

## **Indigenizing Sustainabilities, Sustaining Indigeneities: Decolonization, Sustainability, and Education**

Tim Frandy  
Western Kentucky University  
tim.frandy@wku.edu

**Abstract:** Decolonization is a multifaceted and complex process, involving a wide range of concepts, including the restoration of Indigenous lands to Indigenous control, improved recognition of tribal sovereignty, strengthening of Indigenous worldviews and knowledge traditions, cultivating cultural responsiveness in education and health care, aligning research methods with Indigenous cultural priorities and values, and more.

This special issue of the *Journal of Sustainability Education* on the topic of Decolonization and Sustainability Education reflects many of these diverse projects. The issue is inclusive of Indigenous and allied voices, of academic and Indigenous discourses, of large-scale political actions and—what Jeff Corntassel calls—“everyday acts of resurgence.” The selections are arranged in ways that center Indigenous voices and the work on the ground that reinforces Indigenous sustainabilities and Indigenous-centered pedagogies.

**Keywords:** Decolonization, Sustainability Education, Indigenous Cultures, Indigenous Sustainabilities

*Mas amas diehtá maid oarri borrá?*

[How can a stranger know what a squirrel eats?]

*Gal vuoigŋa voigŋa dovdá.*

[Kindred spirits recognize each other.]

*In leat mun jur du gámanjunnesuoidni.*

[I am not the grass in your boots.]

—*Sámi Proverbs*

Today, as I write this on a chilly April morning in Kentucky, three well known Sámi activists (Beaska Niillas, Niillas Holmberg, & Aslak Heika Hætta Bjørn Fovssen) blocked a backcountry road in Norway with a lávvu (a tipi-like tent used by reindeer herders) in protest of the development of Europe's largest "wind park." Constructed on Sámi lands to power Nordic infrastructure, such projects are known to destabilize crucial habitats, disrupt reindeer migration routes, bring settlers and heavy industry into Sámi territories, and destroy Sámi sacred and historic sites. With another massive wind-park project planned in Sweden, a proposed new arctic rail-line in Finland, and increasingly harsh restrictions on traditional fishing on the Deatnu River, in recent years colonization has found favor amongst settler populations whilst wearing a green mask. What is presented as "green salvation" too often is in effect "green colonialism." Perhaps this should be of little surprise, since sustainability discourses have historically evolved within the context of colonial and capitalist states, and they are often complicit—if not overly weaponized—in the advancement of colonial agendas.

This world is one my family has long known. I grew up as a settler on Anishinaabe lands in northern Wisconsin, but I was raised with a strong sense of identity that connected me to my mixed Finnish and Sámi roots. Such an identity is complex for many of us in the Sámi American community, caught somewhere between settler and Indigenous, "real" Sámi and Sámi descendent, and the positives and negatives of non-recognition by outsiders (Jensen, forthcoming). Although Sámi American identity can take shape in many ways, for me at least, it has always come down to the environmental worldview and our ways of being in the world that I inherited from my father and his family that profoundly shaped who I am today. Our lives are still structured and shaped by the seasons and the weather, by maple runs and fish spawns, by wild berries and late frosts, by deer activity and bird migrations, by the depth of our relationship to snow and ice (which in the Sámi languages is known by hundreds of words), by the places we understand as important and sacred. The forest and waters are how we think, how we communicate, and who we are, in ways too profound and complex to fully elucidate here.

Most outsiders do not understand our values, our metaphors, our communication patterns, or senses of time, place, and self. And many refuse to believe us when we try to articulate these differences. With all due respect for the many celebrated Euro-American naturalists, our visions of sustaining our ways of life at best only partially overlap with theirs. When members of a colonial elite seek to sustain their own ways of life, they tend to devalue the Indigenous lifeways, traditional economies, environmental management strategies, and systems of governance. When we privilege the sustaining of colonial cultures, we destabilize Indigenous patterns of

sustainability that have proven effective in maintaining Indigenous lifeways for millennia (Frandy & Cederström 2017, 224).

Although today this conversation might involve wind power or exogenous regulation of Indigenous fisheries, this is the same paternalistic discourse that formerly brought us hydroelectric dams, boarding schools, and forced assimilation to Western agricultural practices. My own Kemi Sámi ancestors, for instance, endured an economic and societal collapse following the encroachment of Finnish settlers from Savo (also my ancestors) in the 1700s. This encroachment led to the disappearance of the wild reindeer herds, upon which the community relied. For years, this collapse was attributed without evidence to “overhunting,” under the socially Darwinistic auspices that our traditional economic models were relics of the past and doomed to fail. Only in recent years has this assumption finally been called into question by scholars (Kent 2014, 30). There are certainly no shortage of stories in the world of abundant game disappearing shortly after settlers arrive and begin changing and managing the land in their own ways.

External regulation of traditional Indigenous land-use activities is a massive threat to the cultural and economic sustainability of Indigenous peoples. Sámi scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (2011) writes:

State laws often restrict subsistence activities—even when claiming to protect them—and usually conflict with customary laws accompanying subsistence.... The wildlife and game regulations under the guise of conservation, the establishment of parks, seasonal hunting closures, and moratoriums by the government imposed severe limitations on subsistence economies, radically altering the social and economic organization of indigenous societies. (223)

They tell us our ways of life cannot endure, when it is they who have salted their own earth and poisoned their own waters. They tell us they must claim control over Indigenous resources, because we must be saved from ourselves. They sometimes even speak with conviction and good intentions in their hearts, blind to their own ethnocentrism. How could they know otherwise, since most educational institutions privilege their own cultural lens and their own inherited vision of what sustainability means? But there are other ways.

Sustainability cannot exist outside cultural frameworks, and outside the disparities of power endemic to our world. Sustaining a resource requires making value-laden choices that are rooted in our own cultural experiences. We are not simply sustaining a forest; we are sustaining our relationships to the forest. And these relationships vary greatly across cultures. If one manages a forest to sustain pulpwood and timber, it will result in a different forest than if one manages it for medicines and birchbark. The results of these different management strategies are tangible. Tribally-managed forests, for instance, have significantly more biodiversity and resiliency than nearby state and federally run forests (Waller & Reo 2018; Loew 2013, 28-30). Such outcomes are not from disuse (an ideal emerging from the Western wilderness myth), but rather are created in part through cultural patterns of use, and through traditional systems that regulate use, sometimes called customary law.

Ingenious systems of environmental and economic protections exist in Indigenous cultures around the world, representing perhaps the most sophisticated and effective systems of sustainability on the planet. Indigenous cultures have long used concepts like off-seasons, sanctuary areas, the resting of forests or aquatic systems for recovery, and critical habitat protections (like shoreline protections and taboos against walking in rivers). Systems of wealth redistribution minimize the personal profitability of over-harvesting. Many peoples regard over-harvesting itself as taboo, which can lead to sickness or misfortune. Seven-generation models of thinking and the stigmatization of “making one’s mark on the world” help protect resources, and ceremonies help regenerate that which was harvested. Although Indigenous sustainabilities are not perfect systems, and Indigenous peoples also have histories of unsustainable practice and resource disputes, their many successes both past and present speak for themselves. The absence of Indigenous sustainabilities in formal policy is reflective of power disparities and the ethnocentric nature of sustainability discourse, and not of their efficacy to sustain our contemporary world. Unless we make moves to decolonize sustainability practice, we are more deeply entrenching ourselves in perpetuating the instabilities and injustices of a colonial world.

Decolonization is a multifaceted and complex process, involving a wide range of concepts, including the restoration of Indigenous lands to Indigenous control, improved recognition of tribal sovereignty, strengthening of Indigenous worldviews and knowledge traditions, cultivating cultural responsiveness in education and health care, aligning research methods with Indigenous cultural priorities and values, and more. In her discussion of decolonizing Pacific studies, Konai Helu Thaman writes:

For me, decolonizing Pacific studies is important because (1) it is about acknowledging and recognizing the dominance of western philosophy, content, and pedagogy in the lives and the education of Pacific peoples; (2) it is about valuing alternative ways of thinking about our world, particularly those rooted in the indigenous cultures of Oceanic peoples; and (3) it is about developing a new philosophy of education that is culturally inclusive and gender sensitive. (2003, 3)

Linda Tuhiwai Smith has written on the many “projects” that decolonizing methodologies involve (2012). Decolonizing sustainability education is similarly inclusive of multiple projects: increasing lands under Indigenous control and management; improving the reach of Indigenous treaty rights and tribal sovereignty; revitalizing Indigenous cultural practice; critiquing colonial-capitalist concepts of sustainability and education; understanding ethnocentrism and racism in STEM fields and research methodologies; creating space for Indigenous knowledge production and cultural worldview in historically Western institutions, or within new institutions of Indigenous design; validating Indigenous knowledge systems; and dismantling colonial systems. Though decolonization must be led by Indigenous peoples, settlers too have important roles to play in these efforts. Waziyatawin reminds us that “decolonization is a process for both the colonizer and the colonized” (2011).

This special issue of the *Journal of Sustainability Education* on the topic of Decolonization and Sustainability Education reflects many of these diverse projects. The issue is inclusive of Indigenous and allied voices, of academic and Indigenous discourses, of large-scale political actions and—what Jeff Corntassel calls—“everyday acts of resurgence.” The selections are

arranged in ways that center Indigenous voices and the work on the ground that reinforces Indigenous sustainabilities and Indigenous-centered pedagogies. And collectively, these essays connect to the three proverbs that serve as an epigraph to this text, speaking to the non-understanding of outsiders, the kinship that exists across diverse Indigenous cultures, and the resilience of Indigenous peoples today.

The earliest essays in this issue focus on Indigenous and allied methods of community engagement. Michelle M. Jacob (Yakama) and Hobie Blackhorn's (Northern Cheyenne) "Building an Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge Initiative at a Research University: Decolonization Notes from the Field" looks at an Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK) initiative of their team's own design at the University of Oregon. Detailing the process and challenges of forming a broad collaborative research coalition within a Western institution, Jacob and Blackhorn discuss how such initiatives must proceed with "care, respect, reciprocity, and in support of Indigenous self-determination." As related collaborative and Indigenous-centered research projects blossom in university settings, the ITEK initiative serves as a valuable model to replicate and advance this work in other regional centers.

In "Ancient Wisdom, Modern Times: Decolonizing Education Paradigms in a Southwestern Tribal Community," Carrie Calisay Cannon (Kiowa) details the Hualapai Ethnobotany Youth Project, a holistic cultural maintenance project designed through an ethnobotanical lens. The project revitalizes language, traditional knowledge, and intergenerational paradigms through the harvesting and use of traditional foods and plants. As Cannon notes, "Transferring ethnobotanical knowledge takes time." Finding best practices to cultivate intergenerational models of traditional knowledge transmission is important to keep this knowledge alive, in use, and in growth.

Because settler students also have roles to play in decolonization, creating pedagogies that center Indigenous perspectives without romanticization remains important in creating allies. Thomas A. DuBois' "Seeing Snow: A Siftr Challenge Aimed at Transforming Student Perceptions of the Winter Environment and Indigenous Traditional Knowledge" details his use of an educational technology, Siftr, to engage students in the use of Sámi snow and ice terminology. They learn to understand the practical value of the Sámi snow and ice lexicon in describing and understanding northern environments, and in doing so better understand their own positionalities and cultural upbringings in a broader world.

B. Marcus Cederström, Tim Frandy, and Colin Gioia Connors, in their contribution "Indigenous Sustainabilities: Decolonization, Education, and Collaboration at the Ojibwe Winter Games," discuss a multi-year partnership between university folklorists and the Waaswaaganing (Lac du Flambeau) Anishinaabe to revitalize traditional wintertime competitions, and lay out a vision for effective collaboration and allyships with non-Indigenous partners. The piece explores how sustainability education is subject to culturally relative constructions of both sustainability and education, and how revitalization movements plant epistemological and ontological seeds in young people that are essential to strengthening Indigenous knowledge production in years to come.

The second subset of feature essays explore decolonization in terms of dismantling the colonial project. Climate change poses great challenges to issues of basic human security, as we enter a new and unprecedented era of climate refugees. In “Learning Sustainable Cultural Safety in a Crowded, Warming World,” Alexander K. Lautensach and Sabina W. Lautensach critique the monolithic and universal solutions that rely on growth and techno-optimism, and call for a “transition curriculum” that is more inclusive of the social, cultural and moral dimensions of sustainability.

Angela Barthes’ “The Hidden Curriculum of Sustainable Development: The Case of Curriculum Analysis in France” explores how curriculum transmits Western ethnocentric cultural values, relationships with knowledge, and colonial ideologies and logics. The dominant model of sustainability education, she concludes, “results in sustainable development being equated to a model of economic growth based on the Western one.” Andrew Bernier, in his contribution “How Matching Systems Thinking with Critical Pedagogy May Help Resist the Industrialization of Sustainability Education,” advances similar critiques of Western pedagogical models. Bernier looks at linear models for curriculum design and their relationships with industrial-style education and colonial-capitalism, positing that new models of systems curricula could assist in dismantling colonial models of education.

Linda Pope’s essay “Community-Based Learning: The Best Tool Ever Is Used by College Students to Build Tiny Houses for the Homeless” details a community-based tiny-house project in Portland designed to address homelessness. As Pope outlines, these tiny-house projects face barriers in zoning, regulations, and cultural perceptions over what places of residence should be. Such projects can offer practical housing solutions for low-income communities, but their destigmatization and use also resists the unsustainable excesses of overconsumption. Representing the *Journal of Sustainability Education*’s first ever bilingual piece, Raúl Calixto Flores’ “Una Experiencia en Educación Ambiental con Estudiantes Universitarios” [“An Experience in Environmental Education with University Students”] explores the pedagogies of sustainability education in a Mexican university. While balancing the transmission of practical skills with creative thinking, such programs are essential to deal with the problems of globalization and neoliberalism in Mexico.

In the first of our issue’s reflection essays, Paulette Moore (Mohawk) addresses her time at Standing Rock in “Gratitude as Ceremony: A Practical Guide to Decolonization.” Embracing Mohawk discourses to conceptualize Standing Rock from a Mohawk perspective, Moore looks at human connection and disconnection to other human- and non-human persons. She offers the Mohawk Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen, a ceremonial address to maintain our networks of relationalities, as an alternative to the disconnect present in contemporary colonial economic and ecological practice. “Making our minds one” serves as a practical paradigm for bringing sustainable and reciprocal relationships into the world.

Building upon the idea that sustainability connects to reciprocity, Eleva Potter and Jerry Jondreau’s (Keweenaw Bay Ojibwe) “The True Story of Place: Injecting Indigenous Knowledge into an Environmental Studies Course” details the integration of Ojibwe teachings and concepts of sustainability into Conserve School—an environmentally-focused school in northern

Wisconsin. Participating in a ceremony before tapping maple trees deeply impacted how students understood both Ojibwe culture and their own sense of sustainable practice in today's world.

Detailing the shift from cultural programming towards decolonizing pedagogies, Carol Ann Amour, Anthony Brazouski, Jason Dropik (Bad River Ojibwe), Jacob Jones, and Mark Powless' (Oneida) "Our Ways: Culture as the Heart of the Indian Community School" taps into the innovative curricula at the Indian Community School of Milwaukee and its role in advancing cultural sustainability. This holistic and integrated learning environment allows for the restoration of traditional pedagogical structures (learning from elders, pedagogies of paying attention, independent pacing, introspection, teaching history "backwards") that are difficult to support in Western educational contexts. The immersive cultural environment bears great promise in restoring Indigenous sustainabilities for future generations of students.

Finally, our issue concludes with three poems by Sámi American Ron Riecki. The poems tie together many of this issue's themes: Indigenous identity and relationality, erasure of our ways of being, creating a pedagogy of stillness and silence, and recognizing the resilience of our ways in an imperiled world. Riecki writes, "we sit silently / waiting / to see if he will listen / to the trees / that speak / when you are wise enough to be still." The world is talking to us, telling us exactly what we need to do to live sustainably with it. Can you not hear it? Try to quiet yourself and listen...

## Bibliography

- Cederström, B. Marcus and Tim Frandy. 2017. "Sustainable Power: Decolonizing Colonial Sustainabilities through Anishinaabe Birchbark Canoe Building." With. In *Going Beyond —Perceptions of Sustainability in Heritage Studies No. 2*. Ed. Marie-Theres Albert. Berlin: Springer: 217-230.
- Jensen, Ellen Marie. Forthcoming. *Diasporic Indigeneity and Storytelling Across Media: A Case Study of Early 20th Century Sámi Immigrant Women*. Dissertation.
- Kent, Neil. 2014. *The Sámi Peoples of the North: A Social and Cultural History*. London, Hurst.
- Kuokkanen, Rauna. 2011. "Indigenous Economies, Theories of Subsistence, and Women: Exploring the Social Economy Model for Indigenous Governance." *American Indian Quarterly* 35.2: 215-240.
- Loew, Patty. 2013. *Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and Renewal*. 2nd Ed. Wisconsin Historical Society Press.
- Thaman, Konai Helu. 2003. "Decolonizing Pacific Studies: Indigenous Perspectives, Knowledge, and Wisdom in Higher Education." *The Contemporary Pacific* 15.1: 1-17.

Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. London: Zed Books.

Waller, Donald M. & Nicholas J. Reo. 2018. "First Stewards: Ecological Outcomes of Forest and Wildlife Stewardship by Indigenous Peoples of Wisconsin, USA." *Ecology and Society* 23.1: 45.

Waziyatawin (Angela Wilson). 2011. "Understanding Colonizer Status." Blog post. September 6. <https://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/2011/09/06/understanding-colonizer-status/>