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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Reimagining America's "Best Idea": Indigenous Stewardship and the Next Era of Conservation

KATIE SHEA

The national parks are often celebrated as America’s “best idea,” yet their foundation was shaped by a conservation model built on the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples and their stewardship practices. As the country imagines the next era of conservation amid renewed attacks on public lands, this essay argues that reform cannot mean simply rebuilding the old system. It must move beyond preservation through federal control toward increased partnership with Tribal Nations, grounded in Indigenous-led stewardship, shared decision-making, and Tribal governance. Tribal co-stewardship and co-management offer holistic solutions that are already emerging across federal land management. The question now is whether these approaches will remain exceptional arrangements or become foundational to the future of public land policy.

On a bluebird day beneath the great sequoias, I lay on my back in the hush of Mariposa Grove, looking up into branches that had been reaching toward the sky for centuries. I wondered what they had witnessed ... the hands that once tended this place, the fires carefully set, the songs carried through the trees, and the footsteps of Indigenous Peoples who knew these grounds not as wilderness, but as home.

I was 17 then, a young Bodewadmi Kwe (Potawatomi woman), working on a trail crew with dirt beneath my nails and wonder in my chest. Each day, as I maintained those paths, I found myself asking a question I could not put down: Where are my Native brothers and sisters? Why are we not here working alongside these crews, caring for these places openly, visibly, and with authority?

I had always known that we were still here. What I did not yet understand was why we had been made absent from the very places our people had long known, loved, and cared for. That question stayed with me because it was never only about who was missing from a trail crew. It was about who had been made absent from the story of conservation itself, and what it would mean to bring Indigenous stewardship back to its center.

At their foundation, national parks, along with other places under the jurisdiction of federal land-managing agencies, were conceptually flawed from the beginning because they were built on removal rather than relationship. This includes both the forced displacement of Indigenous people to establish parks like Yosemite or Yellowstone,¹ and the enduring barriers that continue to limit Indigenous stewardship today.²

If that is the legacy, then the question becomes how to move forward. As the country considers the future of

public lands amid renewed extraction, deregulation, and political instability, the path forward may be clearer than it seems. It could be a return to what has long worked: Native-led stewardship.

One practical pathway toward this transformation is the expansion of Tribal co-stewardship. While not synonymous with full land return or exclusive jurisdiction, it offers a scalable model for sovereignty-informed governance within existing legal and administrative frameworks. It provides a bridge between current federal systems and a more fundamentally relational approach to conservation.³

With the growing success of Tribal co-stewardship, it should not remain peripheral, but become a defining principle of public land policy, grounded in sovereignty, shared governance, and enduring relationships to place. What began as a question beneath sequoias is ultimately a question about power: who holds it, who has been excluded, and how it must change.

Since time immemorial, Indigenous Peoples have lived in reciprocity with the land. It is where languages and identities are born, economies sustained, ceremonies practiced, and ancestors laid to rest. These connections remain, but they were severely disrupted through forced removal to make way for what became known as “America’s best idea.” It is no coincidence that many national parks sit on sacred Indigenous homelands.

Crucially, the “pristine” environments early conservationists sought to protect were often shaped by generations of Indigenous stewardship. Yet the model that followed emphasized removing people so others could recreate. That model has failed. Lands are over-traveled, agencies have more acres and deferred maintenance than staff to care for them, and dominant frameworks

continue to marginalize the knowledge systems that shaped these ecosystems.

Understanding this failure requires examining the origins of American conservation. Over the course of a fraught and often violent history, the idea of conservation emerged as a project of protecting and preserving lands. But for whom? And is it preservation, or control?

This logic mirrors broader patterns in the legal relationship between Tribes and the federal government. The United States has often prioritized control and ownership at the expense of stewardship, from manifest destiny and resource extraction to paternalistic policies that assumed federal authority knew best.

In contrast, many Indigenous frameworks emphasize balance rather than dominion. As Robin Wall Kimmerer describes, Indigenous stewardship is grounded in reciprocity.⁴ Land is not an object to manage but a living relative with whom humans share obligation. Stewardship is therefore ethical, rooted in responsibility and continuity.

In Tribal communities, conservation is not abstract. It is a responsibility to home. Homelands shape language, ceremony, governance, and future generations. Caring for them is inseparable from caring for people. This stands in sharp contrast to federal systems that treat nature primarily as a resource.

The consequences of that disconnect are visible on the land itself: overused trails, stressed ecosystems, and landscapes managed without the relationships that once sustained them.

Seen through this lens, the public land turbulence of the Trump administration reads not as an anomaly, but as a predictable outcome of a system governed by ownership and control. Rollbacks of land protections, diminished agency capacity, and eroding public trust reflect a pattern as old as the United States itself. Native communities have lived with these disruptions for more than two centuries, often at the cost of land,

language, culture, and life. For many Americans, this moment represented a crisis. For Tribal nations, it was a continuation.

The same pattern appears in everyday public land administration. One persistent failure in federal land management is the inability to relinquish control even when federal systems fall short. If the government truly prioritized stewardship over jurisdiction, it would adequately fund and equip the agencies and systems needed to care for the millions of acres entrusted to them. Chronic understaffing, deferred maintenance, and workforce attrition show what happens when governance emphasizes authority without accountability.

This dilemma is not new. By the late 20th century, Indigenous advocacy and federal policy failures converged to produce a philosophical shift toward self-determination. With support from President Nixon,⁵ the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) recognized that paternalistic governance was both ineffective and incompatible with Tribal sovereignty. Though applied first to social services, this reorientation toward increasing Tribal authority became a catalyst for co-stewardship thinking, extending naturally to the governance of lands central to Indigenous lifeways.

Most importantly, Tribal approaches to land are often grounded in relational and cultural responsibility rather than purely economic valuation, reflecting governance systems that tie land, identity, and continuity together. If the federal government has acknowledged profound failures in Indian policy—including removal, termination, relocation, and the separation of Native children from their families—then it must also confront why land stewardship has been exempt from similar accountability.

Taken together, these structural, ecological, and political failures place the United States at an inflection point in public land management. If the next conservation era is to be more durable than the last, it must move co-stewardship from the margins of federal practice into the fabric of public land policy.



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This evolution is not theoretical; cooperative management is already emerging in federal land policy, though unevenly and often as an exception rather than a norm. At Bears Ears National Monument, for example, a coalition of Tribal Nations has helped shape both designation and ongoing management,⁶ strengthening protections for cultural and ecological resources. Similarly, Tribal-led bison restoration efforts in the Greater Yellowstone region have demonstrated how Indigenous stewardship can support both ecosystem health and long-term conservation goals.⁷

With more than 400 co-stewardship and co-management agreements already in place across the United States, these examples are far from isolated.⁸ They demonstrate that when tribes are treated as governing partners, outcomes improve for ecosystems, communities, and the public. They also raise a larger question: will co-management remain an exception, or become a guiding principle?

The task now is not to re-invent co-management, but to strengthen it by making it more durable, better resourced, and more expected.

This transformation does not require dismantling existing agencies but strengthening them through localized, place-based expertise grounded in enduring relationships to land. Incorporating Indigenous stewardship therefore enhances, rather than replaces, existing institutional capacity. In many cases, it can also result in stronger and more consistent protection for the places people care most about.

Tribal involvement in land management exists along a spectrum, but co-management occupies a critical middle ground. It allows Tribes to exercise meaningful authority while working within, and gradually reshaping, existing federal management regimes. For that reason, it offers a pragmatic entry point for embedding sovereignty into public land governance.

This same principle of grounding stewardship in approaches that produce mutually beneficial ecological and governance outcomes extends beyond co-stewardship agreements. It

also invites reconsideration of the durability of the policies that structure public lands. Foundational frameworks such as the Wilderness Act, the Roadless Rule, and the Public Lands Rule play a central role in shaping conservation outcomes, yet their implementation and interpretation can shift across administrations, as is now being demonstrated with the Trump administration's push to rescind the latter two. Embedding sovereignty-informed stewardship within these systems offers a path toward greater continuity, strengthening both ecological protection and institutional stability over time. It could also correct a longstanding absence by creating space for Tribal Nations to help shape policies that have had lasting impacts on their communities, whether intentional or unintended.

What makes Tribal co-stewardship particularly durable is the legal and governance structure behind it. Tribal nations are sovereign governments with treaty-backed relationships to the United States, giving them a degree of continuity that federal agencies often lack. While federal priorities can shift across administrations, Tribal governance is grounded in long-term responsibility to land, water, and resources that sustain cultural life. This creates a form of stewardship that is less reactive and more consistently protective.

Still, this potential is not always obvious, nor will it be realized automatically. Much of the polarization surrounding Tribal policy stems from misunderstanding, particularly the tendency to conflate co-stewardship with broader calls for "land back." While these efforts may overlap or share underlying principles, they are not interchangeable. Terms like "land back" are often mischaracterized as wholesale dispossession, prompting fear rather than informed debate. In practice, many Tribal priorities focus on access, stewardship authority, and shared governance. When policy discussions are grounded in outcomes and capacity rather than caricature, opposition can soften.

This is especially clear in the context of agency capacity. In this administration, the National Park Service alone faced a sharp reduction in workforce,⁹ in addition to long-standing problems of deferred maintenance, chronic housing con-



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straints, and growing visitation pressures. Framing Tribal co-management as a way to expand stewardship capacity, rather than as an ideological project, reveals its mutual benefits: Tribes regain connection to homelands, agencies gain expertise and continuity, ecosystems receive more attentive care, and the public benefits from lands managed with more holistic, place-based knowledge.

Building support will require tailored messages without diluting Tribal sovereignty. Rural communities may respond to stable local stewardship, jobs, wildfire resilience, and healthier landscapes. Recreation users may respond to continued access paired with deeper responsibility. Conservation organizations must move beyond symbolic inclusion toward actual power-sharing. Congress and agency leadership should understand co-management as a matter of legal obligation, administrative efficiency, and durable outcomes. Tribal communities must see consent, adequate funding, respect for data sovereignty, and assurance that co-management will not become another unfunded mandate.

Translating this vision into practice requires institutional pathways. The Department of the Interior is uniquely positioned to expand co-management because of its land-management authorities and government-to-government responsibilities.¹⁰ In many cases, existing structures could remain intact while administration or management authority is shared through Tribal self-governance agreements. Similar models already operate within the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Education, showing that such arrangements are possible, though not without coordination challenges.

Yet co-management must not become a mechanism for the federal government to offload responsibility without resources. Tribal capacity varies widely, and sustainable funding remains the most significant hurdle, particularly because many Tribes remain structurally dependent on federal dollars by design, not by choice. Any expansion of co-management must therefore include reliable funding, technical support, and true power-sharing.

These implementation questions matter because the next era of conservation cannot rest on aspiration alone. If co-management is to become foundational, it must be funded, staffed, legally understood, and protected from reversal when administrations change.

Despite these challenges, Tribal co-management remains one of the most credible paths for place-based conservation in the United States. Its promise lies not only in improving policy outcomes, but in changing the premises beneath conservation itself—from protection through exclusion to protection through relationship, accountability, shared authority, and sovereignty-informed stewardship.

At its core, any effort to rebuild conservation must confront a simple truth: public lands cannot be fully protected while Indigenous Nations remain peripheral to their governance.

This is what “refounding” should mean. It does not require abandoning the idea that these lands are worthy of care, nor ignoring that co-management has already begun. It requires learning from where partnerships and shared authority are working and asking why those models remain exceptions. The next era of conservation cannot rest on the myth that land is best protected when Indigenous peoples are kept on the sidelines. It must be built on the older truth that land endures when people live in right relationship with it.

Tribal co-management offers one pathway toward that refoundation. Not as a symbolic gesture, but as a structural shift in how authority, responsibility, and knowledge are distributed. It asks the public to love these places more honestly. To recognize the histories beneath the trails, the responsibilities beyond recreation, and the Indigenous Nations whose relationships to these places predate, and persist beyond, federal designation.

When I think back to Mariposa Grove, I still see the sequoias reaching upward, patient and immense, holding centuries in their rings. I also hear the question



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that first came to me there: Where are we in this story? A refounded park system would answer differently. It would recognize Tribal nations as governing partners, cultural knowledge holders, and original stewards whose authority is essential to the future of these lands.

If America's national parks are to remain one of its "best ideas," then the idea itself must grow. The future of conservation will not be secured by restoring the old system after political damage has been done. It will be

secured by building something more durable. A public land framework grounded in Tribal sovereignty, shared authority, and restored relationship.

And perhaps, someday, a young Native person standing beneath those same trees will not have to ask why we are missing.

They will already know we are home.

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