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# PEACE SCIENCE DIGEST

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A PROJECT OF THE WAR PREVENTION INITIATIVE

SPECIAL ISSUE

# DECOLONIAL AND INDIGENOUS APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING



Our vision is a world beyond war where humanity is united and a global system of peace with justice prevails for current and future generations.

Our mission is to transform the global peace and security paradigm to one that is built around viable alternatives to war and all forms of political violence. To achieve this we research, advocate for and advance knowledge on practices that demonstrate the effectiveness of nonviolence and challenge militarism.

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SPECIAL ISSUE

# DECOLONIAL AND INDIGENOUS APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING ASSOCIATION

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# EDITORIAL LETTERS

Dear Readers,

Environmental peacebuilding emerged from the convergence of multiple fields—like political science, environmental science, peace and conflict studies, and ecology—concerned with how the natural environment shapes conditions for peace and conflict. In an era of rapidly changing environmental conditions due to climate change, it is critically important that peacebuilders better understand how environmental realities could open new opportunities for—or negatively influence—peaceful outcomes in conflict-affected contexts. At the same time, environmental scientists must also better understand the principles and strategies of peacebuilding so that their work both avoids reinforcing violence and actively contributes to peace. According to a foundational article in the field, “*environmental peacebuilding comprises the multiple approaches and pathways by which the management of environmental issues is integrated in and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery.*”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the field aims to bring together experts from multiple disciplines with the shared purpose of managing the natural environment in a way that helps build peace.

The War Prevention Initiative has a keen interest in the study and practice of environmental peacebuilding, especially as climate change poses one of the greatest existential threats to planetary life. A foreign policy and national security policy focused on addressing the greatest actual human security threats would center efforts to mitigate climate change, pursue environmental justice, and meaningfully contribute to peacebuilding worldwide. Current U.S. foreign and security policy, by contrast, continues to rely heavily on the U.S. military, which itself contributes massive carbon emissions to the atmosphere while also harming ecosystems (not to mention human life) through weapons testing, the operation of its military bases, and, of course, war-fighting. Applying an environmental lens to questions of peace and security, therefore, adds a new layer to criticism of the primacy of military solutions in U.S. foreign and security policy by shining a spotlight on both the military’s contributions to climate change and environmental destruction and its inability to address the most critical of security issues.

If we are to conceive of a new security paradigm—one that rejects military solutions and asserts that security is achieved by addressing human needs and preserving planetary life—then we should look at alternatives to the Western/European systems of governance that have structured the global order over the past several centuries. This special issue—focused on decolonial and Indigenous approaches to environmental peacebuilding—explores Indigenous (and bottom-up) perspectives on the environment, peace, and conflict in a variety of contexts. In [Exploring Bottom-Up Environmental Peacebuilding in Timor-Leste](#), the local customary dispute resolution practice of *Tara bandu* is examined as a system to manage natural resources and address communal or inter-personal violence. In [Decolonial Environmental Peacebuilding in Colombia](#), Indigenous knowledge and practices related to the coca leaf, widely known as the primary ingredient in cocaine and associated with illicit markets and violence, reveal opportunities for environmental peacebuilding. In [Genuine Security as an Alternative to U.S. Militarization of Oceania](#), the concept of genuine security is discussed as an alternative approach to state-centric security by emphasizing collective well-being, environmental protection, and self-determination of the Indigenous peoples of Oceania.

Linked to a focus on decolonial and Indigenous peacebuilding is a recognition of how power relations influence outcomes for the environment, peace, and conflict. Power analysis is urgently needed in environmental peacebuilding to better understand dynamics that impede sustainable peace.<sup>2</sup> In [Assessing Transitional Justice as a Response to Conservation Violence against Indigenous Peoples](#), conservation violence against Indigenous peoples is understood as a proper concern of transitional justice, as it entails “large-scale past abuses,” and the present moment constitutes a period of transition towards greater recognition of Indigenous rights in relation to environmental protection. In [Water Cooperation as “Imperfect Peace” amid Conflict and Insecurity](#), a comprehensive review of water agreements in the Euphrates-Tigris river basin reveals the viability of environmental peacebuilding even in conditions of ongoing armed conflict and among multiple state and non-state actors—but also raises questions about the operation of environmental cooperation in contexts defined by severe inequality.

Our intention is that this special issue inspire new thought, conversations, and practices in environmental peacebuilding responsive to an awareness of power dynamics and invigorated by Indigenous knowledge and experience. We are extremely grateful for our friends at the Environmental Peacebuilding Association for collaborating with us on this special issue.

*Peace Science Digest* Editorial Team  
Kelsey, Molly, Patrick, and Adam

1. Ide, T., Bruch, C., Carius, A., Conca, K., Dabelko, G. D., Matthew, R., & Weinthal, E. (2021) The past and future(s) of environmental peacebuilding. *International Affairs*, 91(1). doi: 10.1093/ia/iiaa177

2. Davis, K., Peters, L. E. R., Van Den Hoek, J., & Conca, K. (2023). Power in environmental peacebuilding. *World Development Sustainability*, 3. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2772655X23000654>

Dear Readers,

Environmental peacebuilding is a rapidly emerging field of research and practice that seeks to understand how the environment—including natural resources, climate change, and ecosystem services—can both drive conflict and foster peace, and then inform policies and action to make environment a cause of peace rather than conflict. It provides an overarching framework that weaves together many threads of knowledge and action—from the resource curse, water wars, and climate security to conflict resources and the targeting of the environment to cooperation and post-conflict recovery. While we have developed an understanding of how the environment can drive conflict, much less is known about the effectiveness of potential solutions. Environmental peacebuilding seeks to identify potential solutions, test them, and scale them up.

Environmental peacebuilding is not only a question of peace, conflict, environment, development, or governance—it is all of the above. The field encompasses these disciplines and perspectives to reveal the multi-layered, complex, and dynamic interactions between the environment and peace amidst conflict in human societies. That we live in an era of climate change underscores the urgency of this work. We must transition away from fossil fuels yet be fully aware of the possible disruptions, instability, and conflict that this transition may cause. Moreover, this transition must be pursued justly and equitably to avoid reinforcing structural inequalities that foster conflict.

In April 2024, the Environmental Peacebuilding Association celebrated its six-year anniversary. Launched on Earth Day 2018, the Association brings together researchers, practitioners, and decision-makers working across a range of disciplines to deepen our collective understanding of managing the environment in conflict-affected contexts. We have expanded rapidly since our inception with almost 500 members from 80 countries around the world. With the Association, the biennial International Conference on Environmental Peacebuilding, and a new journal on *Environment and Security* (launched in 2023), there is now the necessary institutional infrastructure to foster the maturation of environmental peacebuilding as a field.

From the beginning, dialogue has been central to environmental peacebuilding: dialogue between practitioners, researchers, and decisionmakers; dialogue across a range of disciplines; dialogue across generations; and dialogues with affected communities. Diverse voices and perspectives are crucial to the relevance, equity, and effectiveness of environmental peacebuilding. Diverse voices are necessary to understand what justice looks like in the context of environmental peacebuilding.

The Association is committed to nurturing a diverse and inclusive practice—and embracing the tensions and contradictions that work entails. As the field grows, it cannot reinforce old systems and practices that value the perspectives or belief systems of the powerful over everyone else. Inclusivity in environmental peacebuilding is both procedural (empowering diverse parties to engage and have a voice) and substantive (ensuring that the outcomes are equitable). The Environmental Peacebuilding Association is committed to nurturing the values of diversity and inclusion in all that we do.

Indigenous voices are critically important in environmental peacebuilding. As this special issue reveals, Indigenous communities across the world are often neglected and relegated to the margins of decision-making on environmental issues. Yet, Indigenous communities have immense knowledge of the natural environment and peacebuilding practices that, when supported and treated with respect, can strengthen environmental peacebuilding in many ways, known and as yet unknown. This special issue lays the foundation for understanding decolonial and Indigenous approaches to environmental peacebuilding and can serve as a resource to deepen understanding of these issues.

Carl Bruch  
 Founding President, Environmental Peacebuilding Association

# EXPLORING BOTTOM-UP ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING IN TIMOR-LESTE

Citation: Ide, T., Palmer, L. R., & Barnett, J. (2021). Environmental peacebuilding from below: Customary approaches in Timor-Leste. *International Affairs*, 97(1), 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa059>

## TALKING POINTS

- Local or bottom-up environmental peacebuilding practices gain relatively little attention in environmental peacebuilding discourse despite the “local turn” in peacebuilding.

In the case of Timor-Leste:

- The local customary dispute resolution practice of *Tara bandu*—practiced throughout Timor-Leste to manage natural resources and address communal or interpersonal violence—is an example of successful, bottom-up environmental peacebuilding,
- “*Tara bandu* aims to regulate social interactions and to prevent conflict, hence contributing to peacebuilding in a setting where local cleavages might escalate, while simultaneously managing natural resources.”
- *Tara bandu* is a highly spiritual and cultural practice, which makes it difficult for state and international stakeholders to become involved without undermining “the process’s legitimacy and efficacy.”

## KEY INSIGHT FOR INFORMING PRACTICE

The focus on local peacebuilding among international peacebuilders has revealed several important considerations for emerging knowledge and practice in environmental peacebuilding—particularly the need to contend with local and national politics, especially those that perpetuate or (re)produce power imbalances between local, state, and international stakeholders.



PHOTO CREDIT: ADOBE STOCK

## SUMMARY

Timor-Leste gained independence in 2002, following several decades of brutal control by Indonesia characterized by human rights violations, forced displacement, and the destruction of agricultural land. Timor-Leste's new government was confronted with considerable tension over land and property rights, complicated by multiple and overlapping claims from differing land tenure systems. To address competing claims to land and natural resources, as well as other types of social and interpersonal conflict, many local communities around the country returned to a customary practice for dispute resolution referred to as *tara bandu*.

Tobias Ide, Lisa R. Palmer, and Jon Barnett examine *tara bandu* as a local environmental peacebuilding practice. They note that emerging scholarship on environmental peacebuilding is largely focused on cases with "heavy involvement of external, usually international actors" with relatively few bottom-up environmental peacebuilding cases. The aim of their research is to "rectify...imbalances in knowledge by contributing new evidence about local environmental peacebuilding." Their analysis engages the debate between **liberal peacebuilding** and the "**local turn**" in peacebuilding by demonstrating that *tara bandu* is "a form of successful environmental peacebuilding" but that the involvement of state and international stakeholders "causes detachment from local contexts [undermining] the process's legitimacy and efficacy." Evidence is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Timor-Leste between 2006 and 2018.

**Liberal peacebuilding:** “Efforts in conflict-affected societies to support the creation of liberal institutions—especially liberal democratic governments and market-oriented economic systems—which are assumed to limit the chances of relapse into armed conflict. The liberal peacebuilding project has been criticized for importing liberal institutions and implementing them in a top-down fashion without adequate attention to local context, privileging “international”/Western expertise over local expertise, and reinstating colonial relations between the “developed” and “developing” world.”

Peace Science Digest. (2019). The importance of local/international relationship-building to peacebuilding in Bougainville and Sierra Leone. Retrieved January 25, 2024, from <https://warpreventioninitiative.org/peace-science-digest/the-important-of-local-international-relationship-building-to-peacebuilding-in-bougainville-and-sierra-leone/>

**“Local turn” in peacebuilding (or, local peacebuilding):**

Peacebuilding efforts led by local actors. These efforts “center[] local expertise and solutions” and “shift[] resources, economic or otherwise, to local agents of constructive change.”

Peace Science Digest. (2020). Special issue: Local, national, and international peacebuilding. Retrieved January 25, 2024, from <https://warpreventioninitiative.org/peace-science-digest/special-issue-local-national-and-international-peacebuilding/>



*Tara bandu* is a highly localized set of rituals and negotiations practiced at the village or sub-village level over the course of several days. Public ceremonies are a critical part of the practice wherein “a pre-agreed set of prohibitions are announced to the local community in the presence of witnesses.” Witnesses are both “named spirits called...from the ancestral realm, and significant guests from outside the community.” Negotiations take place between local leaders and the ancestral/spiritual realm that produce “[posts] hung (*tara*) with symbols, usually skulls of scarified animals and forest foliage along with ‘banned’ items representing the prohibitions (*bandu*) now in place.” The integration of the ancestral realm in this practice garners legitimacy from the wider community, and it is believed that those who break the rules “suffer supernatural punishment.” Additionally, the negotiations include an agreed set of punishments for rule violators, including fines, with a monitoring group to ensure compliance. Community members generally prefer a *tara bandu* practice over resolving conflict with the police or national judicial system, further increasing the incentive to comply.

Both state and local leaders agree that the spiritual and communal aspects of *tara bandu* result in effective conflict resolution. *Tara bandu* can be employed for a variety of reasons, but it is often used to resolve disputes over shared natural resources—for example, to protect water sources or forested areas, manage grazing or agricultural land, or settle competing claims over land. It is also used to address instances of communal, sexual, or domestic violence. As such, “*tara bandu* aims to regulate social interactions and to prevent conflict, hence contributing to peacebuilding in a setting where local cleavages might escalate, while simultaneously managing natural resources.”

Yet, because *tara bandu* is a highly spiritual and cultural practice, it is difficult for outsiders to work with. “Frictions can arise when outside agencies seek to engage with *tara bandu* for well-intentioned instrumental purposes and fail to appreciate the effect of their practices on the deeper cosmological,

sociological and temporal dimensions.” For example, NGOs have offered financial or in-kind support for *tara bandu* but fail to follow through past the initial ceremonial phase, leading to poorly enforced prohibitions. In the Ermera region of Timor-Leste, the *tara bandu* process became formalized and bureaucratized by the state, stripping the local community of control, and limiting the flexibility of the process.

When external stakeholders co-opt *tara bandu* (even with good intentions), it ultimately undermines the practice. Support for the practice without fully appreciating its social and spiritual dimensions “is inefficient at best and undermines local customary structures at worst.” External support may also lead to the perception that local authorities are no longer in control of the process. State involvement, “might operate as a kind of symbolic politics, helping the government to claim legitimacy despite falling short of meeting its own responsibilities for managing resources.”

The authors draw several lessons for environmental peacebuilding practice from their study of *tara bandu*. First is an affirmation that bottom-up environmental peacebuilding can be successful in managing natural resources. Yet, environmental peacebuilding is often “articulated in terms of a western-style ontology of self-interest and rational choice behaviors” that fails to appreciate the importance of local customary or spiritual elements that are critical to the success of *tara bandu*. They also note that external support for local environmental peacebuilding is “frequently identified as a facilitating condition for successful environmental peacebuilding,” whereas in the case of *tara bandu* in Timor-Leste, external support can undermine and weaken the practice. These findings call on academics and practitioners in environmental peacebuilding, particularly those from Western backgrounds, to critically examine whether their projects are supporting or undermining local practices and to give space for local practices to flourish without intervention.



## INFORMING PRACTICE

This research aimed to bring forward a case study on local or bottom-up environmental peacebuilding after observing a relative lack of such case work in the broader environmental peacebuilding literature. Given the wealth of literature on local peacebuilding, this presents an opportunity to apply existing local peacebuilding knowledge to environmental peacebuilding practice. The *Peace Science Digest* published a special issue on local, national, and international peacebuilding that explored the “local turn” in peacebuilding and identified important questions for international peacebuilders engaging in local peacebuilding. One such lesson from local peacebuilding can be applied here: the need to address local and national politics, especially those that perpetuate or (re)produce power imbalances between local, state, and international stakeholders.

Who are the “locals” in local peacebuilding? Analyses in the *Digest* special issue reflected on this question given the tendency for international peacebuilders to work with local partners in capital cities but less directly with rural or otherwise harder-to-access communities. For international peacebuilders, focusing efforts on easy-to-access local actors can result in perpetuating local power

imbalances. For example, according to research by Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik summarized in the *Digest* analysis “Recognizing the Hidden Politics of Local Peacebuilding,” in the context of local peacebuilding efforts in the former Yugoslavia, the “Western ideal of ‘the local’ can be a site of exclusion where local actors have different levels of power.” Certain local actors “who can navigate the donor and other international agency world become complicit in, ‘making decisions about which (other local) marginalised voices are heard, and under what conditions,’ leading to the (re)production of power hierarchies, regulatory practices, disciplinary rules, and roles for ‘experts’ and ‘subjects.’”

Customary environmental peacebuilding practices are subject to power politics as well. Conflict could arise when conflicting dispute resolution systems, like the nationally organized judicial system versus the customary practice of *tara bandu*, result in contradictory natural resource management rules. Which set of rules do international stakeholders look to support: a nationally or locally driven solution to environmental peacebuilding? Further, to what extent have conflict histories in Timor-Leste produced marginalized communities excluded from national-level dispute resolution processes for whom the *tara bandu* practice is the most legitimate and



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trustworthy means of resolving conflict? How does the involvement of state or international stakeholders in *tara bandu* affect marginalized communities in particular?

Finally, in embracing a decolonial approach to peacebuilding, it is important to ask: how can outsiders ensure that their activities respect and cede power to local and/or Indigenous practices? The case of *tara bandu* reveals a successful practice without the involvement of external stakeholders. Further, outsider involvement in the *tara bandu* practice can derail its success. Perhaps there is considerable wisdom in allowing customary practices to exist within a larger, more complex web of national and international regulations without attempting to force multiple dispute resolution mechanisms to fit together. Providing space for local and customary practices to flourish with external intervention could be a pathway to greater peace and more effective environmental management in contexts with strong local institutions. [KC]

## ORGANIZATIONS

Peace Direct:  
<https://www.peacedirect.org>

Pact:  
<https://www.pactworld.org>

Community Conservation Research Network:  
<https://www.communityconservation.net>

## CONTINUED READING

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**KEYWORDS:**  
managing  
conflicts without  
violence, environmental  
peacebuilding,  
Timor-Leste

# DECOLONIAL ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING IN COLOMBIA

Citation: Valencia, O. E., & Courtheyn, C. (2023). Peace through coca? Decolonial peacebuilding ecologies and rural development in the Territory of Conviviality and Peace of Lerma, Colombia. *Third World Quarterly*, 44(5), 1077-1097.

## TALKING POINTS

In the context of a *campesino* community in south-western Colombia:

- The coca leaf, widely known as the primary ingredient for cocaine, is commonly associated with illicit markets and violence but can be a source of environmental peacebuilding.
- Beset by armed actors interested in profiting off the illicit drug trade, a *campesino* community in Lerma, Colombia, worked to resist violence and exploitation by reasserting ancestral/Indigenous communal and agricultural practices, including coca leaf farming.
- Women's participation and leadership in communal and agricultural projects were particularly important to countering the patriarchal culture and violent masculinities produced by armed actors and illicit markets.
- While the community sought to profit from ancestral/Indigenous coca leaf farming, this desire for profit was distinguished from the endless and exploitative drive for profit typical of corporations under capitalism due to the nature of *campesinos'* "productions, market interactions, and subjective orientation."

## KEY INSIGHT FOR INFORMING PRACTICE

Working with Indigenous communities and integrating Indigenous knowledge and values into environmental peacebuilding is of utmost importance. However, a successful relationship with Indigenous communities requires a deep acknowledgement of power structures that disadvantage Indigenous groups and an openness to embracing Indigenous worldviews.



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## SUMMARY

The coca leaf, widely known as the primary ingredient for cocaine, has been linked to illicit markets and has served as an income source for armed groups during violent conflict. Coca's association with violence overshadows its other purposes, including its nutritional and cultural value to Indigenous communities in the Andes. Óscar E. Valencia and Christopher Courtheyn examine coca as a source of environmental peacebuilding in Colombia. They look to the efforts of a rural *campesino*<sup>1</sup> community in southwestern Colombia to disavow violence and overcome exploitation through **agroecological** coca. They observe a process where the **coloniality of power** is dismantled through **decolonial peace**, “whereby the community breaks from oppressions tied to the rule of armed groups and capitalist markets” by re-asserting ancestral agricultural practices and community relationships.

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1. Authors' note: “We prefer the Spanish term ‘campesino’ to its typical English translation as ‘peasant’ to avoid the latter’s pejorative—and misguided—association with backwardness, ignorance, and anti-revolutionary reactionism...‘campesino’ is a whole cultural category in Colombia and other parts of Latin America that is not accurately conveyed by peasant or small-scale farmer.”

**Agroecology:** “the application of ecological concepts and princip[les] in farming.”

Soil Association. (n.d.). What is agroecology? Retrieved November 22, 2023, from <https://www.soilassociation.org/causes-campaigns/a-ten-year-transition-to-agroecology/what-is-agroecology/>

**Coloniality of power:** “relations of oppression and domination rooted in colonialism that persist after the end of formal imperialism.”

**Decolonial peace:** The process by which “communities delink from the coloniality of power by recovering previous practices or forging new relations of conviviality.”

This research is centered on an Indigenous *campesino* community located in Lerma, Colombia—an area also recognized as the *Territorio de Convivencia y Paz* (Territory of Conviviality and Peace). The research team conducted focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders from 2017 to 2022 to study the relationship between coca, ecology, and peace in Lerma. The authors’ observations in addition to a review of existing literature upends assumptions about the coca leaf’s association with violence and reveals opportunities for environmental peacebuilding.

Coca is a native crop to the Andes and has long been cultivated by Indigenous communities for a variety of purposes, most notably as an organic fertilizer, alongside a diverse array of fruits, vegetables, and other native plants. However, the coca leaf also contains an alkaloid that produces cocaine when chemically processed. Beginning in the early 1980s, Colombian drug traffickers entered Lerma seeking to expand cocaine production for the illicit drug trade. This led to a population influx where guerilla and paramilitary groups sought to participate in and profit from cocaine production. These events dramatically damaged the local culture and natural environment in Lerma. For instance, it created a “patriarchal culture of strong men” and produced violent masculinities where social status was determined by who could display the greatest capacity for violence—which local residents described as “he who had the best horse, biggest gun, most women, and drank the most liquor.” Community-level violence increased and armed guerrilla or paramilitary groups intervened to settle disputes. Women in the community stopped many of their daily practices (like harvesting crops) for fear of direct and sexual violence.

Ecological destruction also resulted from cocaine production in Lerma. Coca monoculture (or, the cultivation of a single crop over a particular area) overtook previous agricultural practices that emphasized polyculture (or, the cultivation of many crops over a particular area), affecting soil quality and

ecosystem diversity. Further, the materials needed to chemically process coca leaf into cocaine pollute adjacent land and water during production. Pollution and ecological destruction are further exacerbated by government efforts to combat cocaine production—aerial pesticide spraying that, ironically, did more damage to other plants than to coca.

In the late 1980s, a group of community leaders in Lerma organized as *Fuerzas Vivas* (Life Forces). This group worked to resist violence and exploitation, and to reassert ancestral practices and community self-determination. They defined their activities as “coca for life”—a phrase coined by community elder Célimo Hoyos, encapsulating the idea that coca, when “integrated within a diverse campesino economy[,] fostered dignity, empowerment and sustainability.” Rather than allow coca to be defined by its relationship with violence, these community leaders determined that “illicit crop production coupled with a lack of secondary education undermined dignified economic options for youth, eroded community identity and induced displacement.” In response, they started a community festival, prohibited alcohol and closed bars (identified as a source of violence), and opened a high school. Women’s leadership in these activities was significant in resisting oppression and dehumanization, moving “towards a more participatory and dignified community organization.”

Lerma opened an agroecology school, Arriago, in 2006, founded on the principles of “political organizing and dignity in the biosphere.” This school became the center of efforts to pursue alternative uses of coca leaf “rooted in ancestral traditions” that would help to “guarantee food sovereignty and permanence in the territory.” In partnership with SENA (the Colombian national vocational training program), farmers in Lerma learned about the alternative uses of coca leaf among community elders along with its scientific properties. Uniquely, Lerma received approval in 2016 from the Colombian National Narcotics Fund to continue growing coca and to experiment with alternative uses—particularly



its use in organic fertilizers. After years of degradation due to cocaine production, these locally made organic fertilizers helped to revitalize the land and support the community’s food sovereignty. These agricultural projects were particularly important for women who participated in and led various initiatives, thus challenging their “exclusion and subjugation” and supporting their claims to equal rights and autonomy.

Lerma’s experience with the destructive practices of cocaine production followed by a reassertion of ancestral coca agriculture rooted in harmonious social-natural relationships demonstrates how communities can “delink from the coloniality of power” and practice environmental peacebuilding. Despite previous research that associates coca with violence, this research demonstrates that “coca’s role in socioecological destruction or peacebuilding is contextually contingent.”; coca leaf can be a source of peacebuilding when it is rooted in ancestral/ Indigenous practices and used to transcend colonial power relations.





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## INFORMING PRACTICE

From a Western/colonial perspective, the problem of illicit drugs can be solved in part by eliminating the source materials—as with efforts to forcibly stop coca leaf (cocaine) or poppy (opium) production. If armed groups profit from—and if their violent activities are funded by—the illicit drug trade, then it presumably follows that eradicating these drugs would diminish the violence of such armed groups. Governments have therefore tried various methods to destroy plants like coca. A more militarized approach favors police raids, arrests, and destruction of agricultural land while a more “peaceful approach”—or at least the approach most often associated with peacebuilding—incentivizes farmers to grow alternative crops. However, alternative crop programs are often unsuccessful—not because farmers are unwilling to grow alternative crops but because the proposed alternatives are often less lucrative and subject to volatile market prices. For example, the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction found that U.S. efforts to substitute other crops for poppy failed due to “programs [that were] too short-term, failed to provide sustainable alternatives, and sometimes even contributed to poppy production.”<sup>2</sup>

2. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. (2018,

Yet the existence of Indigenous knowledge and practices related to coca challenges the assertion that the source materials for drugs are inherently linked to violence, revealing how this association is often far removed from the lived experience of local communities. The coca leaf’s historical, cultural, and nutritional value to the Andean Indigenous communities that have cultivated it for centuries highlights the plant’s importance beyond cocaine production. Rather, the coca leaf can be seen as an integral part of the local ecosystem and environmental management when Indigenous knowledge and values are centered in policy discussions. For Western researchers and practitioners in environmental peacebuilding, working with Indigenous communities and integrating Indigenous knowledge and values is of utmost importance to creating conditions both for a just peace and for environmental protection. However, a successful relationship with Indigenous communities requires a deep acknowledgement of power structures that disadvantage Indigenous groups and an openness to embracing Indigenous worldviews.

June) Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan. Retrieved January 17, 2024, from <https://www.sigar.mil/inter-active-reports/counternarcotics/index.html>



Environmental peacebuilding is an emerging field that has yet to seriously contend with power. New research by Katy Davis, Laura E.R. Peters, Jamon Van Den Hoek, and Ken Conca systematically reviews literature in environmental peacebuilding and finds that about half of the literature did not discuss power or inequity, while only a few articles focused on power (the remainder only briefly discussed power). As such, these scholars argue that the field “has not gone far enough towards challenging existing exclusionary and colonial approaches.”<sup>3</sup>

Challenging exclusionary and colonial structures that persist even within the field of environmental peacebuilding is possible, but such a task requires a high degree of cultural sensitivity.<sup>4</sup> It also requires **a willingness to design, manage, and implement**

projects from an Indigenous point of view, de-prioritizing Western/colonial standards.<sup>5</sup> There is incredible potential for environmental peacebuilding to commit to respecting and elevating the roles and perspectives of Indigenous peoples. The drivers of direct or structural violence against human populations are often the same drivers of environmental harm—thus, contending with the systems of power that continue to harm Indigenous peoples could have a multiplier effect on creating the conditions for peace and environmental protection. **[KC]**

3. Davis, K., Peters, L. E. R., Van Den Hoek, J., & Conca, K. (2023). Power in environmental peacebuilding. *World Development Sustainability*, 3, pg.2. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2772655X23000654>

4. Jessen, T., Ban, N. C., Claxton, N. X., & Darimont, C. T. (2021, November 15) Contributions of Indigenous knowledge to ecological and evolutionary understanding. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 20(2), 93–101. <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/fee.2435>

5. Ibid.

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Indigenous Climate Action:  
<https://www.indigenousclimateaction.com>

Global Witness:  
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<https://elaw.org>

**KEYWORDS:**  
demilitarizing security,  
Colombia,  
Indigenous knowledge,  
Indigenous Peoples,  
environmental  
peacebuilding

# GENUINE SECURITY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO U.S. MILITARIZATION OF OCEANIA

Citation: Na'puti, T. R., & Frain, S. C. (2023). Indigenous environmental perspectives: Challenging the oceanic security state. *Security Dialogue*, 54(2), 115–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106221139765>

## TALKING POINTS

- U.S. control over the Pacific Ocean constitutes a form of colonial empire sustained by militarization and environmental exploitation.
- The U.S. government frames issues as “security” threats to justify the militarization of oceanic spaces.
- The U.S. utilizes oceanic spaces for military purposes while employing conservation narratives to mask environmentally harmful activities.
- The concept of genuine security is an alternative to state-centric security, as it emphasizes collective well-being, environmental protection, and self-determination of the Indigenous peoples of Oceania.
- In the face of the “oceanic security state,” Indigenous communities in Oceania deploy diverse forms of resistance, such as seafaring to reclaim waterways and disrupt the militarized compartmentalization of the ocean, direct action campaigns to challenge environmental destruction at military testing sites, and educational initiatives and healing

workshops to rebuild cultural resilience and expose the harms of militarization.

## KEY INSIGHT FOR INFORMING PRACTICE

By embracing Indigenous perspectives and acknowledging the dynamic nature of oceanic boundaries, we can create a more just, decolonized, and environmentally sustainable future. This will require active participation and advocacy from both local and international civil society actors.



PHOTO CREDIT: THERESA "ISA" ARRIOLA

## SUMMARY

As perceived by the West, the vast Pacific Ocean is a predominantly empty space, dotted with archipelagos such as the Hawaiian Islands, the Mariana Islands, or American Samoa. Many Westerners envision these islands as paradisaical beach destinations. Indigenous communities view the Pacific Ocean as a tapestry of “connecting pathways in relations with lands, peoples, and skies.” Meanwhile, the United States government sees the Pacific Ocean as a heavily controlled security space for military testing, training, and maintaining transit corridors in the name of national security.

Tiara Na’puti and Sylvia Frain argue that the U.S.’s control over the Pacific Ocean constitutes a form of colonial empire sustained by militarization and environmental exploitation. The authors reveal how oceanic spaces are militarized in the name of U.S. national security within delineated borders of Exclusive Economic Zones, Marine National Monuments, and Marine Protected Areas. Na’puti and Frain examine specific examples of U.S. militarization and environmental destruction in the Pacific, delving into the Mariana Islands Training and Testing (MITT) area and the Mariana Islands Range Complex (MIRC), the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument (PMNM) and the Hawaii Range Complex (HRC), and the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercises. This **oceanic security state** militarizes the ocean, disrupting marine life, increasing the risk of conflict, causing environmental destruction through pollution and climate change, and undermining Indigenous rights and sovereignty.

## **Oceanic security**

**state:** A system of militarization and environmental exploitation that extends beyond land borders to encompass the United States' control of the Pacific Ocean.

## **Genuine security:**

An alternative security framework that emphasizes several key principles: respect for Indigenous rights and sovereignty, environmental protection, peace and cooperation, and a focus on human needs. It focuses on tangible actions and collaborations among diverse women to address the root causes of insecurity, such as militarism and violence. The aim is to achieve real changes in policies and systems to promote healing, self-determination, and the dismantling of oppressive structures.

**Blue-washing:** Refers to the U.S. government's use of marine protection policies and conservation rhetoric to disguise its militarization of ocean spaces, masking environmental damage and undermining genuine sustainability efforts.

The article centers on Indigenous perspectives, understanding the ocean as interconnected pathways and challenging colonial geography imaginaries. The authors reveal how the U.S. government tends to consider issues related to oceanic spaces as “security” threats, which is used to justify militarization. They suggest an alternative approach of **genuine security** that prioritizes the well-being of all, environmental protection, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples. The methodology involves mapping case studies of the Mariana Islands, Hawai’i, and other regions of Oceania. The authors analyze information on military bases, training areas, and conservation designations in the Pacific.

The central argument posits that the oceanic security state perpetuates a dual narrative, presenting militarization as conservation. The research challenges the legitimacy of this narrative, emphasizing the environmental costs of militarization and its impacts on Indigenous communities. The United States utilizes oceanic spaces for military purposes while employing conservation narratives to mask environmentally harmful activities. The authors uncover the phenomenon of **blue-washing**, wherein the U.S. military, despite being a significant contributor to environmental degradation, portrays itself as an environmental steward through policies and assertions of adherence to conservation measures. In reality, military interests are prioritized over conservation, exemplified by the designation of Marine National Monuments as defense assets. Examples such as the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument and Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument show how the military uses seemingly protected areas for training and testing, encompassing activities like sonar tests and live-fire exercises. These practices result in irreparable environmental damage, such as harm to marine life (as evidenced by the beaching of whales and dolphins, pollution, disproportionate greenhouse gas emissions, the destruction of reefs, and the degradation of shoreline and land).

The oceanic security state perpetuates colonial power dynamics, which manifest themselves in a range of negative impacts on Indigenous communities in Oceania. Access to marine protected areas and training zones is limited, directly affecting Indigenous engagement in traditional practices like fishing and navigation. Military activities and conservation measures result in environmental degradation, adversely affecting Indigenous livelihoods. Pollution, habitat destruction, and resource depletion pose significant threats. The disruption and destruction of cultural heritage sites, including sacred areas and burial grounds, further erode the cultural fabric of Indigenous communities. Health concerns arise due to exposure to toxic elements from military activities, impacting both physical and mental well-being.

In the face of the oceanic security state, Indigenous communities in Oceania deploy diverse forms of resistance. Seafaring and voyaging practices reclaim an ancestral connection to interconnected waterways, disrupting the militarized compartmentalization of the ocean into strategic areas. Direct action campaigns challenge environmental destruction at military testing sites. At the same time, educational initiatives and healing workshops rebuild cultural resilience and expose the harms of militarization.

In conclusion, the study calls for reevaluating security studies to incorporate Indigenous perspectives. It challenges the dominant discourses that frame oceanic spaces merely as territories for militarization. The findings underscore the urgent need to address the contradictions within the oceanic security state, where military activities contribute to the global climate crisis, contradicting conservation efforts. The article advocates for strategies of resistance and resilience informed by oceanic epistemologies, recognizing the fluid and interconnected nature of ocean boundaries. Indigenous perspectives “function as decolonial praxis that challenges imperial and militarized orientations of control over ocean spaces.” Ultimately, the study encourages a shift towards decolonial and demilitarized futures by acknowledging the complexities of federal control and militarization of oceanic spaces.

## INFORMING PRACTICE

The practical relevance of this article is multifaceted, merging policy and advocacy realms. The research underscores the urgent need for global discussions on military emissions that emphasize the **'military emissions gap'** and the environmental consequences of granting automatic exemptions to militaries in climate agreements such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. In our roles as advocates, we must elevate the environmental costs of military exemptions more forcefully, call for genuine security, and challenge the continued blue-washing of military operations as "sustainable practices." The idyllic picture of protected marine spaces that blue-washing paints contrasts sharply with the reality of violence and devastation caused by war.

The study's findings directly impact policy formulation and advocacy. Identifying blue-washing practices necessitates a reexamination of legal frameworks governing military activities and environmental protection. Policymakers should scrutinize existing laws, including the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, and the Endangered Species Act, all of which allow military deviations from regulations. Reforms should extend beyond aligning military operations with conservation goals and instead encompass a critical reassessment of security priorities. Guided by "genuine security," advocates can pressure policymakers to disrupt the expansion of war infrastructure and prioritize diplomacy and peacebuilding over militarization. At the same time, reforms must ensure Indigenous representation in decision-making processes related to oceanic spaces. Policy initiatives should prioritize inclusivity, recognizing Indigenous communities' unique perspectives and knowledge systems. This involves changing governance structures for Marine National Monuments and Exclusive Economic Zones to ensure that Indigenous voices play a central role in shaping policies impacting their lands and waters.

The research emphasizes the importance of raising awareness about the dual nature of oceanic spaces as both militarized zones and ecologically sensitive areas. Advocacy initiatives can be crucial in informing the public and policymakers about the environmental consequences of military activities. This includes fostering an understanding of the interconnectedness of oceanic spaces and the need for sustainable, community-centric approaches to their management.

Lastly, local and international NGOs, supported by donors, can support Indigenous-led initiatives that promote traditional knowledge, sustainable resource management, and cultural revitalization in Oceania. They can assist Indigenous resistance efforts and document and expose the negative impacts of the oceanic security state, raising awareness and mobilizing public support for change. Fostering solidarity between the communities affected by militarism and environmental injustice, advocates can document and amplify Indigenous resistance movements and alternative security frameworks such as "genuine security," as introduced in this article, promoting their visibility and acceptance in policy discussions.

By embracing Indigenous perspectives and acknowledging the dynamic nature of oceanic boundaries, we can create a more just, decolonized, and environmentally sustainable future. This will require active participation and advocacy from local and international civil society actors. **[PH]**





## QUESTIONS RAISED

How can genuine security frameworks challenge power dynamics between powerful states, such as the U.S., and Pacific Island nations? Can genuine security proposals resonate with and motivate diverse stakeholders, including Indigenous communities, governments, and international organizations?

How can the proposed genuine security concept be translated into tangible policy measures and implemented on a broader scale? What concrete actions can policymakers and activists take to advocate for and enact genuine security in Oceania?

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Conflict and Environment Observatory & Concrete Impacts: The Military Emissions Gap: <https://militaryemissions.org>

Coalition Against U.S. Foreign Military Bases: <https://noforeignbases.org>

## KEY WORDS:

genuine security,  
militarism,  
blue-washing,  
Indigenous resistance,  
Oceania, environmental  
peacebuilding

# TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AS A RESPONSE TO CONSERVATION VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Citation: Luoma, C. (2023). Reckoning with conservation violence on Indigenous territories: Possibilities and limitations of a transitional justice response. *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 17 (1), 89-106.

## TALKING POINTS

- Conservation violence against Indigenous Peoples can be understood as a proper concern of transitional justice, as it entails “large-scale past abuses,” and the present moment constitutes a period of transition towards greater recognition of Indigenous rights in relation to environmental protection.
- Applying transitional justice to conservation violence may ultimately have indirect positive effects on environmental protection, but doing so also comes with practical challenges, most notably related to whether it can effectively meet the demands of the victims—especially demands for land restitution.
- Applying transitional justice to conservation violence has value, despite its shortcomings: it can identify harms experienced by Indigenous Peoples as significant and worthy of redress, foreground counternarratives on conservation that acknowledge its colonial dimensions, and—through reparations/redress—establish more just relationships between Indigenous Peoples and conservation actors, ultimately benefiting sustainable ecosystems.

- On the whole, it is worthwhile to apply transitional justice to cases of conservation violence, “with potential benefits flowing to both Indigenous Peoples and the environment,” as long as it is approached with modest expectations and in combination with other efforts.

## KEY INSIGHT FOR INFORMING PRACTICE

As the land back movement gains momentum in what is now called the United States, all the individual acts of land return that are happening through different mechanisms—as well as the potential return of national parks to Indigenous nations, should that ever happen—become significantly more powerful if accompanied by transitional justice processes that recognize and speak the truths of the historical harms that make land return meaningful as an act of restitution.



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## SUMMARY

Environmental conservation is often perceived as an unmitigated “good.” Yet, the history of conservation, and of “protected areas” in particular, is inextricably tied up with the history of colonialism and Indigenous dispossession. The establishment of protected areas worldwide has routinely pushed Indigenous Peoples off their land—often violently—cutting them off from key economic and spiritual resources that previously sustained their communities. With this history in mind, Colin Luoma examines whether and how **transitional justice** mechanisms might provide a way to address the widespread human rights abuses inherent in “**conservation violence.**”

## **Conservation**

**violence:** “large-scale human rights abuses perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples through the creation and enforcement of protected areas on their territories,” including “forced evictions of Indigenous Peoples, ongoing exclusion from their natural resources,” and “heavily militarized tactics” and direct violence against Indigenous Peoples trying to access their lands.

## **Fortress conser-**

**vation:** “nature conservation approaches that displace Indigenous Peoples and other land-dependent communities from their lands to establish strictly protected, State-managed protected areas.”

## **Transitional justice:**

Now more broadly understood as “how societies respond to the legacies of massive and serious human rights violations... It focuses on [victims’] rights and dignity as citizens and human beings and it seeks accountability, acknowledgment, and redress for the harms they suffered.” Originally, however, transitional justice was conceived as “a framework to address relatively recent acts of physical and political violence in countries transitioning away from either repressive rule or armed conflict.” Transitional justice mechanisms include, among others, truth commissions, war crimes tribunals, memorials, reparations, and national apologies.

First direct quotation for transitional justice definition above: International Center for Transitional Justice. (N.d.). What is transitional justice? Retrieved November 13, 2023, from <https://www.ictj.org/what-transitional-justice>; subsequent direct quotation and others further above from the research article.

Conservation violence has roots in the “**fortress conservation**” model emerging out of 19th-century U.S. westward expansion and the related “wilderness myth” that represented certain natural areas as uninfluenced by human activity. In truth, the “wilderness” Euro-American settlers encountered had been influenced by Indigenous human activity for millennia, and the act of establishing protected areas was not “preserving” wilderness but rather *producing* the idea of it through Indigenous dispossession.

As the fortress conservation model was exported to other parts of the world, the harms of conservation violence multiplied. These have included not only the forcible dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from their land and resources but also direct violence used by state security forces to remove them or keep them from returning, including murder, rape, torture, and other forms of physical injury. The long-term results of land dispossession include the poverty that comes with being made landless and dependent on the state, as well as “significant religious and cultural loss,” as “Indigenous cultural and spiritual identities are inextricably intertwined” with place. Beyond these harms to Indigenous Peoples themselves, conservation violence has also entailed environmental costs, including biodiversity loss—undercutting the arguments often used to justify the establishment of protected areas.

Indigenous resistance—which intensified against the conservation movement in the 1960s–1970s—has begun to shift the perspective of conservation actors such that it is no longer considered acceptable to separate biodiversity policy from Indigenous perspectives. With this growing connection between mainstream conservation practice and Indigenous rights have come calls for a “historical reckoning” with the harms of fortress conservation, including calls by a prominent international conservation organization for transitional justice in the form of truth commissions at different scales.

The author assesses transitional justice as a potential tool for responding to conservation violence on two levels: theoretical and pragmatic.

Transitional justice can be theoretically justified as an appropriate response to conservation violence against Indigenous Peoples on the basis of its traditional features: its focus on “large-scale past abuses” and its occurrence during periods of transition. First, conservation violence “entails large-scale human rights abuses” worldwide, with roughly half of all protected areas globally having been established on lands previously used by Indigenous Peoples, resulting in tens of millions of people displaced and subject to direct violence and/or violations of economic, social, or cultural rights. Second, although transitional justice has typically occurred along with transitions from authoritarianism to democracy or from armed conflict to peace, in this case there is at least a rhetorical and institutional transition happening towards greater recognition of Indigenous rights in relation to environmental protection. Therefore, conservation violence meets these two criteria for being a suitable focus of transitional justice.

There are also key pragmatic justifications for applying transitional justice to conservation violence, as well as practical challenges—which together point towards employing transitional justice with modest expectations and in combination with other approaches. The first major pragmatic justification is that doing so may have indirect positive effects on environmental protection. When Indigenous Peoples are disconnected from their lands—lands they have stewarded for millennia—and are also alienated from state conservation efforts, their “sustainable resource management” practices are disrupted, leading to “unsustainable resource extraction.” Conversely, although counter-examples can always be identified, generally speaking, Indigenous communities have been shown to be better stewards of their natural environments than states are, so righting these historical wrongs can help reinstate more sustainable practices.

Key practical challenges include the overwhelming breadth of historical and contemporary abuses to address, the “transnational nature of the harm at stake,” and the many actors responsible for that harm. The most significant challenge, however, is whether transitional justice can effectively meet the demands of the victims—especially regarding land restitution. Although restitution is internationally recognized as a form of reparation, transitional justice processes have seldom effectively addressed land return, often overlooking land-related harms. Although transitional justice processes that do not secure land return could, at worst, become tools of co-optation—solidifying colonial wrongs in the name of “reconciliation”—they can also ultimately help advance land return efforts through, for instance, establishing “a truthful record of land issues and claims.”

These considerations point toward the need to have realistic expectations about what transitional justice can and cannot do. Yet, despite the modest expectations and shortcomings of transitional justice in this context, it still has value, especially in combination with other efforts. First, applying transitional justice to conservation violence identifies the related harms experienced by Indigenous Peoples as significant and worthy of redress, and as the result of “conscious policy decisions,” rather than as “collateral damage” that occurred as a byproduct of environmental protection. Second, transitional justice processes—particularly truth commissions—can open up space for counternarratives on conservation to emerge, revealing hitherto-unacknowledged harms, so that the public better understands these and their relationship to protected areas. Finally, redress/reparation mechanisms can help establish more just relationships between Indigenous Peoples and conservation actors, ultimately serving their collective goal of sustaining healthy ecosystems.



## INFORMING PRACTICE

The history of settler colonialism is a history of violence—in what is now called the United States, the direct violence of land dispossession, genocide, and forceful cultural assimilation that characterized settlers’ westward expansion, and the structural violence experienced by Native peoples disconnected from their lands and therefore from traditional livelihoods and cultural heritage. It is also a history of resilience and resistance, as Native peoples continue, against the odds, to pass traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and spiritual connection to place down from generation to generation. In the context of this history, efforts to reckon with and repair the harm from the conservation industry’s role in this violence are best understood as efforts to create holistic human security and build positive peace.

The findings of this research regarding the value of transitional justice processes in reckoning with and repairing these harms can inform current “land back” activism in the United States. In particular, the distinct capacities of transitional justice—to help



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reframe certain harms as worthy of redress, to create space for counternarratives about conservation and its relationship to colonial violence, and to shape more just relationships between Native peoples and conservation actors—remind us that the sheer act of transferring title, as significant as that is, needs to be accompanied by a broader process of recognition and truth-telling to fulfill its potential as an act of reparation. In other words, a land donation by a private land owner to a tribe, a tribe's purchase of land, or even the handing over of a land trust or national park to tribal ownership and stewardship becomes significantly more powerful if it is understood within the frame of restitution. Within this frame, all the individual acts of title transfer happening from the Atlantic to the Pacific can begin to be woven together as part of a greater narrative whole—the newest, surprising chapter in a story of Indigenous dispossession and its eventual reversal. Ceremonies, truth commissions, or memorials to mark the transfer of land ownership can help serve this purpose, recalling the history of a particular piece of land and re-affirming Native sovereignty over it, as was the case with the recent ceremony

marking the transfer of land back to the Saanich people (on what is generally known as Vancouver Island, British Columbia), who prominently displayed their Saanich Indian Territorial Declaration (written in 1987) at the ceremony.

With regard to conservation land in particular, the writer David Treuer (Ojibwe) has argued for the return of U.S. National Parks to Native ownership and stewardship. There is a striking pattern that emerges if one looks at the chronology and acreage of Native dispossession and the chronology and acreage of national park formation in the U.S.: just as Native nations were losing land, national parks began to form—and often in the very same locations. Native ownership of the national parks would ensure that (at least some) tribes could regain access to their sacred places and traditional foods, to the basis of their culture and economy, while also ensuring continued access to these sacred places that inspire awe and reverence for all people. If this transfer ever happens, it should be accompanied by a transitional justice process that recognizes and speaks the truths of the historical harms that make the transfer of title

necessary and meaningful as an act of restitution. Although the United States and other countries have a long way to go to right the wrongs of settler colonialism, this would be a good start. [MW]

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<https://iltf.org/>

The Oregon Land Justice Project:  
<https://www.oregonlandjustice.org/>

## KEY WORDS:

transitional justice, conservation violence, settler-colonialism, fortress conservation, Indigenous peoples/nations, human rights, land back, national parks, protected areas, environmental peacebuilding

# WATER COOPERATION AS “IMPERFECT PEACE” AMID CONFLICT AND INSECURITY

Citation: Kabaroglu, A. & Sayan, R.C. (2021). Water and ‘imperfect peace’ in the Euphrates–Tigris river basin. *International Affairs*, 97(1), 139–155.

## TALKING POINTS

In the context of Turkish–Syrian–Iraqi relations in the Euphrates–Tigris (ET) river basin:

- Although the riparian countries have not reached a comprehensive, binding treaty on water sharing, multiple state and non-state actors in the region have developed water governance mechanisms and other forms of cooperation related to water management despite ongoing violent conflict and instability—a situation the authors describe as “imperfect peace.”
- Since changes in the early 2000s, four types of actors have gained prominence in transboundary water politics, shaping imperfect peace in the ET basin: U.S. agencies and research institutions (in Iraq), epistemic communities (including water professionals and academics), government agencies, and armed actors.
- Due to armed actors’ use of water as a target and as a weapon during armed conflict, there is an urgent need for joint security mechanisms along the waterways of the ET basin to protect vulnerable water infrastructure.

- Applying the concept of “imperfect peace” to environmental peacebuilding is important and useful because it draws out the viability of environmental peacebuilding even in conditions of ongoing armed conflict (rather than only in so-called “post-conflict” settings).

## KEY INSIGHT FOR INFORMING PRACTICE

The structural inequality of the Israeli/Palestinian context forces us to critically examine the aspirations of environmental peacebuilding—namely, whether environmental cooperation under conditions of severe inequality and occupation facilitates the emergence of a just peace, or whether it simply reinforces unequal power relations. Amid the current war on Gaza, when the Israeli government is weaponizing water and killing tens of thousands of Gazans of all ages and genders, the advocacy of Israeli activists for Palestinians’ health and safety becomes the most urgent and appropriate form of “cooperation.”



PHOTO CREDIT: ADOBE STOCK

## SUMMARY

Despite instability and insecurity in recent decades in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, these three **riparian countries** have maintained cooperative efforts to manage the Euphrates-Tigris (ET) river basin they share. Aysegül Kibaroglu and Ramazan Caner Sayan examine the existence of this water cooperation amid violent conflict, asking how actors “operate within and influence transboundary water relations” under these conditions and how they might develop “joint security mechanisms” to help manage the distinct forms of insecurity that arise in relation to water resources and infrastructure. More broadly, the authors consider the role water management can play in broader peacebuilding efforts amid violent conflict.

To explore these questions, the authors employ the concepts of “**imperfect peace**” and “environmental peacebuilding.” Although the riparian countries have not reached a comprehensive, binding treaty on water sharing in the ET basin, multiple state and non-state actors in the region have developed water governance mechanisms and other forms of cooperation related to water management despite ongoing violent conflict and instability—a situation the authors describe as imperfect peace. Furthermore, environmental peacebuilding helps focus attention on how transboundary natural resources can actually be a “source of cooperation between conflicting actors” rather than a source of conflict, with such cooperation potentially spilling over into other, more contentious issue areas.

**Riparian countries:**

countries that border or share the same trans-boundary river.

**Imperfect peace:**

the existence of “peaceful interactions and regulations, including negotiations, agreements, treaties, diplomacy, NGO initiatives and so on” at multiple levels, even amid ongoing violence. “Every small step made towards establishing a peaceful environment and helping humans fulfil their basic needs, even in a conflictive environment, is accepted as an example of ‘imperfect peace’ in action, even if these small steps do not radically transform the conflictive nature of the relations between the actors.”

**Epistemic commu-**

**nities:** “network[s] of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area.”

Haas, P. M. (1990). Obtaining international environmental protection through epistemic consensus. *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, 19(3), 349.

Transboundary water relations in the ET river basin have been characterized by both confrontation and cooperation, and have been shaped by a combination of political rivalries, Cold War politics, trade relationships, border security concerns, and territorial disputes, along with actual water management issues and environmental pressures like drought. In a key development, Turkey's construction of a dam on the Euphrates necessitated greater water cooperation, and the three countries established the Joint Technical Committee (JTC) in 1983, tasked with determining "reasonable and adequate quantities of water" for each country. While ultimately unsuccessful in this respect, the JTC remained a forum for discussing water issues among the three countries and laid the ground work for bilateral agreements on water allocation between Turkey and Syria (1987) and Syria and Iraq (1990).

Since the early 2000s, four types of actors have gained prominence in transboundary water politics, shaping imperfect peace in the basin. First, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, U.S. agencies and research institutions entered the water management scene, focused on reconstruction and development. Their intention to create a "strategic master plan for Iraqi waters" was ultimately unsuccessful, however, due partly to the lack of comprehensive agreement on water flows among the riparian countries, as well as to the insecurity of the post-invasion period.

Second, regime change in Iraq opened new opportunities for non-state and/or unofficial transboundary cooperation, enabling "water professionals, former diplomats, technocrats, and academics" from the three countries to come together more regularly to engage in dialogue, cooperative scientific research activities, capacity-building, and data-sharing on the ET basin, forming **epistemic communities**. These initiatives largely managed to focus on non-contentious technical issues and steer clear of political conflicts, thereby maintaining this "web of cultural, social and economic interactions."

Third, governments of the three countries, particularly their water agencies, have negotiated and signed numerous bilateral protocols and memorandums of understanding (MoUs) since the early 2000s, focused on issues like joint dam construction, data-sharing, water use and management, stresses related to climate change, water treatment infrastructure, and so on. Despite implementation-related challenges and tensions due to growing regional instability—notably the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011—Turkey and Iraq reopened "dialogue at the ministerial level" in 2014. Both governments have publicly supported intergovernmental cooperation on water, even if tensions remain, especially

regarding Turkey's dam-building and downstream water flow to Iraq. The authors note that this cooperation illustrates how, with imperfect peace, negotiations can continue bilaterally even when multilateral negotiations have stalled amid regional political instability.

The fourth prominent set of actors emergent since the early 2000s is armed groups. In both Syria and Iraq in recent years, "state and non-state armed groups have destroyed and captured water installations" in the ET river basin, reflecting a broader trend in armed actors using "water resources and infrastructure as targets or weapons in armed conflict." ISIS, in particular, has both "destroyed water-related infrastructure" and "used water as an instrument of violence," flooding communities or withholding or polluting water as a way to coerce communities in both countries into surrendering. State actors fighting against ISIS and other groups have also used water as a weapon, with the Syrian government using "the denial of potable water as a coercive tactic against [populations] thought to be sympathetic to the rebels" (both ISIS and other rebel groups). Since similar tactics could be used by other armed actors in the future, there is an urgent need for joint security mechanisms along the waterways of the



ET basin to protect vulnerable water infrastructure that could be targeted, like dams. Although countries already have their own processes for determining and responding to risk and threats, they could more proactively and collaboratively address specific threats to water by developing a “joint inventory of critical water infrastructure,” mapping risks and vulnerabilities, and “preparing response plans.” The JTC—as the only remaining multilateral institution focused on water relations in the ET basin—may provide a useful initial forum for dialogue here. Efforts to develop joint security mechanisms in response to these shared vulnerabilities could constitute a form of confidence-building—and therefore environmental peacebuilding—among these countries, fostering further cooperation in the future.

In short, even amid violent conflict in the region, the riparian countries of the ET basin—through the efforts of multiple state and non-state actors—have maintained communication and developed mechanisms to cooperatively manage their shared water resources even in the absence of a comprehensive water treaty, illustrating the presence of imperfect peace.

Applying the concept of “imperfect peace” to environmental peacebuilding is important and useful because it draws out the viability of environmental peacebuilding even in conditions of ongoing armed conflict.

## INFORMING PRACTICE

Cooperative environmental efforts to sustain human needs and address shared vulnerabilities amid violent conflict provide a foundation for adversaries to adopt a broader concern for mutual human security. These efforts, especially on the part of epistemic communities, can also help forge hybrid, cross-cutting identities that can transcend exclusionary nationalist ones. Such cooperation may mean one thing, however, among three sovereign countries (as in this research) but another in contexts—like Israel/Palestine—defined by severe structural inequality. In such cases, the claim that environmental threats affect us all without regard for political boundaries rings hollow. It is precisely these political boundaries—here, between Israel proper and the Occupied Palestinian Territories or even between Israeli settlements and Palestinian villages



PHOTO CREDIT: ADOBE STOCK

within the West Bank—that determine the kind of access someone has to fresh water and therefore their level of vulnerability to environmental stressors.

According to a recent report by Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem (written before the current war on Gaza), in the West Bank, “Israelis have access to water on demand, while Palestinians receive water according to predetermined allocations,” leading to extremely skewed levels of water consumption: Israelis use on average 247 liters of water a day per person, while Palestinians in the West Bank use on average 82.4 liters per person (26 liters if they live in one of 70 Palestinian communities not connected to the water grid). The minimum daily amount recommended by the World Health Organization is 100 liters per person per day.

In such a context, defined by Israeli military occupation, what does water cooperation look like and mean? As B'Tselem notes in its report, the Joint Water Committee, conceived as an equal, cooperative mechanism between Israel and Palestine in the Oslo Accords, is in practice a tool of Israeli

control due to the context of occupation. Through this committee, “projects intended for Palestinians [must] be discussed together with projects intended for settlements as a ‘package deal,’ thereby obliging the Palestinians to support settlement expansion,” and any project “serv[ing] Palestinians that crosses through Area C”—most do—must get approval from an Israeli governing body over which Palestinians have no say. “Cooperation” in such cases looks like a cover for maintaining a status quo where Palestinians do not enjoy equal political or socio-economic rights.

At the same time, non-governmental organizations like EcoPeace Middle East—composed of environmentalists from Palestine, Israel, and Jordan, working together—have had success creating some gains for Palestinians in terms of water safety and access, like successfully securing Israeli approval (pre-Gaza War) for the import of more supplies into the Gaza Strip that would enable operation of a new wastewater treatment plant—a manifestation of “imperfect peace.” Echoing a central aspiration of environmental peacebuilding, EcoPeace contends “that moving forward on specific

and solvable issues like water can help rebuild public trust that peace and end of hostilities are possible,” creating openings for cooperation on tougher issues.

Ultimately, the Israeli/Palestinian context forces us to critically reexamine this aspiration, by asking: Does cooperation in the context of severely unequal power relations ultimately hinder or facilitate the emergence of a just peace—both the cessation of direct violence and the transformation of power relations such that all people in the region can live under conditions that ensure their dignity and well-being?

This was a difficult enough question to consider before October 7. Now, with the military assault on Gaza—which could “plausibl[y]” constitute genocide, according to the International Court of Justice—the stakes are even higher. Israel’s use of water as a weapon has become more blatantly apparent, making it harder to imagine even the mildest forms of cooperation, at least on the governmental level. Immediately after Hamas’ October 7 attack on Israel, Israel shut off all water that it normally piped into Gaza. In addition, according to this PBS report, its blockade of the enclave resulted in fuel shortages that made it impossible to power key desalination plants, from which Gazans get much of their potable water, while bombing has destroyed water infrastructure that desalinates and transports water. As of November 2023, Gazans were estimated to have access to an average of 3 liters of water a day, and many lack access to clean potable water and/or are drinking untreated brackish water, which can result in water-borne diseases, cardiovascular diseases, diarrhea, dehydration, and other health problems, especially in kids. Additionally, Israel’s decision to flood Hamas’ underground tunnels—which Hamas uses to move fighters, weapons, and goods—with seawater could do long-term damage to the already compromised aquifer under Gaza.

Under such conditions, when the Israeli government is weaponizing water and killing tens of thousands

of Gazans of all ages and genders, the responsibility for human-needs-based “cooperation” in Israel/Palestine is falling to Israeli human rights activists. As the constituents of a government that is waging a military campaign in the name of *their* security, Israelis are uniquely positioned to speak out against it. Rather than more traditional cooperation, what the current situation calls for—and what some Israeli activists are already enacting—is strident advocacy for Palestinians’ health and safety needs, whether by publicizing the Israeli government’s use of starvation as a weapon of war (in violation of international law), by calling for a ceasefire and for the unconditional, free entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza on the basis of civilians’ needs, or by putting their own bodies in the way of settlers violently intimidating Palestinian villagers in the West Bank. Whether or not such activism plants the seeds for a just peace sometime in the future, it remains urgent and necessary—even if insufficient—in the present. [MW]

## QUESTIONS RAISED

To what extent do cooperative efforts and peaceful interactions between adversaries amid violent conflict deeply transform conflict dynamics and facilitate the emergence of a just peace, especially in contexts defined by severe power inequalities? Do the concepts of “imperfect peace” and “environmental peacebuilding” make different assumptions about the capacity of such efforts to do so?

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## ORGANIZATIONS

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<https://ecopeaceme.org/water/>

B'Tselem: <https://www.btselem.org>

## KEY WORDS:

imperfect peace,  
 environmental  
 peacebuilding,  
 water,  
 climate change,  
 Turkey,  
 Syria,  
 Iraq

# SPOTLIGHT

## ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING IN THE COLUMBIA AND SNAKE RIVER BASIN

The types of conflict that grab the attention of headlines tend to be “hot” – or violent – conflicts. While peacebuilding is critical in those contexts, it is also relevant in social conflicts where there may not be active violence but where there is a need to build trusting relationships among stakeholders, address historical injustices or inequities, and bring people together to solve collective issues.

The Pacific Northwest (PNW) – where the War Prevention Initiative is located – is a diverse and abundant ecosystem, but the region’s river systems are in crisis. Fish populations have declined significantly due to dams, population growth, and climate change, causing ripple effects on other species and the larger ecosystem. The Columbia River and the Snake River are lifelines for endangered salmon and other fish. Tribal nations, tribally led non-profit organizations, and other stakeholders have collaborated in environmental peacebuilding efforts to ensure healthy riverways. Thanks to a historic ten-year partnership between Tribal Nations and states in the PNW, there is an incredible opportunity to restore this ecosystem,

expand clean energy production, and increase resilience in the river basin – with a dedicated \$1 billion of federal support over the next decade.<sup>1</sup>

One of the Tribal Nations involved in this effort is the Nez Perce (or the Nimiipuu People) who have historical claims to territory spread across modern-day Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Montana – and have witnessed the dramatic changes to the local environment. These changes directly threaten their cultural and ancestral practices.

Kayeloni Scott, the Director for the Columbia/Snake Campaign, is an enrolled Spokane Tribal member with strong Nez Perce ancestry and describes her work as a “long standing effort to heal the Columbia and Snake Rivers.” She explains that, traditionally, the Nez Perce followed a seasonal calendar determined by the return of “life

1. The White House (2023, December 14) Fact sheet: Biden-Harris administration announces 10-year partnership with Tribes and States to restore wild salmon, expand clean energy production, increase resilience, and provide energy stability in the Columbia river basin. Retrieved May 24, 2024, from, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/14/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-10-year-partnership-with-tribes-and-states-to-restore-wild-salmon-expand-clean-energy-production-increase-resilience-and-provide-energy-stability-i/>



PHOTO CREDIT: PALOWA AVAJA

sources” like salmon runs or certain plants. Over time, Tribal elders noticed that salmon runs were starting to diminish, seasonal plants were arriving late, and other “life sources” were disappearing entirely, pointing to an unhealthy environment. The Columbia/Snake Campaign is focused on restoration efforts, which include the partial removal of four dams on the Snake River. Ms. Scott states, “The dams not only completely changed the rivers’ ecosystem but also uprooted the Nez Perce. Sacred sites, like burial sites, were lost to rising waters by shifting rivers.” As she explains, “Much of Nez Perce history and culture is tied to physical space. Without access to ancestral lands, the history and culture, often shared through stories and songs, could be forgotten.”

“If the environment is healthy, the people are healthy. And we have a long way to go to find that place,” said Scott. Healing the rivers and larger ecosystem goes beyond environmental restoration and encompasses historical trauma. For the Nez Perce, accessing ancestral sites and continuing traditional practices can accelerate the healing process and enable the building of trusting relationships with non-Tribal organizations or people.

According to Scott, “[When] we talk about peace, [we] also need to talk about justice. There’s been a lot of injustice done to several groups for centuries. This opportunity to focus on peace and peacebuilding really requires folks to acknowledge the history...[and] have an open mind to different backgrounds and cultures.”

She sees peacebuilding in her work by bringing together different stakeholders in the river basin to co-develop solutions that benefit all communities, other species, and the wider ecosystem. There is a large opposition to the effort to remove dams, but Scott emphasizes that there is always a middle ground that can bring people together. One of the biggest challenges is to build trust. All stakeholders in this context have different priorities and are involved for different reasons but come together because they care about the environment. “If we can be caring, understanding, and empathetic individuals, it can make all the difference. That’s what conservation work is all about. And it’s not just about people, but also the other life sources within our environment.”

# CONVERSATIONS ON INDIGENOUS AND DECOLONIAL APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING

We conducted a series of interviews with experts to gain deeper insight into Indigenous and decolonial approaches to environmental peacebuilding.



PHOTO CREDIT: ELAINE (LAN YIND) HSIAO

This photo was taken at a permaculture center in Byron Bay called StarSeed, a former industrial pig farm being returned to completely organic, biodynamic forms of cultivation, and also host to numerous workshops, classes, and community-building events.

## Interview with Dr. Elaine (Lan Yin) Hsiao

**Elaine (Lan Yin) Hsiao** was a law student that stumbled into environmental peacebuilding after a summer internship supporting a transboundary peace park project on the Honduras-Nicaragua border. Today, she is an Assistant Professor in the School of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kent State University. She studies the intersection between environmental conservation and conflict—be it active armed conflict or social conflict between groups—asking how the environment is involved, how we resolve conflicts, and how we recover from conflicts.

### PSD: Can you introduce yourself and describe how you got into the environmental peacebuilding field?

**EH:** Environmental peacebuilding came into my awareness and consciousness when I scoped the feasibility of a peace park for my summer internship during law school. I spent many years studying this idea of protecting transboundary areas for peace or conflict resolution in Central America and, later, in Central East Africa. The more I did, the more I got interested in the communities that live around these spaces and their contributions to, engagement in, and perspectives on these conservation areas that have this peacebuilding element. That led me more into the decolonial environmental peacebuilding space because I was interacting with Indigenous communities that had long traditions of what we could call environmental peacebuilding but often don't. Now, I focus on the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflict and looking at protected areas as (potentially) having protected status as humanitarian zones. I feel like it's a different take on environmental peacebuilding—it's not just how does state A cooperate with state B in an armed conflict, but how do we have conservation and protection on the ground when state A and state B are at war.

I'm starting this new area of work looking where Indigenous communities are not a party to an armed conflict, but their territories are intersecting with con-

flict zones. Additionally, how do we think about this in a historic context and make reparations for territories that have been seized through armed conflicts? I'm thinking about what that might look like in the U.S., which is a territory that has been taken through very active armed conflict with Indigenous peoples. There's a lot of talk around Land Back, reparations, and reconciliation. I'm curious about what lessons may emerge out of those movements in the U.S. and what we can learn to apply to active armed conflict zones that impact Indigenous territories.

### PSD: When you first started looking at the peace parks, was there an engagement with Indigenous communities in that process?

**EH:** On the Costa Rica-Panama border, there's the international peace park. It's a government-to-government created peace park, but they have a really interesting management approach on the ground. The entire eastern front of the peace park—and this is large area of something like 100,000s of hectares—has very little ranger force protection (official government enforcement on the ground). The Indigenous communities who live there protect the forest so there is no need for any kind of government presence. Most of the official ranger posts were mostly for tourist interaction on the west side. And on the west, park authorities were working with communities on conservation efforts. The more that the communities were engaged in conservation in their own spaces and were buffering the protected area, the better.

### PSD: You mentioned thinking about your work in the context of the U.S. I'd like to hear more about what you're thinking about in this regard.

**EH:** California has a very interesting policy and resources behind this idea of healing and reconciliation. There is state policy with certain state lands to try and return them to California Native Tribes whenever possible and offer the first right of purchase to whatever Tribe would have historically been there or has some historical claim to [the land]. There has been funding set aside by the state government specifically for Tribes to buy that land back. So, there's a policy and money in place to facilitate land back as a land return policy that's aligned with the governor's policy around truth and healing. We're looking at this project to try and understand where there are publicly managed lands that have been environmentally degraded over time and are susceptible to wildfire, floods, droughts, etc., understanding that has an unequal impact on Tribes because of where they've been forced to live. A project to return land to those Tribes to manage in a way that makes both the ecosystem and the community more resilient is an incredible opportunity to repair historical harm. Having tangible examples that help to explain what land back could look like and what it might mean is important. Land back is not this scary thing where everybody who's non-Native must leave. It could be good for everybody.

**PSD:** In our special issue, we use the following definition for environmental peacebuilding from an International Affairs special issue: “environmental peacebuilding comprises the multiple approaches and pathways by which the management of environmental issues is integrated in and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery.”<sup>1</sup> What is your re-

1. Ide, T., Bruch, C., Carius, A., Conca, K., Dabelko, G. D., Matthew, R., & Weinthal, E. (2021). The past and future(s) of environmental peacebuilding. *International Affairs*, 91(1). doi: 10.1093/ia/iaa177

action to this definition? Anything you might add or change?

**EH:** I've seen this definition before. I think it fits where it comes from. It is a very technical approach to peacebuilding, very management oriented and a formulaic approach to conflict. I think of it as a very Westernized way to define environmental peacebuilding. I think that a decolonial or Indigenous approach to environmental peacebuilding would bring about a very different definition. I wish it had more concepts from peace and conflict studies on relations and repair, reconciliation, and healing. These kinds of words are missing in that definition of environmental peacebuilding. It will ultimately limit what is environmental peacebuilding or what environmental peacebuilding can achieve. Because if we don't get the relational aspect, and the healing of what has happened in the past, then we might get stuck at an environmental technical fix. I find it also very anthropocentric: speaking about a human-to-human peacebuilding and forgetting that there's humans and nature, and humans and the rest of life on earth that needs to be repaired in the process. Environmental peacebuilding is really about the repair of relationships between people [and] people, between peoples, and between people and the rest of life.

Another thing from peace and conflict studies: this definition is so focused on a formulaic approach to conflict that conflict is almost seen as a bad thing. There's this idea in peace and conflict studies that conflict is a way to resolve issues, especially in cases of extreme injustice. Nonviolent action and the practice of nonviolence is seen as a form of conflict creation to make extreme injustice right. In a definition like this, nonviolent action, which is sometimes called conflict creation, would be sidelined, or made invisible. It's such a powerful strategy really to making right with nature. Thinking of environmental peacebuilding as needing to step up and create a conflict where an extreme injustice is happening or about to happen is another decolonial angle that could be brought in.

## PSD: Can you describe how Indigenous or decolonial approaches are distinct in environmental peacebuilding?

**EH:** Many Indigenous approaches are often decolonial, but not all the decolonial approaches are Indigenous. Decolonial for me is about disrupting those colonial legacies and those systems of power that have been entrenched by former colonial systems. It has a lot to do with a few things like the coloniality of knowledge and knowledge production, the coloniality of identity and the hierarchy of race and ethnicities, and economic systems. It's the extractive capitalist approach and globalized extractive capitalism combined with today's government's approach to neoliberalism that's very colonial. The ways that political power is consolidated and controlled—that's what decolonial is trying to be a solution or alternative or antithesis to. Sometimes the more bottom-up, community-driven/led—whether that's Indigenous or not—is often a more decolonial approach. It's also not taking the environment as this technically separate thing from us, but to think of all of it as an integrative whole through the lens of actual relationships between us and other species and life on earth. If we're bringing in the Indigenous approaches, we can also start thinking about environmental peacebuilding as our spiritual relationship with nature and other species. There are ceremonies that I think we could consider as a form of environmental peacebuilding from an Indigenous perspective, but that's not at all what you see in the UN's work in post-conflict countries. It also pulls us into this realm of how we define peace. I was in the Rwanda-Congo-Uganda borderland area in a village. I asked the villagers, "What would environmental peace look like to you?" And they said, "It's fresh air." Then, they explained that fresh air means that the air is clear because there [are] winds coming through and there [are] rains that clear the air so it's not dusty, and if there's rain then there's agriculture and food for everybody. It was their way of describing a wholly functioning ecosystem that provides for people and people provide for the environment as environmental peacebuilding.

When you come into a lot of Indigenous communities, one of the things they might tell you is that they don't have a word for the environment because it's not a separate thing. They are so embedded in it that they don't identify it separately. At least that's what I've been told. One thing that I've noticed about Indigenous peacebuilding broadly is that it inherently encompasses the natural environment in many different ways. And when there's conflict in Indigenous communities, it also invokes the natural environment. Taking a decolonial or Indigenous approach really opens up your mind to the basic idea of what these words really mean, what needs to be made right, and if environmental peacebuilding is even its own thing or is that just peacebuilding.

## PSD: What does an Indigenous and/or decolonial approach look like in practice?

**EH:** Decolonial practices offer space for a lot more exploration, and that's a hard one for all of us grappling with how we change these mega systems that are incredibly colonial. There is a lot of incredible work coming out of critical development studies, like the pluriverse dictionary that shares different approaches to decolonial development—which I think inherently embraces a lot of these concepts of what could be a decolonial environmental peacebuilding. I think one of the challenges is the external intervention-based answer to environmental peacebuilding where people come in and offer solutions and it's funded by donors and then projects happen, and they go away. That, I think, is a very colonial approach. A decolonial approach would have to look quite different. It doesn't mean that external people can't come in to support communities locally that are trying to do environmental peacebuilding, but I think you would have to disengage that capitalist economic system somehow. A decolonial approach to environmental peacebuilding should also be very appreciative of where its resources and money and ideas come from.

## **PSD:** To what extent has the environmental peacebuilding field embraced an Indigenous and/or decolonial approach?

**EH:** I think it's in its early stages. You'll see it in some of the summative articles on environmental peacebuilding where there is a small section on local and Indigenous approaches. It's not yet at the space where it's radically re-thinking peace—is it an environmental management thing or is it a relational spiritual practice? As a field, environmental peacebuilding is very open and welcoming and tries to be very inclusive, so I think there's space for that. But when you put forward a definition for a concept, it inevitably excludes people who don't think that's what they do. In sessions we've done on Indigenous approaches, we've had to pull in people who would have never called themselves environmental peacebuilders.

## **PSD:** How does militarism and militarization show up in environmental peacebuilding?

**EH:** One of the dangers is that the field of environmental peacebuilding allies itself with mainstream conservation movement thinking that it's an avenue for expanding environmental peacebuilding initiatives, especially with ideas like peace parks or cooperative natural resource management. The mainstream conservation movement is, in many places, quite militarized. There's been a lot of the pushback against conservation and its affiliation with armed rangers that are perpetrating human rights violations. Environmental peacebuilding initiatives aren't free of that just because we call it peacebuilding. That's why I got really interested in working with communities. The states are telling me that they're working together but then when I go to the communities, they're telling me that the armed rangers are burning down their homes and arresting their people. The peacebuilding

between the states might be decent but the peacebuilding with the people is not looking great. There's also the growing interest of the military in the natural environment due to climate change that is front and center for environmental peacebuilding. I started reading a report by the International Military Council on Climate Change and Security. The sum of the report is that they think militaries will be overwhelmed by the challenges of dealing with climate change and the security implications of it.

When we think about Indigenous territories and the environmental conflicts that they face against large corporations, against private security forces that are well armed, and the kind of human rights violations that come out of that—I think shedding light on the nonviolence that Indigenous communities practice is so important. If we don't support the nonviolent struggles, then...it's not going to look good.

## **PSD:** It's not going to look so non-violent anymore.

**EH:** Yes, exactly. I think the environmental peacebuilding world is going to have to struggle with these realities. I do sometimes wonder if having that limited definition of environmental peacebuilding that's focused on environmental management will be able to encompass those struggles in a way that is helpful.

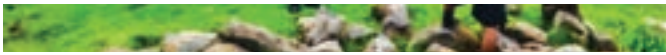
## **PSD:** How important are designated conservation and protected areas to environmental peacebuilding?

**EH:** This question is interesting given where international policy is right now. We have a Global Biodiversity Framework and targets calling to expand conservation areas and protected areas to 30% of the Earth's surface (terrestrial and marine). There's been a lot of concern on whether that enables an increase in militarized conservation to acquire those lands and if it will displace people. There is research showing that this could impact up to 1.8 billion people. That conservation and protected areas policy is potential-



ly creating this whole new space for environmental conflict. How will we manage to meet those targeted goals in such a way that isn't violent and isn't displacing people or their rights? This is an important question for the environmental peacebuilding community. There's also an idea that there's an overemphasis on conservation areas as a vehicle for environmental peacebuilding. That raises some of the problems and challenges around protected areas as a concept, especially in countries where protected areas were created by a colonial government and then have been militarized. I've started telling people to be mindful of "sacrifice zones," like this area is for conservation and everything else can be sacrificed where we can do whatever we want to the environment.

Environmental peacebuilding, for me, has been very exciting because it has so much possibility. There's so much opportunity, so much to think about, and so many directions and ways that you can take it and view it and practice it. In a world that looks increasingly violent, divided, and broken in so many ways, I think that the fact that environmental peacebuilding can take so many different forms, means that it can help us address extreme circumstances whether that's war or genocide or civil conflicts or interpersonal differences on an everyday level.



This is a photo of the Hawaiian practice of moving rocks (pohaku) to build the traditional aquaculture ponds where they farm both fish and seaweeds.



PHOTO CREDIT: ELAINE (LAN YIN) HSIAO

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PHOTO CREDIT: THERESA "ISA" ARRIOLA

## Interview with Dr. Theresa “Isa” Arriola

**Isa Arriola** is an Indigenous Chamorro community and demilitarization advocate and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University. She currently lives on Saipan. Her research and community work explores how the everyday lives and identities of Indigenous peoples are transformed by militarization and imperialism.

### **PSD:** Can you introduce yourself and how you got into your work?

**IA:** I was born and raised on Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands, and I’m Chamorro. That [upbringing] gives you a view of war that’s conventional—we

learn a lot about WWII history through our grandparents’ stories and U.S. history books. But you don’t really grow up here [in Saipan] with an awareness of the global process of militarization. When I left for college, I really started to think about militarization and I saw that we were so wrapped up in it, but had never been taught that part of the story. This was an intentional invisibility as I later found out but this propelled me into doing my dissertation, called *Securing Nature: Militarism, Indigeneity, and the Environment*. The reason why I mention the name of the dissertation is because that title is where I started to see the convergence of militarism in the environment. There was this original idea that the environment was just one of the sites where the military impacted us. For example, there was the environment, there was economy, there was culture, etc. And then I started to realize as time went on that this is all about the environment in a more holistic sense and wasn’t some-

thing that could be disconnected from our social and politics lives. This thing that we call the environment and how we imagine the environment, how we relate to the environment, and how our bodies are allowed to move in these spaces. And so, [my work] became this broader project of looking at environmental regulations and constructions of the environment in the context of militarization on Indigenous territories in these islands with a long history of colonialism.

**PSD:** It's interesting, reflecting on my own educational journey, there are parallels in how I was or wasn't taught about imperialism and militarism. You are taught that there was an imperial period and then decolonization but not this treatment of colonization as an active issue.

**IA:** Yes, exactly. That's really what was inspiring to me in the beginning. There's a term that talks about militarization as a process. I remember feeling like my worldview changed in a lot of ways by [understanding] that war doesn't necessarily end and we're still wrapped up in it. How do we not really recognize in so many ways how we've been made to feel a certain way about war? When I was starting out, I was really interested in the idea of war and memory, the ways that wars are commemorated. There was a Chamorro scholar, Keith Camacho, in Guam, that had written book called *Cultures of Commemoration* where he explored how our people talked about, thought about, and remembered war. Why do we not think we're as wrapped up in it as we were in the past? There is a bleeding into the contemporary moment where it is much harder to identify how things are being militarized. There's this way of thinking about war where it's all about this notion of security and we're not aware of what the economics are or how our social life is being influenced. Then this word, "strategic," which I'm always insistent on unpacking because it's so overused and it's so loaded. So much war preparation is justified by this one word.

Everything is in the name of national defense, but then what does that mean for us, especially in these "territories"? Essentially, over the years, we find our environmental goals, our political goals, our economic goals are swayed toward bolstering United States [defense] goals. They're not even necessarily our goals because we've been colonized for so long. There's this very deep connection to the U.S. and this feeling that supporting the military is supporting the U.S. because they've always supported us. It takes a lot to break through that because if you challenge it, you're considered anti-military, anti-those sentiments that people want to be associated with.

**PSD:** In our special issue, we use the following definition for environmental peacebuilding from an International Affairs special issue: "environmental peacebuilding comprises the multiple approaches and pathways by which the management of environmental issues is integrated in and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery." What is your reaction to this definition? Anything you might add or change?

**IA:** I appreciate the notion of multiple approaches, but also know that the environment is also such a loaded term particularly within governmental spaces. We should always contextualize what we mean by the environment and how the term itself is couched in existing political systems and histories. It's not just that there are differing perspectives but that there's a stake in those differences. There's a political reality that creates hierarchies of legitimacy in terms of environmental knowledge and intelligence. There's also a cultural politics that highlight the changing

definition of the environment and our place within it. I was thinking about the ways that these issues [are] systemic at this point. It's not a mistake that Indigenous folks aren't often part of planning environmental changes but are viewed as consultants, not owners in the process or knowledge producers.

There are also two words that stuck out to me in this definition. The word "management" strikes me and it's reminiscent of institutional jargon that implies a sense of control over what we can do to the environment rather than how we are a part of it. Also, the word "mitigation," perhaps we've been given a false sense of the ability to make things better after we've destroyed things in some ways. It begs the question of who bears responsibility for mitigating and for fixing those things?

## PSD: Can you describe how Indigenous or decolonial approaches are distinct in environmental peacebuilding?

**IA:** We center the land in our perspectives and worldviews because it's what gives us life, it's what sustains us and our identities as people. The environment is something that's genealogical, not something outside of us in any way. It's not romanticized either. I think there's a tendency for Indigenous perspectives to be added onto existing discussions about the environment rather than understood as part of creating or foundational to our understandings.

Indigenous and decolonial approaches don't shy away from the political. They understand that our contemporary moments are shaped by distinct histories of dispossession and that the environment has often been a site of dispossession for Indigenous peoples. Toxicity, destruction, and pollution on Indigenous lands is a systemic problem built on Indigenous erasure primarily because Indigenous life is a constant reminder of settler injustice and extraction over the

land. A distinct Indigenous approach would be that all environmental planning and regulatory work has to be connected to Indigenous calls for "land back." Institutions are deeply invested in the status quo that participate in this erasure and so thinking about the environment in the context of "land back" means something other than protecting capitalistic interests, it means returning land to its rightful caretakers and stewards and recognizing that this benefits everyone, not just a select few. This is why building Indigenous global solidarity is so important because it allows us to build power to make the appropriate changes that center the health of the land.

Sometimes we forget that imperial ideologies about the environment are just that—ideologies—because they are hegemonic and unquestioned. But Indigenous peoples defy these logics through their existence everyday. This means that what the environment is and how we relate to it shifts and changes and doesn't have one Eurocentric definition that is unchanging. It's really tough to cut through that notion at a regulatory level or at a community level where we have to strike a balance and consensus between different kinds of expertise.

We also realize that we don't just live on the land and do things to it, like impact it, but the land transforms us as well and we are it. Decision-making about environmental changes can't simply be understood as top-down decisions in the realm of environmental regulation, but instead are rooted in community-building and theorizing about place that is linked to sustainable living. I mean sustainable in a very broad way not just greening things, but also politically sustainable because you can't make sovereign decisions about your environment when you're politically subordinated or under duress. For example, on our islands, sometimes we make environmental policy decisions based on the needs of the military, like exempting them from conservation spaces or allowing them to skirt local environmental laws to complete their goals. This is why demilitarization work in environmental spaces inevitably takes on that political dimension. It's not just about stopping the military from destroying an island, for example, it's also about

Indigenous resurgence and cultivating a deeper sense of self-determination and Indigenous sovereignty that create long-term safety.

**PSD:** Which is why it can be perceived as very threatening to the status quo.

**IA:** Absolutely. That's why it gets so violent. When you assert those rights, even if you're saying that you're trying to advance Indigenous sovereignty, you get pushback from folks that feel this is all American territory that can be sacrificed for the broader nation. It's been so interesting throughout the years to see who's most upset by calling out militarism in our community. A gendered analysis is important here because it's threatening to this very patriarchal way of thinking about land and what militarized security looks like from that perspective. But as I've learned from bell hooks' analysis of militarism and feminism, it's really rooted in imperialism. Indigenous perspectives are intersectional in that way too. We're always thinking through the politics of all of this. Why is it that normally women are at the forefront of demilitarization movements? Historically, our society has been matriarchal and, even though that's shifted, there's aspects that we've maintained in this struggle. So many of the resistance movements are led by older, Indigenous women that then train the younger generation of women. In our own community here, I owe so much to Cinta Kaipat. She was a former representative here and had a deeply impactful role in the community. She was a knowledge keeper, a musician, a mentor. There were so many things that she was, but she was dedicated to spreading this cause and garnering a whole group of younger women to understand the importance of our lineages in these islands.

**PSD:** I'm so happy you brought up a gender component. My own thinking on patriarchy and internalized misogyny has helped me to better understand this relationship

with other systems of oppression, like colonization.

**IA:** Women in the movement have described what's happening here as a "rape" of our lands and waters as if they are just there to dominate and spoil. Like, we're being asked just take it all in the name of defense. Honestly, it's just the violation that you feel, the sense of powerlessness. You feel like you're in an abusive relationship where you depend on the military for a lot of things, so you must keep crawling back to them. Economically, militarism is like tourism. It's a boom and bust economic prospect that isn't sustainable in the long term. There's a lot of money that's promised to our communities, but how that money actually trickles into the community is yet to be seen. Even if [you] rely economically on the military, what are the trade-offs? So, a lot of times it's this promise of infrastructural development like roads. But it's really shocking when you look at the records of how much they've given us. One of the islands here named No'os was on a 50-year lease by the Pentagon for \$20,000. That is pennies. There's no other way to describe that kind of relationship other than colonial if you're being honest.

**PSD:** What does an Indigenous and/or decolonial approach look like in practice?

**IA:** A decolonial practice means prioritizing the safety of the land and aligning environmental and political goals with Indigenous sovereignty. As Unanga scholar Eve Tuck and K. Yang have shown us, it's not metaphorical or performative. It means investing in community. It means language revitalization. It means reinterpreting conventional histories from islander perspectives. It means imagining alternatives beyond militarism. It means respect and humility in relationship building and making room for error. It also means resisting imperial and Orwellian narratives about the environment that work to convince us that violence or war preparation, for example, are

acceptable forms of environmental governance and stewardship. It's intersectional and it's honest about the real damage that colonialism has caused and continues to cause on world systems rather than viewing colonialism as something in the distant past.

You can't be equitable in peacebuilding if you're ignoring the sociopolitical and economic realities of Indigenous peoples whose land extractive systems are literally built upon. Indigeneity is always in the making. It's not simply an add-on to theorizing about peace. It's fundamental to understanding power differentials in the world.

There are also deep core Chamorro cultural values like respect and humility that are very much part of the decolonial process here. If you're not careful, you would think that you're making a lot of progress in some ways, for example in conservation, but if you don't have a decolonial approach, you can end up doing much more harm to the very communities that are supposed to be protected. That happens all the time. Like, there are federal environmental regulations that are meant to protect the environment but can harm Indigenous communities. For example, what good are environmental regulations that restrict local access to fishing for war preparation?

## PSD: How does militarism and militarization show up in environmental peacebuilding?

We've gotten to a point where you simply can't talk about the environment without addressing militarization and the role of the military industrial complex. When the U.S. spends 1 trillion dollars on the Pentagon budget, you can see where the country's priorities lie. Our islands are critically connected to this budget because billions of those dollars are now being used to invest in war preparation and military infrastructure in this region called "Indo-Pacific." That hyper-militarization has caused many Indigenous folks to pause and say: What is actually security here? How

are we defining security? If it's more militarizing, then that's not sustainable. I want to be very clear: militarism is not environmentally friendly. Militarism is no substitute for conservation, even if certain species flourish in spaces where the military restricts movement, and certainly it is not a form of stewardship. It is simply greenwashing and, quite frankly, Orwellian to describe militarism as a kind of stewardship over the sea. The Pentagon is bombing No'os as I mentioned earlier, and there's coral growth around the island as a result since nobody can develop the island or access the land because it's so dangerous. The Navy will cite that coral growth as a positive outcome of their bombing. That is not Indigenous stewardship. The military has entirely different goals. They want to boost their capabilities to engage in war, and war technologies, and things like that. Those are not our goals. We have such a discrepancy in what we see as stewardship. For us, it's being able to trace your genealogy to the land peacefully and continue to flourish for generations to come—that's a very different definition of sustainability for us.

Militarism is transformative because it shifts environmental policy in the service of this notion of national defense. That term is very misleading because not only does security often mean more investments in war or more weapons in Pentagon terms, but also the term can only think in very state-centered ways that make no room for other interpretations of what sovereignty might look like outside of the state. This is especially troublesome in a place like the Marianas where political status is something apart from Indigenous identity. If you look at Guam—Guam is on the list of non-self-governing territories. They don't even have a political status, they are a colony. So, what does security look like from the perspective of a colony? I think about this quote by Jaskiran Dhillon in her introduction to a special issue in *Environment and Society* where she says, "Contemporary manifestations of colonial violence are deeply interconnected to environmental violence." This perspective is important for making sense of how militarism is a form of colonialism that enlists the environment at all costs to support the goals of the nation state especially in Indigenous territories where political power is lacking. Bombing an island, which is destructive, is

turned into a necessary for national defense. To me, that's environmental violence that is tied to colonialism in the Pacific.

Militarism is quite incompatible with Indigenous knowledge about the environment because it often leaves lands polluted, toxic and, worse, uninhabitable. It redlines where people can fish, collect local medicine, and so forth. It causes psychological stress of marine mammals through sonar usage and testing. There's so much we simply don't know about how militarism is impacting the environment. We have found that throughout the years, when the Pentagon produced environmental impact statements, they often lack critical baseline data about the environment to make appropriate assessments. If they do, often this information is coming from scientists hired by the Pentagon. So, I think in this case, we have to work hard to shift the very idea of what the environment is and how we can relate to it in this literature. This is really key for me. So much of the way that the Pentagon talks about environmental transformation is through the use of this word "impact." That has very serious consequences in the way that they see what they're doing. For example, they can impact the environment but then they can mitigate it so that's supposed to make everything better, but how do you mitigate irreparable damage? In the long term, we see that that mitigation doesn't always happen. In other words, there's no way to bring things back to the way they were. There's no real oversight for any of that happening. Even if we can get the land back, what if it's so toxic or bombed out? What does that mean for our futures?

You almost have to take a couple steps back and remind yourself that bombing is not safe. It seems so simple, but it's because we've become so desensitized to it. Sometimes in the Northern Marianas, you see these notices in the newspaper that tell the public about the times and dates when the military will be bombing one of the northern islands and there is a ten-mile radius around the island where nobody can enter, even the fishing community, because it's so dangerous. Nobody even blinks an eye anymore about those advertisements. To me, these are glaring,

horrific reminders that there's islands being bombed and we hardly notice or if we do, we make ourselves feel better by saying that it's necessary for our safety. I always want to keep that sense of shock and grief. That these things don't have to be this way and that we don't have to resign ourselves [to] how our environmental futures being framed in those ways. We still have the ability to articulate a sovereignty that protects us from this, and that's a safer future for all of us.

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PHOTO CREDIT: ADOBE STOCK

## Interview with Dr. Diana Arbelaez-Ruiz

**Diana Arbelaez-Ruiz** was born and raised in Colombia in a family with campesino origins whose elders suffered internal displacement due to the political violence of what is now known as the “Violencia” years. Today, she is a researcher looking at mineral extraction contexts to understand people’s experiences and needs and how mining affects them. She builds on that understanding to support more informed decision-making processes. In polarized contexts, she works to find common ground and ways people can work together towards a more peaceful society and engagement with nature.

**PSD:** Can you introduce yourself and provide some background on how you came into the environmental peacebuilding field?

**DAR:** I trained as an engineer and was very interested in environmental issues. So, then I worked in environmental economics, and re-trained in environmental sciences, anthropology, and finally peace and conflict studies. My Ph.D. was done with Indigenous people around mining and its connection with conflict and peace. It’s been a long journey across multiple fields and connecting different disciplines. In the last decade, I’ve worked with Indigenous people who live in areas where there is mineral extraction—legalized or not. There are different interactions between that mineral extraction and armed conflict processes. It’s trying to understand what mining means to Indige-



nous people through their understanding of conflict and what peace means to them.

## PSD: When you work with an Indigenous community, what does that look like in practice?

**DAR:** We do it in a participatory way and use ethnographic methods. The needs people express and the context determine how we work together. For example, I've worked with the Nasa Indigenous people in Colombia. It always begins with a conversation with people from their organizations. The Nasa are extremely organized and experienced in doing research with academics and have a model that they favor—participatory action research. It's a back-and-forth dialogue to understand what it is that they are interested in learning, what it is that you are interested in learning, and how you can bring your capacities and knowledge to come together. One important thing for me is to be aware that many of the Indigenous leaders are not only activists but also experienced researchers. These leaders have taken the time to mentor me and to teach me. It's been a real exchange—it's not like this academic expert coming in from the outside but a meeting of different forms of expertise that cross pollinate.

## PSD: Can speak on potential conflict or tension around Western and Indigenous knowledge generation? Do you see them as being in opposition to each other or equally valid approaches?

**DAR:** This is the main question for me when doing environmental peacebuilding research. These approaches—Western and Indigenous—shouldn't be in opposition to each other. However, I'd say we have a long way to go. Academic institutions—the processes and the power structures that Western universities work under—do not favor collaborative research and engagement with Indigenous people. The difficulty in

negotiating the two spaces, especially for early career academics is marked. There are pressures to publish rapidly and in English, and to lead the research with academic output as the top priority. This is neither fair to Indigenous collaborators in a violent conflict setting, nor does it align with the principle of free, prior, and informed consent.

For example, take my experience working with an Indigenous community that was at once heavily stigmatized as “violent” and at the receiving end of violent repression. Academic expectations became difficult to navigate. The community I worked with has been targeted with systematic murder campaigns, threats, harassment, and violence. It happens very regularly that their leaders are murdered. Speaking up against the illegal elements of the mining system, or other illicit economies, places them at risk. So, I was writing about a topic—mining—that is polarizing and dangerous. In academia, the expectation is that you must quickly write up and publish the research in English, a language the community do not speak. When you go into these very polarized and violent contexts, you need to write about it carefully and respectfully, considering the implications for the Indigenous people. One needs distance. One needs time to consult with the community. In practice, what this means is time, and that time can be hard to find in academic institutions.

**PSD:** In our special issue, we use the following definition for environmental peacebuilding: “environmental peacebuilding comprises the multiple approaches and pathways by which the management of environmental issues is integrated in and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery.” What is your reaction to this definition? Anything you might add or change?

**DAR:** When we speak about peacebuilding, in the context of decolonial and Indigenous approaches, there are two key words I would ask that we reflect on: harmony and violence. Within Indigenous communities, nature is not seen as a set of resources, a supermarket or hardware store, or a set of recreational areas. Nature is often understood as a sentient being, a motherly being. Nature is not seen as a set of natural resources to be managed. This makes harmony a priority.

Harmony comes up a lot when working with Indigenous peoples: the idea of having balanced relationships, relationships of reciprocity, and relationships of mutual care between people and with nature. We need to think about how we can integrate notions of harmony in our understanding of environmental peacebuilding. When I was in Australia, for example, I was doing social impact studies for the closure of a mine. The Aboriginal people from the area would constantly refer to their responsibility to care for country. It's the ideal that people hold—you balance damage with reciprocity or a mutual care act towards the land, the country, the territory. We need to include harmony in our understanding of nature.

Let's turn to violence now. We tend to concentrate on conflicts that attract the media or recent conflicts, but there are many other forms of violence. There is subtle violence that happens slowly but is just as painful and damaging. So, in the definition of peacebuilding we need to ask whether we're only focusing on conflict or on building harmony. Thinking about harmony addresses the causes of all these different types of violence that people can be subjected to. It is often because of not attending to disharmonies that slow "violences" end up into larger conflicts. When you think about harmony, it makes the slow violence more visible. It's making your lens more sensitive to subtle forms of violence, thus working to prevent conflict.

## PSD: Can you describe how Indigenous or decolonial approaches are distinct in environmental peacebuilding?

**DAR:** Indigenous approaches are not the same as decolonial. A decolonial approach is about bringing in voices, ways of understanding, ways of acting, and concerns of people that tend to be silenced because of gender, faith, class, ethnicity, economic factors, education, or any other factor or difference that is used to silence others. It's not one set approach. It's a variety, a range of approaches. A decolonial approach can include an Indigenous approach if it has been built by the Indigenous people in their terms, through their organizations, their concepts, their strengths, and if it considers all the diverse perspectives I just spoke about. Indigenous approaches to peacebuilding come from Indigenous people from their territories, their values, from their everyday experiences.

In Colombia, Indigenous notions of peace are connected to this notion of *Buen Vivir* (or, living well). It comes from the First Nations of Latin America. It's an alternative to development discourse that prioritizes harmony: harmony with yourself, with your family, with your community, with nature. The idea of *Buen Vivir* is an integrative concept. It's not fragmented as in a water management project, or land rehabilitation project—it's the whole way of viewing different dimensions of life. That integrative approach helps us to build a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between people, with nature and what damage to people and nature does to all. For example, one thing I find interesting when I'm working with Indigenous people in Colombia is that they will say, "This land has a lot of blood in it." Meaning that the land has been injured by the violence that has been enacted on people. *Buen Vivir* contests the idea that linear economic development is something to wish for or that we should aim for material accumulation at the expense of our natural environment and ourselves. This is an ideal of course. It's not the reality that people live in because we're all immersed in this political economic system that sees nature as a resource.

Because of structural, ongoing factors, Indigenous peoples are often dispossessed, targeted with violence, and oppressed. As result, there is a lot of effort to prevent disunity within Indigenous societies. There is an emphasis on not letting people get to the point of open conflict through different social mechanisms. From the Indigenous world, you learn about many mediation or reconciliation approaches that can be useful and that tend to involve not just the conflicting parties. The whole community gets involved because the conflict is seen as a rupture or injury to the social fabric of the whole group. People can go to great lengths to prevent those fractures, with different degrees of success.

**PSD:** We're talking about these huge structural inequalities between the Global North and the Global South, between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people. There's a lot of painful history there. It's hard to figure out how to move forward.

**DAR:** It's not easy, because it's in our head. There are academic scholars from Latin American who talk about the coloniality of being—when you have absorbed the colonial approach. You're colonized in your head and that happens to all of us. When you're an immigrant, for example, you try to fit in and adapt to the environment (maybe in academia or outside). Sometimes that forces you to give up the very sources of what makes you unique, your own strength. And that's the loss of when you don't apply decolonial approaches—we try to turn everything into the same. Decolonial approaches acknowledge that there's all these different ways [of] doing things. It's not going from the dominant Euro-centric perspective to another one. It's embracing the reality of the many different ways people think about the world and how people think about peace and nature.

**PSD:** To what extent has the environmental peacebuilding field embraced an Indigenous or decolonial approach?

**DAR:** Traditionally in peacebuilding, you would hear a lot of this idea of the local people as a resource for peacebuilding actors. This is a transactional way of thinking about local people. Recently, there has been more of an acknowledgement of everyday peace and local peace. But I still feel like sometimes in discussion and work, it can still seem transactional.

Environmental peacebuilding is a diverse field that is still evolving. We are seeing more voices of people from the Global South, and we need to hear even more. This is always going to be a work in progress. We need to keep things open. What we lose when we don't keep things open is expertise, knowledge, research rigor, and better approaches. We need to continue to open the field. It's going to grow amazingly if we do. It already is growing. It might not be easy for everybody but it's going to lead to a much better practice. However, these disciplines are very difficult to separate from what is happening in the world. For every effort to open and include, there are other efforts to keep things closed or exclusive.

**PSD:** How does militarism and militarization show up in environmental peacebuilding?

**DAR:** What I've seen in conflicts around mining is military intervention after grave situations have developed because communities were not looked after, taken care of, or protected, for a long time. For example, in Colombia, you have an issue of people participating in illegal economies. How do you get to the point where you have to put together hundreds of police, army, and navy to dismantle a huge illegal mine that is destroying a river? It's a livelihood question, unan-

swered, in a remote area. The people are doing what they can to survive in areas of Colombia that are difficult to access.

Once you get to the point where you have these large-scale illegal mines where there are no environmental controls or social controls—it's horrifying how they are destroying the rivers. How long do people have to be forgotten for things to get to that level? Once these large-scale illegal mines are dismantled, it's not an easy fix. The army and police may come in, but these illegal ventures come back from the ashes.

The Nasa advocate for demilitarization. In their context, they have had so many armed groups going through their territory. The state doesn't come to those areas to compete to offer services or opportunities. These armed groups create strongholds and take on illicit economies—be it mining or drug trafficking—they are extremely profitable. Then, the state wants to send the army to fight the armed groups. The local communities are caught in between. In response, the Nasa have declared territories as zones of humanitarian protection or territories of peace. They make efforts to deter armed actor entry in their communities or territories. It is not easy.

## **PSD:** Have you found common challenges or trends in social and armed conflicts that occur in mining regions?

There are huge problems that are simply alarming, and then there are things that we can call challenges. The huge problems compound themselves, and they affect similar communities. One is the criminalization of protest, including incarcerating people or oppressing people in other ways, getting them entangled in the judiciary system to punish them for protesting. The other is the waves of violence and harassment, and efforts to stigmatize people who work as human

rights defenders or environmental defenders. Even the term “defenders” presents them in a vulnerable situation. Those people are often Indigenous or campesino leaders in rural areas.

So, you have these two problems: the criminalization of protest and the violence against people who are advocating for rights and nature. Then, on top of that, you have regressive reform. Regressive reform means, for example, simplifying the environmental protection process for mining approvals, or reducing community participation requirements. The excuse might be “the economy,” the urgent energy transition, or the “national interest.” In the end, fast-tracking approvals can lead to looser regulations and less social inclusion in mining. These processes compound.

As for challenges, there are a few that come up in mining regions. For example, the issue of how outsiders engage with Indigenous, Afro-descendant, or campesino people. Indigenous people see nature in a very different way than how a mining company or professional geologist or engineer might see nature. Indigenous people may see an ideal future in a different way from these professionals. For example, an Indigenous community may view untouched nature as better left as it is, whereas an engineer may see it as ripe for improvement.

## CONTINUED READING

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