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Decolonizing conservation, a global conversation: views from Turtle Island, Tanzania, and Thailand

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What does it mean to decolonize conservation? This question was posed to a group of scholars and activists working in different places around the world – the US, Canada, Tanzania, and Thailand. This article is an edited transcript of the conversation that ensued. The goal of this paper is to keep that conversation alive and continue to add nuance and curiosity to the question as it unfolds in similar and different places around the world. A key feature of continuing important dialogues such as this one, is to resist the temptation to offer definitive definitions of what it would take to decolonize conservation but rather seek out greater understanding of what it might look like in a variety of places. Amongst deepening calls for greater Indigenous inclusion as states seek to implement the Global Biodiversity Framework, it is vital we keep questions of what constitutes decolonized conservation top of mind.

KEYWORDS

conservation, Indigenous Peoples, decolonization, political ecology, global biodiversity framework

Introduction

Calls to decolonize conservation have been growing in recent years from scholars and activist groups alike (Adams and Mulligan, 2002; Lanjouw, 2021; Corbera et al., 2021; Youdelis et al., 2021). However, it remains unclear what this call actually means in practice, with disagreement across regions, perspectives and academic disciplines common.¹ In line with these concerns, Goldman and Roth convened a session at the Anthropology and Conservation Conference in 2021 to discuss the question in earnest. With a goal of promoting a thoughtful and productive conversation on this topic, we invited scholars and activists in different places around the world – the US, Canada, Tanzania, and Thailand—whom we knew were working on these issues to simply talk about what it means to *decolonize conservation*—to them and the communities where they work/are from. This article is an edited transcript of the dialogue

¹ See blog post: <https://conviva-research.com/what-do-we-mean-by-decolonizing-conservation-a-response-to-lanjouw-2021/>

that ensued. The paper intends to keep that conversation alive and continue to add nuance and curiosity to the question as it unfolds in similar and different places around the world. With increasing calls to engage Indigenous Peoples in implementation of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) (Oliva et al., 2025), this dialogue continues to be important and takes on new meaning and urgency. We started with a set of questions to guide the process, outlined below as part of the dialogue, but the conversation was not tied to these questions, and allowed to flow organically. We also encouraged participants to think critically about the two words—*conservation* and *decolonization*—separately; what they mean, how they are used, misused, and how they can be redefined in potentially productive ways.

In this paper we unpack both these words through a productive conversation. We do this to build an open and engaging dialogue about reinventing conservation without getting caught up in academic arguments or held back by political obstacles regarding decolonization. This does not mean we do not take decolonization-seriously (Tuck and Yang, 2021). We do. We take it extremely seriously. But we see it as a process. As a verb that encapsulates a series of processes and contestations that are often overlooked when one focuses on decolonization as a definitive end-point tied to specific academic genealogies or political necessities. As verb, decolonizing is active, on-going, and relational. It can also unfold in different ways, at different speeds, while sharing the same underlying root meaning in different contexts.

Mara Goldman introducing the panel

I am an associate professor of geography at the University of Colorado-Boulder, which sits on the ancestral homelands of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute nations. However, I am currently speaking to you from Portugal, a country that played a huge role in global colonization. My work is based in Tanzania and Kenya among Maasai communities in particular. I am a visitor to all of these places with ancestral ties to Jewish communities that migrated to the US from Eastern Europe (Polish, Russian and Romanian). However, my primary role today is in convening the panel and starting the conversation. I called this panel together because I want to start a conversation, to unpack the various ways we are thinking about, talking about, and participating in decolonizing conservation. To do this, I called some friends and colleagues working on the topic to help shed some light on how progress toward decolonized conservation is being framed by Indigenous groups and scholars in different places, including settler states like Canada and the US, and places in the global south, like Tanzania, Thailand, and Burma. How are processes unfolding around the world, in places with different and similar ecologies, and histories of colonialism but yet similar models of global colonial conservation? We really want this to be more of a conversation than a set of different presentations. And we want to do so in a way that encourages a dialogue and bridges concerns normally defined as ‘theory’ vs. ‘practice’. We put these words in scare quotes because if we take Indigenous knowledge seriously, then *knowledge and practice is theory*. In other words, this notion of a divide between theory and practice is colonial in and of itself. So, we are not going to specifically address this assumed divide between theory versus practice, but will be doing that to some extent in the conversation itself. We begin by asking each participant to introduce themselves, say why they are here,

what they do, the communities that they work with and then to address a set of questions we have previously posed to them. The big question that we are focusing on is, “what does decolonizing conservation mean to you and/or your community and the places where you work?” Panelists are asked to address this question in whatever way seems most appropriate. In doing so you may also think about and respond to a series of sub-questions, if you choose. These include: What does conservation mean? What would a local version look like? Is there a local word that you would propose? What does decolonization mean in different contexts? We often think of decolonization as a really big process, but are there smaller projects, ongoing projects, ongoing sets of negotiations that may not seem decolonial to outsiders, but are potentially working toward decolonization incrementally? And how are decolonization efforts addressing internal differentiation within communities that you work with and are from, such as gender, class, and age? We will start in Tanzania, with Edward Loure.

Edward Loure from Tanzania

My name’s Edward Loure. I work with the Ujamaa Community Resource Team, UCRT. This is our local organization working for Hadzabe, Barabaig, and Maasai Hunter-gatherer and pastoralist communities in the Northern part of the country. Our main work is to help these local communities to be able to own land, manage and benefit from land and natural resources that are available in their locality. We have been working hard to make sure that we secure communal land for local communities in the northern part of the country and *decolonization* to us means that most of our land has been taken in the name of conservation and most of the laws and policies that governed land and natural resources are all the colonial laws and policies. Now we are trying to advocate for changing these laws and the policies to suit our local community needs.

This realization [about the on-going colonial nature of the country’s laws and policies], led to community conservation, which we call *conservation with a human face*. Those are the words that I want you to think about. Because we have been struggling, working with conservation with no human face, conservation that only cares about protected areas, no humans, no human activities. Fences and boundaries kill social conservation because most of these conserved areas in Tanzania are not fenced. They have open boundaries. Wildlife move out of the protected areas to access special resources which they need outside the park, like saltwater lakes and specific grasses. They have to come out and once they come, because Maasai are concerned about nature, they welcome them. They love them. They stay with them, but laws come in, which divide wildlife and the community. And we also have cases where before the Maasai were kicked out [of a protected area], the number of wildlife was high. After being kicked out, now the number of wildlife has declined. We are not wildlife scientists, but we can just see that wildlife have disappeared and others are running away.

In 2016 I got an award called the Goldman Environmental Award. It’s an award that is given to individuals who have contributed to environmental protection. The kind of conservation that UCRT is supporting is not usually recognized. We were spearheading it, working with communities, and I received recognition in 2016 because of that work. And now we are promoting what we call

Connectivity of wildlife and life. This includes re-establishing the connectivity of wildlife routes that were blocked for different reasons and are now open because of the work of communities. But we are not calling these corridors, because conservation corridors can have important and negative implications for community land rights.² So we had to come up with our own suitable words, because the word corridor is a colonial word that is not suited to our community needs. We now have come up with a word, which we call *livestock and wildlife migratory routes*, which has also been a means of ensuring our own survival and contributions to the national GDP.

We have been working with different organizations in the northern part of Tanzania. Some are local, and some are international, and this one large international organization came in with their own ideas. We all share the same goals of protecting the environment, land, and natural resources. But the way to get to our goal is different for every actor. For us, we start with community land rights, considering the rights of local communities along with the environment and wildlife. Others consider it through the channel of protecting wildlife, using the existing laws and policies, many of which are not suitable to local communities. They push [this approach] hard, coming in with a top-down approach that oppresses local communities.

This approach has brought great failure to the ability of conservation to help these local communities. This is also because these organizations fail to include traditional knowledge of Indigenous people who have been working in that locality, *which also is their home*. This has now become something that we are trying to change. *Communities have the ability to protect natural resources and wildlife, what they need is the right support to empower them to continue this work on the ground.* It has been a great working with some researchers, like Mara and others who have engaged our communities in their research. Asked permission. And then also come back with data and stories to share, bringing publications to this community, and we translate them into local languages, and we share them. This is something that most of the researchers in Maasai areas long ago, did not do. They just came here, did their research, and then went back to the universities and produced publications. If you want to access these publications, you need to get a password to get to this university website to read the story that you are part of! These are some of the things that we see as part of the colonial process. These researchers keep all our stories in high level archives, which we cannot just access easily. So, I'm really happy today to have a conversation with a team of academics and experts.

In terms of the question, 'what does conservation mean,' I say that conservation has different meanings for different groups. *For pastoralists it means historical injustice.* Every time you hear 'conservation' it means displacement of local groups. Conservation with no human face; processes/organizations that do not want to see local people around. This is the type of conservation that we are now trying to modify. Conservation with a human face. That is the model we would like to see from now onward. We want conservation that will enhance Indigenous people's traditions and adapt for the benefit of local communities. We want people-centered Conservation. Conservation has to build on what communities know and what they say about it. *Maasai have been conservators for many years. But then*

the colonizers came and took everything. They came and took the animals and put them in the forest and called it conservation. All the conservation areas started in the pastoralist lands because that is where the wildlife are. So, they just made new boundaries and asked people to move. For example, with the establishment of Serengeti in 1959 – just moved Maasai to Ngorongoro and nobody will bother you there. Now they say that the population is too high in Ngorongoro and we need to move again. They do not see that we are good conservators, but only that we are too many people. They do not look at the staff of the Conservation Area and say it is too many people, and move them. This area (Ngorongoro Conservation Area, NCA) was designed as a multiple use area and was unique in that way (including pastoralists, wildlife, and tourism). Now they are moving Maasai but they are not moving staff.

John bright – Burma, Thai-Burma border

My name is John. I work for an organization called the *Karen Environmental and Social Action network* in Burma. We work around the Thai-Burma border, and you know, our area in Burma is now under the military regime after the coup happened on February 1st. So now we are in a very messy situation. We Indigenous people are still trying to manage multiple challenges. We have had COVID 19, political conflict, violence, and we also we have a lot of issues related to a hydro power project, mining and logging.

[Conservation practices] are driven by the colonial legacy, the economic model, without listening to the people's voices. And with this military rule in the country, we have no platform to give voice to those development plans. This is just a bit of introduction from my side. I would like to discuss what we mean by conservation in our current context looking from our site—the Salween peace Park, situated in the southeastern part of the country in Burma. It is in the autonomous area of the Karen Indigenous community.

In the Karen community we understand conservation in a holistic sense, according to our Indigenous tradition, with human nature, and the spirit living within us all as deeply connected. The status of one directly corresponds to that of the others. For the Indigenous Karen community in the Salween Peace Park, a healthy forest means a prospering and healthy life. We see water as a life, connected to our livelihood, our forest, our culture and belief system. We have to pay respect to water spirits whenever we want to manage or utilize the water bodies. These are our current ontologies that are very important in our conservation philosophy. This worldview comes from our Indigenous knowledge shared from generation to generation through our traditional poetry. We call this "ta" in Karen. Karen Indigenous knowledge underpins our whole society, informing the shape of our livelihood, our institutions, and our social taboos. And due to this, *the Karen Indigenous community understands conservation as an aspect of our daily life. It is connected to our culture, our livelihood, and our political system.* It is important to have a peaceful environment to be able to maintain these traditional ways of life.

This Karen worldview is at the heart of the Salween Peace Park and works toward three core goals. Number one is *peace and self-determination* because it is important for us to work on governance and institutional mechanisms, governance mechanisms that make our local institutions strong and contribute to peace and justice. Number

² See Goldman (2009).

two is *environmental integrity*. Our Indigenous territory contributes to protecting one of the largest tropical forest areas in the world and contributes to combatting climate change. And you know, in the literature, [it says] we save 80% of global biodiversity. We contribute to this from the Indigenous territory. It is very important to work toward this environmental integrity in our area. And the third pillar, the third goal is *cultural survival*. Our life, our belief system, and our identity are all deeply connected, as I mentioned, to nature and conservation, in conserving nature. We support the prosperity, the wellbeing of our people, and the future generation.

In the Karen tradition, areas of particular cultural importance frequently correspond with areas of biological significance like mountain ridges. This led to a series of community managed protected areas being established across the Salween Peace Park. This is coupled with three larger wildlife protection areas, which are co-managed with the Karen forestry department and our Karen authority within our autonomous area. We have about 34 community forests that have ensured healthy populations of endangered and vulnerable and nearly threatened mammals, including tigers, gibbons, and pangolins. This combination of designated community managed areas and protected areas through cultural practices, enabled an approach to conservation that is inclusive people-driven and sensitive to sustainable livelihoods and needs. *It is very important to see this interconnection between people's livelihoods, culture and the spiritual parts of their lives.*

I would like to discuss this question, what does colonization mean here? In Burma, *decolonization is an ongoing and multifaceted process*. Karen communities have faced many waves of attempted colonization, including more than a hundred years of British colonial rule and continuous attempts at what we call Burma-ization by successive military and civilian governments that have taken power since the British left. We still have a lot of problems, many challenges driven by this colonial legacy of economic models, hydropower, mining. These development projects threaten our communities, causing displacement. In the name of development, they come to clear our area, they conduct a military operation in the Indigenous areas, causing the displacement of hundreds of thousands and human rights violations. So, we have these challenges and no participation in decision making at the policy level. Yet throughout this, we Karen people, we stood up firmly to protect our culture, tradition, and territory wherever we could. And the Salween Peace Park is a manifestation of this. This is a clear outcome of the first pillar mentioned above, *peace and self-determination*, and it is vital that we Karen communities be given the right to govern our own territories in a traditional and sustainable way. This is the quickest and most effective path to peace and justice in modern day Burma. *But very importantly, when we talk about self-determination it is important to understand this term in a decolonized sense.* We Karen have our own understanding of the term—*self-determination in develop through deliberative democracy and cooperation with other ethnic and Indigenous groups in Burma. This is reflected in our Salween Peace Park governance system.*

For us, peace and self-determination does not mean secession, but rather respect. Self-determination means respect for Karen traditions and belief systems and the right to govern our own territories and the right to make and enforce our own laws in ways that best fits our people and ways of life. It means recognizing and respecting the value of current traditional governance, which has helped protect the ecological integrity of one of the most biologically important regions on the planet. It means respect now [of the Karen people] as equal

partners within the future of the federal union of Burma. Lastly, for Karen communities in the Salween Peace Park, *decolonization is more than an act of removing a standard influence. It is an opportunity to learn from other ways of thinking.*

The Karen community has practiced conservation in their own way, through generations, through waves of colonization and war. Now through the Salween Peace Park, led by us, our local community. We once again offer our experience to the world, also to our own country. *We hope that people can join us in this opportunity and see that decolonization is not just freedom from an imposed influence, but also freedom to learn now.*

Clint Carroll, UC Boulder, Cherokee Nation

Thank you [greet everyone in his own language]. Hello, everyone. I'm grateful to be on this panel, and to have heard from our previous panelists, Edward and John sharing their experiences and knowledges from various Indigenous communities across the globe. I will start by explaining where I'm coming to you from. I'm a colleague of Mara's, and as she stated earlier, that institution and where I live sits on the ancestral homelands of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute nations. I am a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and an Associate Professor of Native American and Indigenous studies in the Department of Ethnic Studies. I come to the topics of both decolonization and conservation through the work that I've been doing for over a decade with Cherokee Elders, Cherokee Nation natural resource managers, and in partnership with three rural Cherokee communities throughout Northeastern Oklahoma on the Cherokee Reservation. This work has been toward perpetuating our environmental knowledges and practices, which inherently entails the need for suitable places on which to carry out that work.

Much of this work centers our medicinal plants that have been threatened for quite some time due to the loss that we have experienced as a people. And that includes both the loss of land, as well as the loss of knowledge and the language that goes along with that knowledge. All of this is, of course, a result of assimilation policies that have gone hand in hand with the forced alienation and dispossession of many of our tribal lands. Over the course of the last century and a half, primarily due to the allotment policy of the US government, 98% of lands that were formerly considered Cherokee Nation territory have been lost to us in terms of control on a tribal level.

Additionally, as Cherokee people, we have been forcibly removed from our original homelands. Where we reside now, these are not the lands that our distant ancestors knew as home. Despite this dislocation, we have managed to hold onto some of the ancestral knowledge from the homelands, because as it turns out the Ozark mountains, where many of our communities reside in Northeastern Oklahoma, have a lot of similarities with the Appalachian mountains of our homelands. In any case, conservation in our context effectively has to do with taking care of other people's homelands that nonetheless make up new homelands for many Cherokee people today. And so, my work with Elders and knowledge keepers in Oklahoma has been to seek strategic ways to perpetuate the knowledge as well as protect our lands. And that has entailed tribal land conservation strategies. This also has entailed amplifying the voices of our knowledge keepers, and our traditional people, within our own governmental offices. So, I think this question of internal differentiation regarding different experiences and perspectives

along the lines of class, gender and age is a really important conversation to have, especially since a lot of our tribal governments have inherited a lot of the baggage of Western forms of governance. And so, how do we work with that in ways that amplify and promote knowledge from our Elders, many of whom are fluent language speakers who have grown up close to the land and have grown up with land-based knowledge and teachings from their Elders? I come to this topic of conservation through this grounded work and through these internal efforts.

In response to the prompt about concepts that might articulate conservation from grounded or locally specific Indigenous languages and knowledge systems, what came to mind for me are concepts that have been shared with me from my Elders. One concept an Elder shared with me that I always keep at the front of my mind is to *honor the spirit of the land*. That really resonates with some of the concepts that John was sharing regarding the connection between humans, nature, the spirits, and the deep connections that reside there. But also, in this phrase that my Elder shared, *we are acting as caretakers of a place that has a spirit, and that needs to be honored*. Another phrase in the Cherokee language is to say *we are all related* (ᎠᎩᎩᎩ ᎠᎩᎩᎩ), which means a sense of relatedness between not only humans, but humans and the land, and other-than-humans that reside and share the land with us. Another is to *respect all life* (ᎠᎩᎩ ᎠᎩᎩᎩ) as a way of centering a position of respect of land and the beings with whom we share it. Lastly, perhaps one of the most important phrases that comes to mind, is *DUGJ*—to honor oneself and all people with love even to the last day on earth. I come to decolonization with these guiding Cherokee concepts in mind.

I've always been a little skeptical of the term decolonization. For one, it's a big word, and it does not have the same traction in our communities as it does in academic circles. This is not to say our communities are anti-intellectual, nor is it to reinforce that artificial split between theory and practice that Mara mentioned at the beginning of the panel today. But the day-to-day work that I've witnessed not only with land-based practitioners (Elders, knowledge keepers), but also tribal natural resource managers, requires a more immediate and applicable goal. Here in the US and Canada, the phrase Land Back is a bit more specific. It's a plan and a clear statement, and I like that about it, even though it also resides in this kind of ultimatum space. But what I like about *Land Back* and why I think it's gained a lot of traction in thinking about social justice and what it looks like to respect Indigenous treaties, is that it is clear and provocative enough to open up a conversation around what *Land Back* could and should look like. I think these conversations really need to be had every time that phrase *Land Back* is used, lest it also fall victim to an easy way to claim a moral high ground and point fingers rather than the harder work of building relationships and allowing for true understanding of what is really needed to reverse what is driving the numerous crises of our times. So, in that space, I see a better place for our traditional teachings to be heard and to be implemented. We cannot ever lose sight of those teachings because we are lost without them.

Staying on Turtle Island, we move to Canada. Starting with Robin Roth.

Robin Roth, Guelph University, Ontario Canada

So my name is Robin Roth. I am in Guelph, Ontario, which is in the southern part of Canada and near the center of the country. These are the treaty lands of the Mississauga of the Credit First Nation,

where I am a guest, having an ancestral history that reaches to western Europe via the United States. And I think interesting for our discussion here, is that these lands are also part of a pre-European settlement covenant between a number of Indigenous nations called the Dish With One Spoon Covenant, which speaks to the ways in which we are meant to share and respect the territory that we inhabit. I work as a professor of geography here at the University of Guelph. I'm here in part because I am one of a six-member leadership circle of a project that's national in scope called, Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership. It is an Indigenous-led project, I am but one of two non-Indigenous leadership circle members.

A lot of what John said resonated for me. The Karen elders and knowledge holders that I had the privilege and honor of working with mostly in Thailand, but also across the border, have relayed similar teachings to me. And then more recently here in Canada, working in the capacity that I just mentioned, coming into contact with Elders and knowledge holders from many different cultures in Canada. I cannot speak for anyone else, but I will share what I have come to understand through these lessons and teachings that I have had the honor of receiving. But first, I'm going to start with more of an academic comment, that Edward already alluded to, which is great. I am paraphrasing here a bit from Smith's work on decolonizing research [Smith, 1999](#) — that research is one of the dirtiest words in any Indigenous language. And I sort of jokingly like to say that I think conservation is probably the second dirtiest word in most Indigenous people's language. And so, it is tough to be a conservation researcher, because it's a bit of a disaster. One of the reasons why conservation is such a dirty word I think is because it has been used as a tool of dispossession, unequivocally, and it continues to be used as such. But I also think it's more than that, right? *It also continues the work of colonialism by promoting an idea and a relationship to nature that is at odds with, that undermines and that does violence to, the relationship to nature that has sustained the earth for millennia, prior to racial capitalism and colonialism; the relationship to nature that continues to care for the earth in territories that Indigenous people still have a great deal of control over.*

We all know that there is mounting evidence even from a Western science perspective, that Indigenous nations do as good or better a job of maintaining Western conservation metrics—the things that Western conservation cares about like biodiversity and ecosystem integrity—than Western states do. For me this is no longer up for debate. Yet ironically mainstream colonial conservation undermines the very processes that enable this to continue. *Mainstream conservation is clearly intertwined with many concepts and practices of colonialism. It also continues to do the work of colonialism by undermining Indigenous knowledge systems through dispossession and disconnection.* If you are not in your territory, caring for it, it's very hard to continue the dynamic process of knowledge production and transmission. And it does this also through insisting that Indigenous knowledge be validated by Western science. *So, at every turn mainstream conservation practice and conceptions undermine the very thing that has been the only successful tool that we have had as humans to maintain the abundance of life on earth.* I think that it is really insidious in many ways, that for practical reasons we continue to have to hang onto that word conservation. I am constantly troubled by this, but nevertheless, I will talk about what decolonized conservation has come to mean for me. I am going to quote heavily a number of people who are involved in the Conservation Through Reconciliation

Partnership, many of whom you have probably heard of already. Anishinaabe scholar, Deborah McGregor, runs the Knowledge System stream, and she's very fond of saying that you cannot care about Indigenous knowledge without caring about Indigenous people.

We do not get to value Indigenous knowledge until we value the processes that can ensure that it continues, right? So that means a *decolonized conservation is actually about Indigenous self-determination*. In the end, whatever it is that we are doing, it needs to support Indigenous peoples getting reconnected to their territories and being able to take up, not just their rights (in Canada, we talk a lot about Indigenous rights because it's been framed in the constitution), but also their Indigenous responsibilities. This is something that the Indigenous people I work with talk a lot about—that it's not just having conservation support Indigenous rights, but also their responsibilities, as they understand them. At a national level, that's kind of as far as we can go because these things get defined locally by their own cultural and legal systems. For instance, what decolonizing conservation might mean to my Dene colleague, who is from territory in the north of what is now called Canada might look a lot different from what decolonizing conservation might mean for another member of the leadership circle, a Mi'kmaw woman who is from the Southeast part of Canada. Self-determination means that they get to define their responsibilities, to practice them, and to assert their own practices in their own territories. Conservation for me is about helping to re-enliven these responsibilities and decolonized conservation should be that. I think about this as a continuum. Clint already talked about Land Back and there's a lot of discussion here in Canada about Land Back. There are acts of Land Back where individual private property owners are returning land to Indigenous governments. In many ways this is the ultimate form of decolonization, actually returning land that was taken through the processes of colonization. But also, I think there is some irony here, and I want to quote Leanne Simpson, who's an Anishinaabe scholar, but who is not part of the Conservation Reconciliation Partnership. She says *that the opposite of dispossession is not possession. It is deep reciprocal, consensual attachment*. As we are locked in this legal world of private property, returning land is a really good place to start, but it is a little ironic in that Indigenous people's possessing land is also not usually in line with the way that they understand their relationship to land. In that sense, there's a whole continuum of possibilities for decolonized conservation in Canada, Land Back being one of them certainly, but shared governance being another. Some of the things happening in Canada that we are playing with are getting easements on properties. Easements on private property to be able to gather, hunt, have ceremony, to be able to enact those responsibilities and not worry about who owns the land. It is rather about who has responsibility over it. And you can have responsibility legally in Canada without a land title. So, I think there is a whole range of possibilities of what decolonized conservation can look like.

In closing I'll share something I've learned from my colleague Steven Nitah, a Dene from Lutselk'e in the North of what is now called Canada. He's fond of saying that Indigenous peoples aren't the ones who need to be decolonized, right? He says, "we are pretty good, actually. We're resilient, we have resisted. We are still in touch with our traditions. You know, non-Indigenous Canadians need to be decolonized." We need to unpack and unlearn a lot of the ideas that do the harm that conservation carries the flag for, such as ideas of wilderness in Canada. It's a very popular idea, which is very harmful.

And to learn to reenact that relationship to nature, that will lead to abundance. To paraphrase a Cree elder who once said to me at a workshop in Treaty 6 territory and which he allowed me to repeat when speaking with conservationists:

You know, when you guys say conservation, you think there's a problem. That we have to put nature over there and protect it from humans who are the problem. But when *we* say conservation, what we are saying is there is a problem. And there is a problem in that relationship. And now it's time to fix that relationship, which means reconnecting people to nature in a way that will lead to abundance.

I've carried these words with me for a long time because it keeps coming up over and over again in the work that that I do and the work that the Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership is doing. *It's not about separation, it's about reconnection and, and it's not about ecology, it's about health and healing*. The title of our partnership is Conservation Through Reconciliation, and there was a debate about that. Some of it was very strategic—it wasn't decolonization, it was reconciliation—but the way we understand reconciliation as I've come to understand it, is that you have to start with reconciling with nature. That's the first thing you do, right? You have to start to heal, you need to start to connect and then you can start reconciling with each other and trying to deal with the harm that colonization has done, certainly to Indigenous people in Canada. It's profound for all of us, because it's robbed us of our ability to understand the knowledge systems and the world views, the epistemologies that can be advanced through supporting Indigenous leadership. The Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership is trying to help with that reconnection, we are trying to help educate the public and other stakeholders and conservation actors to try to make this shift away from these models that disconnect that are actually part of the problem, toward models that are rooted in Indigenous law and Indigenous legal systems. As one of Elders I have the honor of working with, reminds me that you cannot argue with natural law and we need to realign our economies and our societies and our politics to work within natural law, which is what Indigenous government systems have done for a long time.

Maggie Low, University of British Columbia, Vancouver

Thank you everyone for being here. It's such an honor to be in this space with all of you and especially with my panelists. I'm feeling uplifted and lucky to learn from folks around the world. My name is Maggie Low and I'm talking to you now from the west coast of Canada. I work at the University of British Columbia, as an assistant professor in the School of Community and Regional Planning. I do recognize that I work on the unceded, ancestral and traditional territory of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ speaking Musqueam peoples. I am of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry—Italian, German, and French from my mom's side and my dad's side is French and a member of Wiikwemkoong unceded territory in Ontario.

I am going to take a bit of a different approach because my work actually does intersect with conservation in some ways, but I also come from an environmental studies background, and my current

work really sits in community, regional and urban planning and very specifically in Indigenous community planning. The Indigenous community planning concentration at UBC focuses on training a new generation of planners who can essentially break from many of the colonial legacies and current culture of planning in order to work in respectful relationships with Indigenous communities, which is an important theme we have been hearing about today.

Broadly speaking, I'm interested in how Indigenous nations in Canada assert their inherent sovereignty, jurisdiction, and self-determination. I try to do this as a community engaged scholar and someone who's very interested in, motivated, and driven by supporting the governance goals of Indigenous nations themselves. I will talk about Land Back too, but I'm going to talk mostly about my work as it pertains to students because I've actually been thinking a lot about what decolonization means within the context of being an educator and how I speak and teach about it with students.

In ICP, Indigenous Community Planning, our planning students, who are both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, work with and for First Nations communities in British Columbia supporting the Nation's planning processes. This takes place over an eight-month practicum. One of the aims is to provide students an opportunity to learn about Indigenous planning directly from communities. And I also teach them to research what decolonization is and reconciliation—to think about these two words together. I really appreciated Robin's understanding of reconciliation.

I look at these terms, how they are playing out in cities and specifically for local governments and how Nations are understanding these terms, especially the Nations adjacent to cities and cities which are situated on those Nations' lands. I teach emerging planners the Indigenous histories and the contemporary realities they need to know to hopefully contribute to reconciliation and decolonization efforts moving forward. And as I mentioned before, I've had to really grapple with how to teach about decolonization and how to use this term in ways that uphold its meaning. In terms of decolonization being about Indigenous land and life, so the return of this land, the return of stolen land, especially in the context of settler colonialism in Canada is certainly a very powerful and important meaning of decolonization and one that I do support fully. But at the same time, my own understanding and practice of decolonization has also been informed by incredible Indigenous thinkers, like Linda Smith and her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which was a really important book that I read as a graduate student. I take this book as an invitation for all of us, especially researchers, to stimulate the type of research that is possible, when we decolonize our minds, our discourse, our understandings, our practices. This is very much an understanding of decolonization that Robin was talking about. And of course, I really love this idea. Decolonization is about Indigenous self-determination which John, Edward and Clint also brought up. I also really appreciate the understanding of decolonization as a continuum. As an educator much of my thinking around decolonization is informed by my students and the very important and poignant questions about what decolonization can look like here in Canada in terms of land justice and what is now being called Land Back in Canada and the United States.

I want to talk a bit about what we are doing now, which may not necessarily be the full version of decolonization, but it is still working toward this larger picture. I teach planners, who are inevitably concerned about land—how it's used now and how it will be used in

the future—things like parks, developments, transportation, roads, public art, housing. It is important for students to understand the decision-making power and authority that they may hold 1 day when it comes to land. Students are asking questions, like, what does it mean to plan on and for stolen land? How are Nations involved in making decisions about their own lands? How do we plan to uphold Indigenous land rights and title? This is the same for my students that are working with, and for First Nations communities in their practicum. Throughout my teaching I delight in watching students—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—grasp the accountabilities and responsibilities many of them hold when working in better relationship with Indigenous Nations and peoples. They are asking questions like, what can Western planning practices learn from Indigenous planning practices? By working with students about the histories and legacies of settler colonialism, and on what it means to decolonize our minds and our discourse and our understandings and our institutions, I'm trying to look at how we can use that learning and move toward a vision of decolonization centered around land.

Some amazing and wonderful examples have already been mentioned. From things like setting up different and new taxation schemes, to different co-management agreements, to the actual repatriation of private and Crown land to tribal parks, to Indigenous protected and conservation areas, which are very big in Canada right now to, to nature-based solutions to climate change adaptation strategies and to the actual recognition of Indigenous title. Of course, all of these things are a very long-term game and we are going to be on this journey for a very long time. So I'll just end by saying that I'm constantly inspired by the people I work with, the people around me, and particularly the kind of ambition, curiosity and potential that my students have and that they will bring, hopefully to making this a more just world in the future.

Mara Goldman, UC Boulder, Colorado United States

Thank you so much, Maggie, and to all the participants. I agree. This is really inspiring. I want to point out some overall themes and concepts that came up across the different discussions that I think are useful. One is the idea of *decolonizing our minds* and starting with the academy, as well as our way of thinking about things and doing things, a conversation that began with Edward in terms of the academy. And thank you, Edward, for the very kind words you said about my own work, but it's still coming with the legacy. Knowing that I was going to study one of the most studied people on the planet, coming from the US, and recognizing my need to kind of unpack all of that before I even began and to have responsibility for it, to take responsibility for it. So, the notion of responsibility, these words, *responsibility, respect, reciprocity, self-determination*. You know, I had these set of questions that I gave you all, but I was hesitant because I really wanted everybody to sort of just speak what came to mind, which I think you all did anyway. But I realized that while I started with a question of what it means to say what decolonization means it should of started with what does colonization mean? Because the examples and the experiences are so different and continue to be different around the world. And these issues are ongoing, as brought up by John and Edward. But also, I really appreciated your comment John, that there is so much loss, right? That everybody talks about land loss, knowledge, and language

loss, but also that there is so much opportunity right now to learn. You mentioned that decolonization is not just freedom from the imposition, but also freedom to learn new ways. For me, that is truly inspiring and a great opportunity to open up the dialogue to questions.

Robin

Maggie, when you were talking, I was thinking about my colleagues in the Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership who have called to replace the term ‘land use planning’ with ‘land relations planning’. I’m just wondering if there are other examples that people have in the audience or amongst the panelists of reclaiming language a little bit and trying to reassert different ideas by putting out different ways of operating. And trying to get some of our academic or conservation partners—sometimes the very people who often infringe on Indigenous rights—to start using these new terms, to start to think in this other way. Or rather, to start thinking about things differently by using language and maybe those are Indigenous languages, or maybe what my colleagues have done, which is, to sort of say, ‘wait a minute, why are you calling it land use planning, this is not all just about your use and extraction! This is about your relationship to it. And you should plan for that.’

Clint Carroll

It makes me think of a question that I had for John. I did not have a chance to get into some of the specific work we are doing in the Cherokee Nation, but for the past 2 years we have been conducting an Indigenous land education program with Cherokee Nation natural resource managers, a group of Elders and Knowledge Keepers called the Cherokee Medicine Keepers, an inaugural cohort of five Cherokee students. We’ve seen the designation of the first tribal conservation area for the purposes that I described in my brief comments: for cultural, land-based practices, and the perpetuation of traditional knowledge. What I wanted to share with the panelists and with John specifically is a story about the name for this place. It is relatively small, but to us, because as I mentioned, we have lost so much, it’s one of the larger parcels of land that we have managed to hang onto as a tribal trust unit. It’s roughly 830 acres. It’s a beautiful place that has many of our plants that our Elders know as medicine. It has running water, which is also important for the practice of medicine. And it’s located in a place that is relatively protected and secluded. The Elders named it ᏍᏏᏉᏍᏉ ᏍᏏᏉᏍᏉ, which means *the peaceful place of medicine*. Now, my question for John—I am wondering if in the naming of the Salween Peace Park, if there was some conversation behind that concept of “peace,” because it seems like there is a common thread there.

John Bright

Thank you. Yes, the name of the place itself, reflecting the reality that is needed, you know, on the ground. Like I mentioned at the moment there are a lot of tensions with the military operations and this is not just now, this has been happening for over 70 years. But our Indigenous people have been trying to resist by surviving, through this

traditional kind of management of our livelihood system—farming, forest management, our traditional belief system, through our living this life, it is already resisting. But the concept that we come up with was the peace park. It is a term known around the world, but we have been doing it already for many years, almost two decades. We were trying to frame the work that we have been doing, like community forestry, community livelihoods, culture, conservation, all this work, all these initiatives into this “peace” entity. It was needed for this initiative to be recognized in the peace process as well, because since 2012, the government was working on a peace negotiation, but that kind of peace negotiation was just the leader trying to speak at the table, that’s it. Not like a reality on the ground. Sometimes when people talk about peace, peace meetings, people are still struggling on the ground, a military operation is still happening, and people have to run and leave their homes. So, we think that the whole concept of a peace process in Burma needed to reflect the reality on the ground. That’s why we came up with this, the idea of putting peace into this local initiative. And then trying to frame it, this is a model that we want because we have been talking about self-determination to govern ourselves, to decentralize natural resource governance, to manage our forests. This peace approach to nature conservation is not just about nature, but also culture and our belief system.

Clint Carroll

To me, this highlights some of the stark differences in the everyday reality of militarization on the land, but it also highlights the common themes that I’m hearing from all our panelists of peace and reconciliation starting with the land.

[There is then a question about how the language of decolonization comes into the work of students in the planning school. Maggie then spoke from a planning perspective on the challenges of changing those language issues].

Maggie Low

I can speak of name changes in a Canadian context. Changing a name that is ingrained, steeped in settler colonialism—our streets, our buildings, our institutions are all named after colonizers. Changing those names is difficult, but it is happening in Canada in various ways. An example is - there’s a very popular main street in Toronto, Ontario called Dundas Street, which is a street that I lived on for 2 years actually. There is now public pressure to change the name of that street because Dundas was not a great person and an early colonist. So it’s been a tricky and hot topic in Canada for sure.

On the question in the chat, “could you please consider commenting on your students experience of using Indigenous autoethnography for conservation as a way to contribute to decolonization?” I can say that I have a student right now who is using that method in her research. They’re about to conduct field work, working with the community. And I know that it’s been vital to her research methodology. She has really wanted to have that as part of her research because it situates her own Indigenous identity in the work. And I have to say, I come across in academia, articles or beautiful chapters that are written or co-written with Indigenous folks, there’s an Indigenous author and non-Indigenous author and when

the article is introduced, it begins with an introduction of the authors and where they are coming from and where they situate themselves. I find that to be such an embodiment of a practice that we could all learn from. It is almost like embodying a decolonial practice. I feel like that's a contribution broadly that that can be made. It would be difficult. I'm not sure specifically to conservation, but in general, I think to academia in general, I love seeing that.

Mara Goldman

Great, thank you so much for that. There was somebody who asked a question about the possibility for conservation to sort of do some good by being able to help Indigenous communities with, for instance, self-determination, land back, land control, and access to resources, particularly in countries with strong nation states that are subverting those rights. This question takes us back to the point of recognizing different versions of colonization. And I think in some ways, again, the work that the group that Edward works with in Tanzania, and that John works with in Burma, working to try and fight the power of the contemporary nation state to gain land rights through conservation, well it's sort of using one colonial tool to fight another.

Conclusion

What would it mean for us—as communities of scholars and activists—to take seriously the sort of conversations reported on here? To use these conversations to move forward in reframing conservation, to open up possibilities for re-naming conservation and all that that would entail? Naming matters. Words matter. But neither conservation nor decolonization are metaphors, so naming is just the beginning. Decolonization itself means different things in different contexts and is often a slow iterative process of undoing, relearning, redoing, renaming, and reclaiming. As such, we resist the temptation to offer a single definitive definition of decolonized conservation as it would risk foreclosing the conversation, the dialogue. Yet, despite vastly different geo-political, cultural, and ecological settings, that decolonizing conservation entails, there are some core tenants—such as self-determination, rebuilding relations and re-invigorating the language of those relations. This sometimes means Land Back, it sometimes means Indigenous and local communities regaining full control. But it also means changing the ways conservation organizations work, and sometimes negotiating small changes from within. It is a continuum – From Land Back, to notions of responsibility and shared governance.

Ultimately, it means changing how we use and think about the word conservation and challenging the historic model that it upholds. The conversation reported here shows promise in sharing experiences, visions, and challenges across locations. It also highlights the need to decolonize the very process of talking and planning about the process—by working across colonial boundaries of geography, epistemology, language, and procedure—by including academic and non-academic voices, Indigenous and settler. By questioning the very words we use and how we use them. It means recognizing language itself as part of a revitalization process. As part of self-determination. As part of recognizing connection to the land and rebuilding and sustaining those connections. As Albert Marshall, a renowned Mikmaq Elder who helped popularize the concept of 'two-eyed seeing'

(Etuaptmuk) points out, knowledge is not a noun in his language, it is a verb. That means that you do not get to pick it up and take it and learn it and slot it into the standard model of conservation. It means we learn from each other as we build relations. It means we need to continue to have these sorts of conversations to bring the strength of multiple knowledge systems to address the challenging problems we face. Albert Marshall reminds us that once we do that, we have the responsibility to act. Language is not easily translated, nor is it neutral or passive. This reflects a theme of the panel, that generally speaking, Indigenous people working on the ground on conservation issues are often less concerned with words than with actions. Yet by highlighting that Indigenous languages are mostly an active verb-based way of looking at the world, it becomes not just about naming, but about describing what things do and can do. So, we can talk about decolonization, but when you put it into practice, what does that look like? Thinking about decolonization as a process and then highlighting the continuum of that process and what it looks like in different locations is really important. What happens if we start to think about decolonization as a process rather than an end-point? Decolonizing. Which includes small and big milestones, like changes in laws and language that gain traction and make a difference. Like the story Edward told about corridors. Wildlife corridors are a legal structure in Tanzania where the government can claim an area and kick people off and say, it's for wildlife conservation and people cannot live in it. And people do not realize that when they throw the word around. Whereas if you say, no, we are not going to use that word. We are going to find a word that describes what's really happening in that place and support that sort of space and the relations within it—like grazing areas for wildlife *and* livestock. That becomes a political action to say, no, this is what we are calling it. And realizing that language that does have power. Power that can be resisted and refracted. This is what renaming 'land use planning' to 'land relations planning' is also all about.

There are so many examples of resisting, refracting, reframing that we think are part of the conversation, part of the continuum of decolonizing and re-making conservation. From Indigenous re-naming and re-framing of conservation corridors as community-controlled wildlife-livestock grazing pathways, to Indigenous titles to land, to Indigenous protected areas, and Indigenous models for healthy land management. It is a long journey. And it includes the work of scholars, academics, practitioners, and activists, particularly among the non-indigenous, to do the work of decolonizing our minds, and assist students to do the same, so we can see and support these various efforts and work toward better, more ecologically sound, and socially just futures. This article points to the importance of dialogue in that process. We must, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and practitioners, take the opportunity to enter into dialogue with one another and build a collaborative understanding of all the ways conservation might be decolonized. We can learn together and build better conservation practice together. As John says, decolonization is not just freedom from imposition but freedom to learn new ways.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The patients/participants [legal guardian/next of kin] provided written informed consent to participate in this study. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements.

Author contributions

SB: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. CC: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. MG: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ML: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. EL: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. RR: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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