how to care for the land.

IFEP rejects patriarchy and hierarchy. Settler colonialism disrupted Indigenous gender relations through the imposition of heteropatriarchy; prior to colonization, many Native American nations were matrilineal and/or matriarchal. Of course, there is significant variation among communities, and it would be a mistake to suggest all Native American nations were gender equitable pre-colonization. But there was a widespread sentiment among my participants that it is time for Indigenous womxn to regain their place as community leaders and decision-makers. Carla shared,

> …it's obviously a time for us to lead. I see how we get things done. Because of what we hold, because of what we carry, because we have that vision of the future and what we want so clearly. We see the intersections of all the issues and how they come together.

The abolition of hierarchy extends to other species, too. Tori (Tiwa Pueblo of Ysleta del Sur, they/them) explained, "we think we're better, dominant, more smart and intelligent than all of these lifeforms around us. But really, we're the only lifeform destroying the world, right?"

Like ecofeminism, the Indigenous feminist perspective outlined by my participants highlights the connections between the protection of womxn and the protection of the environment. Jennifer (Diné, she/her) explained, "…violence against our land is also violence against our women and our children and our way of life." Because Indigenous womxn maintain close relationships to the environment – due to traditional roles and current political-economic conditions – they are at increased risk of toxics exposure from mining, pollution, and other environmental harms. Carla said,

> …we center Indigenous women and girls, knowing that if they're protected, everybody is protected, whether it's through environmental regulations, protection standards for toxicity, protection from violence in any form in our communities, that if we could center Indigenous women and girls, it's going to shift those protective circles to all walks of life.

Reproductive justice is understood as an integral part of Indigenous feminist environmental protection. For Indigenous pregnant families, environmental degradation currently threatens their ability to carry to term, birth, and raise their children in a safe environment. This reality is hardly limited to the Southwest; throughout Turtle Island, Indigenous pregnant people and parents experience high levels of toxics exposure, which threaten children's health and well-being (Hoover, 2018; LaDuke, 1999).

Indigenous womxn are also threatened by environmental degradation in other ways. The rampant extraction on and around many reservations brings outsiders, typically men, to Indigenous lands. Settler men working on oil rigs, mines, and pipelines, for example, often live in "man camps" near extractive sites. These man camps are "correlated with increases in sexual and domestic violence, STIs, increased use of drugs and alcohol, trafficking, and murders or disappearances" (Bacigal, 2020). The crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S) is closely related to the presence of man camps (Ibid). Indeed, New Mexico has the highest rate of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in the country (New Mexico MMIWR Task Force, 2020).

My participants drew powerful connections between the protection of the environment and the safety of Indigenous womxn and families. While IFEP and ecofeminism are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the key distinction, for my participants, is that they are engaged in a practice of *Indigenous* feminism. That is, my participants emphasized that their experiences as Indigenous womxn *and* their commitment to anti-colonial struggle inform their approach to environmental protection. Moreover, the additional tenets of IFEP, such as a foundation of TEK and a radical approach, are not shared by all the movements that can be grouped under ecofeminism.

Radical, not reformist

While dominant environmental paradigms have long relied on the state[13] to protect the environment, IFEP is skeptical of state-based solutions. The prevailing settler colonial capitalist system is regarded as incapable of delivering meaningful change and justice, given that it is premised on the exploitation of nature and non-white and non-male people. Accordingly, IFEP advocates for radical change, not reform. Raquel told me:

> We're not reformists, we don't think the system can ever be fixed because it's been a broken system since its inception. It's been a colonial system. And so there is no fixing it from the inside, which is why we're really focused on water back and Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. We should be able to create systems that meet the needs of our future, we should be able to plan our futures.

Although IFEP seeks to abolish the settler colonial state, the majority of those with whom I spoke are still willing to work with the state to some extent. There is a pragmatic recognition that there are instances when the state has the power to intervene and "do work that is supportive of social and environmental justice" (Pellow, 2018, p. 24).

IFEP's rejection of the settler state is coupled with a rejection of capitalism. Colonialism and capitalism are understood as interrelated forces of environmental destruction. Audrey explained, "…settler colonialism created this system that we're in, created this system of capitalism that seeks to extract and make money, right?

[13] While the neoliberalization of nature might be seen as a break from the past of state environmental management, it is more accurate to think of neoliberal environmental policy as *re*-regulation than *de*-regulation (Igoe & Brockington, 2007, p. 437).

Always just take, take, take, you know, and therefore, because of that, it's created climate change." Carla said, "capitalism, which is extremely harmful, makes conservation impossible. It's impossible. Cause that system is still in place. We've got to be honest about that." Carla's argument is echoed in scholarly work which indicates that conservation will fail to protect the environment as long as it leaves the underlying causes of environmental degradation, like capitalism, in place (i.e. Napoletano & Clark, 2020, p. 41).

Relatedly, IFEP is strongly committed to anti-militarism. Historically and today, militarism both fuels the search for resources and contributes to their capture (Kojola & Pellow, 2021; Hooks & Smith, 2005). Carla explained, "I really look at militarism as a huge shift that needs to happen. It's keeping our entire country in economic slavery and the need for constant warfare, which in turn is the largest polluter of the planet." IFEP's rejection of militarism stems directly from Indigenous peoples' experiences of genocide and living under an occupying power. IFEP's anti-militarism contrasts with the logic of Anglo-European conservation. The creation and militarization of PA boundaries was deemed necessary to protect nature – or rather, to protect it from certain people – however this is anathema to IFEP, which recognizes that militarization was, and is, a powerful tool to remove Indigenous peoples from their lands. In the Southwest and globally, militarized actors such as park rangers continue to stand between Indigenous peoples and their lifeways (Küçüküstel, 2025; Homewood *et al*., 2022; Ishii, 2022; Kelly & Ybarra, 2016).[14]

Accordingly, IFEP firmly rejects borders of any kind. The concept of borders offered by my participants encompasses much more than the dividing lines between states or countries. Within PAs, participants reported a number of non-physical borders, including fees, harassment, and discrimination, which separate them from their land. Tori told me:

> …when I think about national parks and stuff like that, I think the way that they border off things and have protected areas, it kind of just reminds me of reservations. And a lot of these national parks they're on Native land and the way that they treat Indigenous people for wanting to get in for free is not nice, like I've seen it happen up here at the Grand Canyon a lot. They try to charge you like 30 bucks to get in. And for people who are Navajo, they're like, "well, I'm trying to make an offering and this is my land, why am I paying? Like this isn't right. I shouldn't be paying to make an offering." And so even these little areas that we think that we're protecting, they still have these rules and regulations that are really damaging to Native people.

The numerous borders inherent to PAs raise the concern that ostensibly just forms of conservation, like Indigenous co-management, may reproduce environments that curtail Indigenous access to traditional lands (Rwelengera, 2025; Torres-Alruiz & Gómez-Liendo, 2024).

Through their emphasis on radical, rather than reformist, approaches, my participants articulated the limits of conservation as a pathway to social and environmental justice in the U.S. Southwest. Indeed, my participants overwhelmingly did not identify with the concept or practice of conservation and instead emphasized the need for systemic change which would allow holistic socio-ecological protection. In the next section, I will discuss the distinction between conservation and protection that emerged in my interviews, and the relevance of this distinction for decolonial conservation.

5. Discussion: Protection, not conservation

There is a significant body of work, particularly within political ecology, seeking to make conservation more just and effective, most recently by promoting "other kinds of protected area categories that explicitly link with social justice, sustainable use and related concerns, for example through indigenous peoples' and community conserved territories and areas" (Büscher *et al*., 2017, p. 408). Grappling with the long history of conservation practice, however, reveals that it has always been rooted in imperialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. Efforts to reform Anglo-European conservation, the participants observed, cannot change the

[14] In December of 2020, for example, a National Park Service officer violently tasered an Indigenous man at Petroglyph National Monument in New Mexico.

fact that conservation is enmeshed in a global political economy, which rests on the destruction of nature and Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, conservation reforms overlook the myriad other methods of environmental protection found at the grassroots. The oppressive foundations of conservation call out for anti-colonial/anti-imperial, anti-capitalist, feminist alternatives. Indigenous feminist environmental protection is one such alternative.

IFEP, rather than enclosing and commodifying nature to protect it, instead seeks to strengthen reciprocal, place-based relations to the more-than-human world. IFEP upends mainstream understandings of who and what needs to be protected (and from whom) to include Indigenous peoples, languages, cultures, and lifeways. Importantly, IFEP is also a praxis, which non-Indigenous scholars, conservationists, and activists must participate in. As Carla told me, "…everybody needs to actively be putting resources to the conservation of Indigenous nations, knowing that it's going to benefit the conservation of the planet." This is consistent with Napoletano and Clark's assertion that "[conservationists] need to participate in collective resistance to the social-ecological depredations and injustices of global, imperial capitalism if they hope to ultimately resolve a biodiversity crisis represented as much by the commodification as the destruction of nature" (2020, p. 41).

Scholars are increasingly attentive to the importance of Indigenous resistance for stopping the destruction of nature (Goldtooth, Saldamando, & Gracey, 2021; Dhillon, 2021; Napoletano & Clark, 2020, p. 45; Estes, 2019; Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014), challenging mainstream understandings of what forms environmental protection might take. To date, however, these discussions have generally been limited to Indigenous movements with an anti-extractive emphasis, like #NoDAPL and Stop Line 3 on Turtle Island. I extend this line of analysis to argue that Indigenous resistance broadly can be conceptualized as a method of environmental protection. Fundamentally, all methods of environmental protection, ranging from conservation to legislation that regulates polluters, attempt to remake socio-ecological relations in a particular time and place. Indigenous resistance, according to the perspective offered by the participants, similarly seeks to bring about alternative socio-ecological relations on Turtle Island, through decolonization. Understood this way, Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism can also be conceptualized as a form of environmental protection, particularly because resurgent Indigenous governance recognizes obligations to the earth, water, and more-than-human kin (Dhillon, 2021; Estes, 2019; Whyte, 2018; Simpson, 2017; Kimmerer, 2013).

Importantly, my participants emphasized the incommensurability of conservation practice in the U.S. with Indigenous lifeways. The womxn with whom I spoke overwhelmingly do not identify with the concept of conservation, indicating the importance of adapting ideas like decolonial or convivial conservation in line with local movements and meanings. Audrey captured this sentiment when she told me, "…this entire time that I've done this work, I've never used the word conservation. I've never used it at all because I always use protection. It's a protection of our land base. It's a protection of my culture." A number of participants rejected the practice of conservation on account of its traditional association with dispossession, noting that "public lands are stolen lands." Some participants stressed the inadequacy of the Western concept of conservation, because it fails to appreciate that everything Indigenous people do is intended to protect the more-than-human world. Jana explained,

> …in the Navajo language, there's not a word for conservation because it's so ingrained in the method, in the lifestyle that Navajo people lead. And every part of your being is so connected to the land and to the elements and to the seasons that at the end of the day, all the work we do in our regular lives is meant to conserve the land that we live on.

Moreover, my participants stressed that efforts to delimit areas for conservation are inconsistent with Indigenous worldviews, which would struggle to draw borders around lands that are "worthy" of protection, given that all lands and waters are inherently valuable. Melanie (Diné, she/her) told me, "…it just doesn't make sense to identify these sacred places [for protection]… it's all connected and it's all sacred." Similarly, Jennifer said, "…there was a story behind everything in the world, every landmass, every waterway, every mountain, every hill, everything has a purpose. And when you start seeing it in that way, then everything needs to be protected." In other words, my participants made clear that they would not like to leave any lands *un*protected

and therefore open to exploitation. Protected areas, regardless of who they are managed by, do little to alter the norms of extraction and depredation under capitalism, which continue to endanger the Earth both within and beyond PA boundaries. This is an inevitable consequence of the capitalist system, as conservation necessitates continued expansion; the removal of conserved lands from direct industrial exploitation does not prevent environmental degradation, but rather shifts destructive activities elsewhere (Napoletano & Clark, 2020; Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2015).

Indeed, capitalism and imperialism have long relied on conservation to offset immediate ecological contradictions and ensure continued expansion. Today, conservation is increasingly looked to as the solution to all of capital's contradictions, promising to harbor biodiversity, offset carbon emissions, and purify water, for example (DePuy *et al*., 2022; Dinerstein *et al*., 2020; Igoe & Brockington, 2007). In the present era of global capital, however, ecological crises are deepening at the same time as there is less land to "protect." As Tori explained, conservation attempts to "conserve what we have and what we seem to have that's actually ours feels very little right now, right?... It feels like we have to conserve what we have left. I think the difference between that and 'land back' initiatives is that we aren't trying to just conserve what we have." IFEP's emphasis on decolonization and land back attempts to remake socioecological and political-economic relations on a massive scale. While conservation efforts like 30x30 cannot imagine protecting the entirety of the North American continent, 'land back' can.

This is not to say, however, that justice-oriented conservation measures have no role in Indigenous communities. My participants noted that, under current political-economic conditions, conservation can be a useful tool to protect sacred sites, water sources, and more-than-human kin, for example, in the short-term (see also Bernauer & Roth, 2021; Youdelis *et al*., 2021, and Hope, 2021 for discussions of similar compromises in Canada and Bolivia). Yet they are mindful of conservation's limitations, given that PA designations are subject to political whims, as the case of Bears Ears shows. This is consistent with Bernauer and Roth's (2021, p. 214) analysis of Indigenous-led conservation as an "unstable equilibrium of compromises." While scholars and conservationists should be wary of large-scale efforts to incorporate Indigenous lands into global PA networks, even with free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) (Dunlap & Arce, 2022), this does not preclude support for communities that seek out conservation designations.[15] It is worth noting, however, that if more scholars and practitioners expand their understanding of what "counts" as environmental protection or decolonial conservation – and support Indigenous resistance accordingly – fewer communities may need to resort to traditional conservation measures to achieve their short-term goals.

6. Conclusion

This article advances the decolonial conservation literature by 1) evaluating why reforms to conservation practice in the U.S. will not be sufficient to bring about environmental protection or justice, and 2) outlining a radical alternative to conservation based on the theory and practice of Indigenous womxn resisting settler colonialism in the U.S. Southwest. Although Indigenous feminist environmental protection, as I've described it, is particular to the Southwest, its implications are global. The womxn with whom I spoke understand their resistance as part of a global Indigenous struggle, which, according to Raquel, "…always has to do with water or land and Indigenous sovereignty." That is, Indigenous resistance can likely be conceptualized as a method of environmental protection elsewhere. Political ecologists and other critical scholars of conservation can offer a powerful intervention in the literature and practice by centering the distinct socio-ecological systems that give rise to Indigenous sustainability globally, and the diverse ways in which Indigenous nations are fighting to protect the environment. In-depth scholarly engagement with other Indigenous resisters is necessary to identify points of overlap and difference with the central tenets of IFEP. In particular, the call for decolonial environmental praxis has distinct implications in settler colonial states like the U.S., where the vast majority of Indigenous lands remain under the control of an occupying government and must be returned. In post-colonial and neo-colonial settings, however, where conservation often reproduces colonial dynamics, the nature of

[15] Though beyond the scope of this article, I must note that communities are not monoliths (Sen and Pattanaik, 2019): leaders and other elites may seek PA status without the consent of the broader community, accruing individual benefits under the guise of community-based conservation (Sen & Pattanaik, 2019; Homewood *et al*., 2022; Ballivián, 2022).

decolonial environmental praxis will be distinct, implicating national and foreign governments, international governmental organizations, industry, NGOs, and other actors.

In the absence of radical changes to the global capitalist system, and associated socio-ecological relations, conservation practice will continue to underlie environmental degradation. Recognizing that conservation is a tool of – or, at best, a counterpart to – global capitalism helps explain why efforts to include Indigenous territories in global conservation schemes risk undermining the very socio-ecological systems that contributed to Indigenous sustainability in the first instance. Conservation, like any system of environmental management, inscribes certain relations of production and reproduction in a particular place, disrupting others (Homewood *et al*., 2022; Gutiérrez-Zamora, 2021; Thakholi, 2021; Napoletano & Clark, 2020; Sen & Pattanaik, 2019; Doane, 2014; Igoe & Brockington, 2007). Rather than seeking to incorporate Indigenous nations and practices into global conservation schemes, then, this article suggests that scholars, conservationists, funders, and other actors concerned about environmental degradation have an obligation to support Indigenous resistance and resurgence (in line with community demands). As Tori explained,

> …it's not just that Native people are most impacted [by environmental degradation], Native people also have the answers… If you actually care about making change and wanting to see an actual better world, then you should be centering Indigenous people, because we know how to steward this land.

Building Indigenous power is a crucial first step toward transforming the political economy and shifting away from a system based on exploitation of the land and its caretakers. Ultimately, Zoe captured the intent behind Indigenous feminist environmental protection when she told me, "…lands managed by Indigenous peoples, Indigenous authority over land, I think that's the vision when it comes to what does the future of conservation or environmental protection look like." A global shift to decolonial environmental praxis presents an opportunity, and an obligation, to restore right relations among humans, our more-than-human kin, and the Earth.

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