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# Environmental Activism on the Ground: Small Green and Indigenous Organizing

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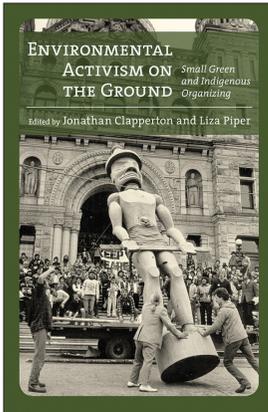
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**ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM ON THE GROUND:  
Small Green and Indigenous Organizing**  
Edited by Jonathan Clapperton and Liza Piper

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# Strategies for Survival: First Nations Encounters with Environmentalism

*Anna J. Willow*

Although I have proudly called myself an environmentalist for many years, I have lately found myself hesitating before making this claim. It is not because I value environmental protection any less than I used to; unlike some gloomy folks who have abandoned the quest in anticipation of planetary doom, I see caring for the earth as more essential than ever. Nor is my apprehension underlain by a belief that environmentalism has failed in its mission.<sup>1</sup> Instead, my reservations arise from an increasing awareness of how environmentalism is envisioned and utilized by environmental protectors who do not define themselves as environmentalists, who have not directed the mainstream movement's trajectory, and who do not share the cultural assumptions of most of its proponents.

This chapter is about how Canadian First Nations citizens' motives and strategies intersect with the predominantly non-Indigenous societal phenomenon that bears the *environmentalism* label. Drawing on two examples—one from Ontario and one from British Columbia—of recent alliances between boreal forest First Nations communities and environmentally concerned non-Natives, I propose that Indigenous participants approach such alliances as components of comprehensive ongoing struggles for survival. By extension, this chapter is a call to rethink environmentalism as we know it, to complement fine-grained organizational histories with

big-picture cross-cultural analyses that make it possible to imagine environmentalism not just as a trajectory of movements and beliefs but also as a rich assemblage of tools and processes. In other words, the case studies explored here suggest that environmentalism can be a means by which to achieve ends that are more diverse and more enduring than standard academic interpretations imply. This chapter offers a chance to reflect on the lessons that First Nations encounters with environmentalism contain for the environmental movement, for those of us who participate in and study it, and for humanity's long-term prospects.

When I began my graduate training in environmental anthropology, I was an idealistic student with a middle-class Euro-American background that I did not yet recognize as privileged. I wanted to make a positive difference in the world, to study something that really mattered. That came to mean figuring out why some people are willing to take dramatic action to protect the environment while others eagerly exploit non-human entities and interactions for profit or (more commonly) seem indifferent to the destruction that surrounds them. I was intrigued by my readings about American Indian ways of knowing, being, and living and not yet troubled by "ecological Indian" images that I now view as deeply problematic.<sup>2</sup> I fell in love with *Anishinaabemowin* (the Anishinaabe language) in the classroom, was drawn into the Sokaogon Chippewa Community's struggle to protect a critical portion of their northern Wisconsin homeland from sulfide mining in 2001, and travelled to northwestern Ontario in May 2003 when I learned that the people of Grassy Narrows First Nation had initiated a blockade to protest the industrial clearcutting that was ravaging their traditional land use area.<sup>3</sup>

Once I began working with Indigenous activists, I quickly realized the ethnocentric impossibility of comprehending environment, culture, and politics as separate entities. I have worked ever since to understand how the ultimate goal of land-based self-determination is woven into First Nations peoples' efforts to protect Canada's boreal forest.<sup>4</sup> I have never claimed neutrality regarding the struggles I describe. Using ethnography (which rapidly becomes history) to document unfolding events, and constructing academic interpretations inspired by my observations, I take encouragement from J. K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink, who declare that "to understand the world *is* to change it."<sup>5</sup> By exposing settler

colonialism's unjust foundations and enduring legacies and by telling stories that stimulate readers' reconsiderations of taken-for-granted histories and cultural constructs, I write with the mission of inspiring not only new understandings but also the more environmentally sustainable and socially just futures that these understandings might ultimately make possible.

## Encounters with Environmentalism

Why do some First Nations people choose to work with non-Native environmentalists? After all, more than a few Native groups have deliberately avoided these kinds of collaborations.<sup>6</sup> And their misgivings are not without reason. The North American environmental movement has a well-documented history of excluding Indigenous peoples—conceptually as well as physically—from the places it protects. The forcible expulsion of Indigenous people from Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks in the United States and from Banff, Riding Mountain, and Quetico National Parks in Canada epitomized the colonial mindset, with Indigenous residents removed from lands subsequently entrusted to management by non-Native “experts.”<sup>7</sup> The anti-fur campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, which stripped trappers of a viable land-based livelihood, further damaged environmentalism's reputation among Native northerners.<sup>8</sup>

Over the course of three decades, environmental protection paradigms have gradually moved beyond exclusionary “fortress conservation” models to embrace community-based and collaborative approaches that support the sustainable use of protected areas and the inclusion of Indigenous peoples and their knowledge.<sup>9</sup> In North America, this shift has inspired the creation of ad hoc alliances (like those documented by Grossman in this volume and elsewhere) as well as formal co-management bodies, both which have offered valuable new vehicles for broadcasting Native voices and concerns.<sup>10</sup> Still, critics contend that these partnerships empower Indigenous people only within an inherently inequitable (post) colonial social system. Anthropologist Paul Nadasdy, for example, argues that because such arrangements take existing political and economic relations for granted, “the form and nature of ‘participation’ is shaped by those relations and the assumptions underlying them. To be ‘empowered,’ local people must first agree to the rules of the game, rules that they had no role

in creating and that constrain what it is possible to do and think.”<sup>11</sup> Global observers of Indigenous inclusion in natural resource management and conservation projects have noted similar structural asymmetries.<sup>12</sup> As a result, even collaborations that have resulted in productive public pressure and withdrawals of resource development plans frequently see Indigenous interests misinterpreted by environmentalists.<sup>13</sup> With very different objectives, and agendas that are only partially compatible, relationships that succeed in the short term rarely stand the test of time.<sup>14</sup>

Why, then, do it? It’s absolutely *not* naïveté. On the contrary, my experiences with First Nations environmental leaders have revealed that most of the individuals who make this choice are well aware of the inherent paradoxes and potential pitfalls. And, while relationships with environmentalists do offer some obvious immediate benefits (such as funding and publicity), these cynical explanations address First Nations activists’ proximate, rather than ultimate, aims and are incapable of accounting for relationships that endure over time. I propose that environmental alliances can be more constructively comprehended as strategic choices made by astute leaders seeking to retain or regain control of customary lands and thereby promote their peoples’ physical, cultural, and political survival. In the following pages, I share two brief case studies in order to demonstrate that although the forms Indigenous-environmentalist alliances take and the circumstances that inform them vary, First Nations participants share an understanding of environmental protection as one key component of multi-dimensional—and multi-generational—campaigns to ensure the continuance of the land-based subsistence on which their survival as culturally distinct and politically autonomous peoples depends.

## Struggles and Strategies I: Grassy Narrows First Nation

Located eighty kilometres north of Kenora, Ontario, Grassy Narrows First Nation is a semi-remote community with an on-reserve population of nearly one thousand.<sup>15</sup> Recent generations of Grassy Narrows residents have faced a long line of uninvited changes to their local environment. By the 1950s, the English-Wabigoon River, which flows through Grassy

Narrows' 4,000-square-kilometre traditional land use area as well as the 41-square-kilometre contemporary reserve, had been dammed to facilitate hydroelectric power generation. With the dam came the inundation of near-shore sites (including traditional burial grounds) and unpredictable fluctuations in water level. Then, in the early 1960s, community members were forced to abandon extended family dwellings scattered along the river's tangled peninsulas and islands for a more consolidated parcel of land accessible via a newly constructed road. The federal government argued that the move would expedite the delivery of education and health care services, but with customary living arrangements and kinship patterns disrupted and the new road granting easy access to alcohol and other damaging substances, the negative social consequences of relocation were severe.<sup>16</sup> In the following decade, high levels of methylmercury were detected in the English-Wabigoon River, the result of dumping (to a tune of ten tonnes of the substance) by a pulp and paper mill located in far-upstream Dryden, Ontario.<sup>17</sup> Beyond the contamination's detrimental health consequences, the region's wage economy—largely supported by commercial fishing and guiding for the tourist industry—collapsed.<sup>18</sup>

As if the combined impacts of dam construction, relocation, and mercury contamination were not enough, the closed canopy boreal forest surrounding Grassy Narrows saw a surge in industrial logging in the 1990s. As the clearcuts grew larger and drew closer, areas essential to the practice of land-based subsistence were irrevocably altered. After several years of letter writing and conventional protest—not to mention a lawsuit filed in 2000 by three Grassy Narrows trappers against the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources—Grassy Narrows youth and activists acted independently of their chief and council to initiate a blockade on a logging road just north of their reserve community on 3 December 2002.<sup>19</sup>

When I first travelled to Grassy Narrows as a supporter and student-researcher, the blockade was still in full swing.<sup>20</sup> I initially assumed that the protest was primarily about protecting the environment. I quickly learned that there was much more to it. As a young Anishinaabe activist explained in a 2004 public statement, “We grew up hunting and fishing and just living off the land. We still have our culture and beliefs. That’s what we wanted to save that day. Laying those logs on the road wasn’t just against clearcutting, it was for *everything* that affects Anishinaabeg

negatively today.”<sup>21</sup> People at Grassy Narrows *do* talk about their close relationship to the land; they talk about the fact that Indigenous inhabitants of northern Canada have often been dealt with in ways that appear oddly analogous to wildlife management techniques, and about the need to protect Mother Earth. But their concern for the environment is not abstract. It flows from tangible experiences of being in the boreal forest and from their determination that Anishinaabe people continue to have opportunities to live and learn their culture out on the land.

At Grassy Narrows, I also learned that the landscape of the blockade is a deeply political one: the fact that clearcutting has impeded Anishinaabe land-based subsistence is viewed as a blatant violation of Treaty 3 of 1873, which promised that the descendants of Native signatories would “have right to pursue their avocations of hunting and fishing throughout the tract surrendered.”<sup>22</sup> Oral historical understandings of the agreement further hold that the treaty was an agreement to share—not give away—the land.<sup>23</sup> By taking direct action, people at Grassy Narrows were not only protesting the ongoing clearcutting but were simultaneously making a strong statement about their right to make decisions concerning their homeland and its resources.

At the Grassy Narrows blockade and at blockade-related events in Kenora and in Winnipeg, Manitoba, non-Anishinaabe individuals were a constant source of support for Grassy Narrows activists. Among the most notable of the partnerships that developed was an alliance between Anishinaabe activists and a San Francisco-based environmental NGO called Rainforest Action Network (RAN).<sup>24</sup> Both parties acknowledged that the other’s comprehensive agenda was not identical to their own: RAN’s overarching goal was to protect global forest ecosystems, while Anishinaabe activists sought to protect their own homeland, rights, and way of life. By 2006, however, both agreed to a shared short-range goal of stopping clearcutting within Grassy Narrows’ traditional land use area. As one former RAN campaigner told me,

At first RAN’s goals and Grassy blockaders’ goals were not the same, but had some important overlap. Both wanted to hurt [the company responsible for the logging]. Both wanted to stop clearcutting in Grassy Narrows’ territory, or stop

industrial logging all together on the Territory. Both wanted to increase public awareness of the impacts of industrial logging on communities and ecosystems.<sup>25</sup>

RAN was able to offer Anishinaabe activists funding, logistical assistance, and solidarity to support local gatherings, trainings, and direct action events (such as the blockade that stopped traffic on the Trans-Canada Highway in July 2006 and made national news in Canada).<sup>26</sup> Bolstered by positive personal relationships between RAN campaigners and Grassy Narrows residents, the partnership also generated international media attention and support from a broader RAN campaign targeting a key corporate purchaser of wood from the contested area.

After two years of joint campaigning, the company authorized to log in the area voluntarily relinquished its licence in June 2008, indicating an important (if temporary) victory.<sup>27</sup> Grassy Narrows activists embraced the alliance with RAN because of its potential to help them realize their immediate objective of stopping industrial clearcutting within their territory, which, in turn, promoted their ultimate goal of cultural and political survival through land-based self-determination. The alliance offered a new means to achieve an enduring end.

## Struggles and Strategies II: West Moberly First Nations

Ten years and one month after I began my quest to understand the complex factors that converged to inspire the Grassy Narrows blockade, I sat with Roland Willson, chief of West Moberly First Nations (WMFN), in his office near Chetwynd, British Columbia. “We’re trying to preserve our culture. We’re trying to preserve who we are as a people,” he told me. We want “our grandchildren and their grandchildren to be able to know what it is to be *Dane-zaa*.”<sup>28</sup> I was 2,400 kilometres from Grassy Narrows, but his words sounded familiar. First Nations citizens in northeastern British Columbia have struggled against outsiders’ attempts to control the rich resources of *Dane-zaa nané?*—the *Dane-zaa* homeland—for generations. It was the desire for non-renewable resources—reported petroleum reserves

in northeastern British Columbia itself and the Klondike gold sought by passing prospectors—that motivated the Canadian government to initiate negotiations for Treaty 8 in 1899.<sup>29</sup> Eager to ensure hunting, fishing, and trapping rights in the face of Euro-Canadian encroachment, Dane-zaa leaders refused to sign until commissioners promised they would be “as free to hunt and fish after the treaty as they would be if they never entered into it.”<sup>30</sup> Contemporary Treaty 8 citizens argue that industrial activities and environmental degradation now prevent them from fully exercising their land-based subsistence rights, thereby violating the treaty agreement.<sup>31</sup> This, too, sounded familiar.

Although agricultural settlement in the Peace River’s fertile valleys began in the early 1900s, it was the construction of the Alaska Highway in 1942 that opened the region to significant resource-extractive industry. Additional cultivation, logging, and conventional oil and gas production followed the highway, fragmenting wildlife habitat and progressively undermining Dane-zaa subsistence opportunities. In recent years, oil and gas extraction has increased exponentially with the introduction of high-velocity horizontal hydrofracturing (commonly called *fracking*) technology that makes it possible and profitable to extract fossil fuels from the deep shale layers that underlie much of *Dane-zaa nané?* WMFN has taken a stand against unrestrained shale energy production by participating in a joint position paper critiquing the industry’s profligate use of water, flawed consultation framework, and general lack of attention to cumulative impacts.<sup>32</sup>

Northeastern British Columbia also supplies southern energy demands with two massive hydroelectric dams along the Peace River. A controversial third dam (referred to as Site C) is now under construction, although legal cases opposing the project are still ongoing. WMFN has actively opposed the Site C dam and is collaborating with environmental groups to publicize its detrimental potential.<sup>33</sup> Compounding the devastating impacts of hydroelectric power generation on caribou and other species, recent decades have brought massive metallurgical coal mines to the surrounding area. Hopeful that their people will once again be able to hunt caribou within their customary land use area, WMFN took legal action against proposed mining exploration in a critical caribou habitat

zone and collaborated with conservation biologists to develop an action plan for the Moberly caribou herd.<sup>34</sup>

Dane-zaa people now face direct impacts from two large hydroelectric dams (and the additional dam at Site C), eleven mines, 8,000 oil and gas well sites, 10,000 pipelines, eight wind farms, and an untold number of powerlines and support facilities as well as ongoing forestry, agriculture, and sports hunting outfitter operations.<sup>35</sup> Yet provincial agencies and industrial decision makers refuse to acknowledge the impacts of these developments in any cumulative manner.<sup>36</sup> This is the set of circumstances that motivated WMFN to begin working with the Boreal Leadership Council (BLC), a 21-member coalition composed of environmental NGOs, environmentally concerned resource and investment companies, and First Nations organizations committed to working collectively toward “solutions-based dialogue on issues affecting the boreal region of Canada.”<sup>37</sup> This, in fact, was what had brought me to British Columbia: I was exploring the BLC as a collaborative conservation model and conducting multi-sited research with participating First Nations groups in order to better understand how cultural and political differences contour and complicate environmental alliances.<sup>38</sup>

Environmental leaders at WMFN are optimistic that working with the BLC will offer new opportunities for taking high-profile, national action on matters of urgent local concern. Specifically and directly, they hope the BLC will be able to stimulate broader awareness of the cumulative impacts associated with many years of industrial activity on *Dane-zaa nané?* When their decision is examined through a comprehensive historical lens, however, it becomes obvious that they choose to partner with the BLC not primarily for these immediate gains but for the same reason their forbearers insisted on land-based subsistence rights before agreeing to Treaty 8—the same reason that compels their recent positions on shale gas, hydroelectric dams, and problematically sited coal mining. Their ultimate goal, so clearly articulated by Roland Willson, has not changed over time. In a twenty-first-century context of extreme extraction and resource colonialism, partnering with environmental groups may help them reach it.

## Environmentalism as a Survival Strategy

The goal of survival—in the conjoined physical, cultural, and political sense I'm evoking here—is widely shared among First Nations citizens in Canada and among others around the world who live with comparable colonial legacies.<sup>39</sup> As Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) state,

The struggle to survive as distinct peoples on foundations constituted in their unique heritages, attachments to their homelands, and natural ways of life is what is shared by all Indigenous peoples, as well as the fact that their existence is in large part lived as determined acts of survival against colonizing states' efforts to eradicate them culturally, politically and physically.<sup>40</sup>

The word *survival* in this context does not imply that Indigenous people are content to merely make do. This is not the case. They want to *thrive* as individuals, communities, and political entities, and they want to do it according to standards that they themselves set. Wherever boreal landscapes are rearranged by extractive industrial activities, transformed worlds thus stand as symbols of distant outsiders' political and economic power to sacrifice local environments in order to promote national ambitions and global capital.<sup>41</sup> It is not only the physical conditions and consequences of environmental degradation that contemporary First Nations activists oppose but also the balance of power that permits it.

The year before I met Roland Willson in northeastern British Columbia, my project on collaborative boreal forest conservation and the BLC had taken me to Labrador, where I spoke with employees of the environmental branch of Innu Nation (the governing body that represents Innu citizens in Labrador). Their main message was simple: although the actions they take and the decisions they make may sometimes seem unrelated, "the central pillar of the Innu Nation is ensuring the survival of the Innu people."<sup>42</sup> The project had also taken me back to Anishinaabe country, to the eastern shores of Lake Winnipeg, where Poplar River First Nation environmental leader Sophia Rabliauskas discussed her community's

decision to work for decades to document—and eventually gain legal authority to manage—its customary land. It was for the children and the future, she said, so their traditions and way of life would survive.<sup>43</sup> I suspect, too, that White Mountain Apache members of the Fort Apache Heritage Foundation, who enact heritage and historic presentation as a form of environmental protection, would agree with this overarching ambition (see Welch, this volume).

Partnering with an environmental NGO to combat emplaced impacts of externally imposed resource extraction (as in the case of the Grassy Narrows-RAN alliance) and contributing to a national multi-sector coalition (like the BLC) demand very different kinds of interactions and activities. On-the-ground protest events, direct action, and media campaigning appear to have little in common with semi-annual meetings, diplomatic engagement, and topical working groups. Yet in the juxtaposition of these unique relationships sits an underlying similarity: First Nations people who work with non-Native environmentalists are thinking strategically. They are acknowledging environmental encounters as a potential path toward continued access to customary lands and, ultimately, toward the long-term well-being of their people. If we hope to make sense of Indigenous-environmentalist alliances, we need to begin here, with a clear acknowledgment that the roots of environmentally protective action often extend much deeper and much wider than most non-Native environmentalists originally supposed.

## What (Some) Environmentalists Have Learned

If First Nations people approach environmentalism as a valuable tool—one of many—that can be used to advance land-based self-determination agendas, we must recognize that non-Indigenous partners in environmental alliances also gain from collaborating with First Nations individuals and organizations. Some of the immediate benefits are obvious to attentive observers: Working with Indigenous groups is a public image asset that can augment funding opportunities and promote positive media attention. It can enhance local legitimacy and open access to contested sites.<sup>44</sup> However, it is worth considering the possibility of benefits that are both more enduring and more profound.

In the case of the Grassy Narrows–RAN alliance, working with Anishinaabe activists allowed RAN to argue that a targeted corporation was not only practising environmentally destructive clearcutting but simultaneously violating Indigenous land rights. With the approval of their Grassy Narrows partners, RAN activists were able to broadcast this message to consumers of wood products across the United States and Canada.<sup>45</sup> Although they were careful not to speak *for* the region’s Anishinaabe residents, the partnership made it possible for RAN campaigners to speak *from* an impacted location and to call on supporters to help them “Save Grassy Narrows Boreal Forest.”<sup>46</sup> The alliance built bridges between human rights advocates who came to appreciate the environmental dimensions of a social struggle and environmental activists who were moved in the opposite direction. It put a human face on an environmental catastrophe and demonstrated that environmental degradation has devastating social and cultural consequences.<sup>47</sup> Taken together, these qualities made the case against clearcutting more compelling and were instrumental in pressuring a multinational corporation to adopt more sustainable logging practices.

Even more significant, the alliance extended an institutional trajectory that was already primed to accept environmental and social issues as inextricably intertwined. Unlike most North American environmental NGOs, RAN has a history of incorporating local and Indigenous people into its campaigns and has often articulated an organizational mission that includes supporting forest inhabitants and their fundamental rights.<sup>48</sup> According to an individual who worked on RAN’s old-growth campaign during the group’s active partnership with Grassy Narrows First Nation, the collaboration was especially valuable because it “helped RAN re-root its work in grassroots community level struggles and [helped] re-inject a focus on Indigenous rights into the leadership priorities and dialogue of the organization.”<sup>49</sup> Working closely and conscientiously with First Nations activists reminded RAN staffers and supporters that the “natural” environments they work to protect necessarily include a wide variety of human activities and concerns.

Non-Native BLC participants share similar benefits of alliance despite the fact that the BLC developed intentionally rather than organically and devotes its attention to carefully chosen proactive projects rather than

issue-driven, action-oriented campaigning. In the eyes of Indigenous Canadians and socially conscious environmentalists, the inclusion of First Nations representatives gives the group's statements on topics ranging from caribou conservation to informed consent an otherwise unattainable level of legitimacy. It makes it impossible to dismiss the BLC's recommendations as those of a detached interest group. For an entity with a national audience composed of First Nations citizens and others sympathetic to Indigenous land and resource rights, including First Nations perspectives means respectability and relevance. It means that the BLC's collective voice emanates not from the urban-industrial centres of southern Canada but from across the 3.5 million square kilometres of the Canadian boreal. This, in turn, enables the BLC to function as an effective and influential entity, consequently increasing its appeal to prospective supporters and funders.

Critically, the incorporation of First Nations individuals and ideas makes it unlikely that discussions about environmental protection will proceed as though the boreal forest is an uninhabited wilderness or a vacant resource frontier. This is especially significant in light of the historical construction of Canadian wilderness as an empowering destination for white (and usually male) tourists and the concomitant pejorative reconstitution of First Nations inhabitants as fixed in time and place.<sup>50</sup> As Arn Keeling and John Sandlos suggest, the conceptual erasure of Indigenous inhabitants to produce pristine "wilderness" for protection (on one hand) and entrepreneurial calls to develop Canada's vast northern regions (on the other) have long stood as two sides of the same developmentalist coin.<sup>51</sup> Challenging this colonial legacy, Indigenous participation obliges BLC members to always abide by the council's founding commitment to "respect the lands, rights and ways of life of Aboriginal people" and to acknowledge First Nations cultural and political concerns as central to the future of conservation in Canada and beyond.<sup>52</sup>

## What We (All) Can Learn

What do these cases imply for environmentalism as a way of perceiving the world? And what lessons can environmentalists (and those who study them) take from all of this? In an overview of the accomplishments and

challenges of community-based conservation, Fikret Berkes suggests that broader conservation constituencies will only be built when we put aside Western-centric perspectives and develop a “cross-cultural pluralistic definition of conservation.”<sup>53</sup> This is essential for reasons that are both practical and profound. If environmental organizations want to increase (or at least retain) their membership and influence—if, in short, they want to remain viable—they must find ways to speak to wider audiences and broaden their bases of support. On a deeper level, if we hope to leave future generations with a world that resembles the bounty and beauty we inherited, we have to convince more people in more places that protecting the environment is an essential and achievable task as well as a valid and vital way of being in the world.

Albeit in very different ways, both the Grassy Narrows–RAN alliance and the BLC coalition signify a paradigmatic shift away from visions of an uninhabited and untouched wild nature toward a more inclusive comprehension that admits humans as an integral part of the environment. Whether or not they affiliate themselves with the environmental justice movement’s international network, Indigenous allies in Canada (like environmental justice activists elsewhere) direct non-Native environmentalists’ attention to the ties that bind environmental issues to social turmoil and political inequity. They implicitly call for a definitional expansion that acknowledges “social justice, local economic sustainability, health, and community governance as ‘environmental issues.’”<sup>54</sup> Working with, listening to, and learning from First Nations citizens compels environmentalists to accept people as part of worlds worth protecting. From environmental alliances, we learn that our own future is intertwined with the future of the non-human world.

Far beyond the small but growing network of scholars who see environmentalism as a complex cultural phenomenon worthy of concerted attention, realizations catalyzed by the global climate crisis are leading others to strikingly similar conclusions. In 2002, atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen coined the term *Anthropocene* to underscore the predominant human influence on global climate, landforms, and ecosystems.<sup>55</sup> The Anthropocene idea has subsequently influenced physical, biological, and social scientists, with recent analysts arguing that long-standing Western categorical divisions between human/cultural and environmental/natural

realms are being challenged by the changing reality of life on earth. “In the Anthropocene,” social/ecological researcher Egon Becker observes, “it is impossible to understand nature without society, and society without nature.”<sup>56</sup> To some, these connections may ring of revelation, but many who exist outside of Western conceptual traditions have recognized them all along. Environmental injustice permeated Canadian policy makers’ once-standard disregard for First Nations’ territorial interests and intentional ignorance of Indigenous citizens’ concerns about resource-extractive undertakings’ potential impacts.<sup>57</sup> First Nations people have been fighting for generations to achieve an accessible and un-degraded environment and for justice in its environmental forms—the very things the rest of us now realize are required if our social structures (and perhaps even our species) are to survive into the future.

I have often wondered if the prominent First Nations activists I know see themselves as environmentalists, and I have had several occasions to ask this question. Although First Nations activists often *accept* environmentalism (for reasons outlined above), it is neither their own project nor their lives’ work. For people like Judy DaSilva of Grassy Narrows First Nation (who has been nominated for the Goldman Environmental Prize) and Sophia Rabliauskas of Poplar River First Nation (who won that prize in 2007), environmentalism is a *label* used by outsiders to describe what Indigenous people have been doing all along.<sup>58</sup> This insight forces us to reconsider how we think, talk, and write about environmentalism. First Nations people encounter environmentalism in the context of struggles they perceive as (and that occasionally quite literally become) matters of life and death.<sup>59</sup> For them, environmentalism is not merely an identity or lifestyle card pulled from the deck of an over-optional post-industrial society. It is neither a charitable crusade nor a professional commitment. It is, instead, a strategic opportunity that may be accepted, adapted, or rejected as circumstances warrant. Understanding environmental protection not as an end in itself but as a means to an even more important ultimate goal—survival—encourages us to reflect on the enormous task that lies ahead. For people like me who have contributed to environmentalist causes for many years, this expanded perspective is both humbling and inspiring.

Viewing environmentalism as “others” see it opens space for a new kind of dialogue; stepping back to appreciate environmentalism from the outside in, as I have attempted to do here, encourages us to envision environmental protection as a small part of a much larger process. Identifying tangible links—and forging conceptual ones—between environmental and social predicaments, First Nations activists and those who have heeded their message recognize that social injustice often appears in environmental guises and that holistic well-being demands environmental integrity. Perhaps First Nations environmental leaders (accompanied by others who, to return to the title of the workshop that inspired this edited collection, come to environmentalism “from below”) will carry us beyond environmentalism as we now know it toward the more collective, integrative struggles that are certain to follow. Perhaps, environmental alliances will give rise to an environmental protection paradigm capable of embracing humans as part of “nature” and human rights as a legitimate conservation concern. If we are willing to embrace the heartening possibility that understanding the world and changing it can constitute a unified project, it is likely that this repositioning will engender exciting new thinking about what environmentalism means and, in turn, stimulate constructive new conversations to guide what it might someday become.

## Notes

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- 1 Jonathan Clapperton discusses various perspectives regarding the alleged failure—even the “death”—of environmentalism at the outset of his chapter (Chapter 11, this volume). For a well-known example of this viewpoint, see Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, “The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World,” *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations* 1 (2009): 121–63.
- 2 On the ecological Indian stereotype and its consequences, see Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999). See also Paul

- Nadasdy, “Transcending the Debate over the Ecologically Noble Indian: Indigenous Peoples and Environmentalism,” *Ethnohistory* 52, no. 2 (2005): 291–331.
- 3 See Larry Nesper, Anna J. Willow, and Thomas F. King, *The Mushgigagamongsebe District: A Traditional Cultural Property of the Sokaogon Ojibwe Community* (Mole Lake, WI: Sokaogon Chippewa Community, 2002). The terms *Chippewa* and *Ojibwe* (along with various spellings) are frequently utilized in historical, ethnographic, and legal records to refer to the people who call themselves *Anishinaabe*.
  - 4 In previous work, I have used the phrase *land-based self-determination* to describe the ability to independently make key decisions concerning land, livelihood, and opportunities available to future generations. See Anna J. Willow, “Doing Sovereignty in Native North America: Anishinaabe Counter-Mapping and the Struggle for Land-Based Self-Determination,” *Human Ecology: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 41, no. 6 (2013): 871–84.
  - 5 J. K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink, “An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene,” *Antipode* 41, S1 (2009): 320–46. More recently, Brian Burke and Boon Shear have echoed this point, suggesting that “to describe the world in a compelling way is to change it, and to change the world requires compelling new descriptions.” Brian Burke and Boone Shear, “Introduction: Engaged Scholarship for Non-Capitalist Political Ecologies,” *Journal of Political Ecology* 21(2014): 130.
  - 6 While most unrealized collaborations are never documented, David McNab describes Teme-Augama Anishnabai activists’ 1988 decision to *avoid* working with a non-Native environmental group that opposed the same road extension. In this case, First Nations activists were worried that their land rights issues would be overshadowed by environmentalists’ better-publicized concerns. David T. McNab, “Remembering an Intellectual Wilderness: A Captivity Narrative at Queen’s Park in 1988–9,” in *Blockades and Resistance: Studies in Actions of Peace and the Temagami Blockade of 1988–89*, ed. Bruce Hodgins, Ute Lischke, and David T. McNab, 31–53 (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2003), 49.
  - 7 On the history of American Indians and National Parks in the United States, see Mark Dowie, *Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Robert H. Keller Jr. and Michael Francis Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999); Mark D. Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). For examples from Canada, see Theodore Binnema and Melanie Niemi, “Let the Line be Drawn Now”: Wilderness, Conservation, and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada,” *Environmental History* 11, no. 4 (2006): 724–50; Erin E. Sherry, “Protected Areas and Aboriginal Interests: At Home in the Canadian Arctic Wilderness,” *International Journal of Wilderness* 5, no. 1 (1999): 17–20. See also Jonathan Clapperton, “Stewards of the Earth? Aboriginal Peoples, Environmentalists, and Historical Representation” (PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 2013).
  - 8 George Wenzel, *Animal Rights, Human Rights: Ecology, Economy and Ideology in the Canadian Arctic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991). An additional source to consider on this subject is Teale Phelps Bondaroff and Danita Catherine Burke, “Bridging Troubled Waters: History as Political Opportunity Structure” *Journal of*

- Civil Society* 10, no. 2 (2014): 165–83, which explores the impact of the anti-sealing movement on environmental organization relations directly.
- 9 As Evans (this volume) demonstrates, circumstances vary enormously, but comparative studies of relationships between Indigenous communities and protected areas seem to suggest improvements in integration and indigenous control. For a critical history of fortress conservation, see Dan Brockington, *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserves, Tanzania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002). On community-based conservation, see Fikret Berkes, “Community-Based Conservation in a Globalized World,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 39 (2007): 15188–93; Marshall W. Murphree, “Protected Areas and the Commons,” *Common Property Resource Digest* 60 (2002): 1–3.
  - 10 On informal alliances, see Zoltán Grossman, *Unlikely Alliances: Native Nations and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017); and Zoltán Grossman, “Unlikely Alliances: Treaty Conflicts and Environmental Cooperation Between Native American and Rural White Communities,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 29, no. 4 (2005): 21–43. On formal co-management arrangements, see Paul Nadasdy, *Hunters and Bureaucrats: Power, Knowledge, and Aboriginal-State Relations in the Southwest Yukon* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003); David C. Natcher, Susan Davis, and Clifford G. Hickey, “Co-Management: Managing Relationships, Not Resources,” *Human Organization* 64, no. 3 (2005): 240–50.
  - 11 Paul Nadasdy, “The Anti-Politics of TEK: The Institutionalization of Co-Management Discourse and Practice,” *Anthropologica* 47, no 2 (2005): 220. See also Nadasdy, *Hunters and Bureaucrats*.
  - 12 Based on a study of joint forest management in India, for example, Hildyard et al. argue that merely sitting around the same table is not sufficient so long as access to the tangible and intangible resources that constitute power remain uneven. In order to empower formerly marginalized groups, they propose that “participation requires wider processes of social transformation and structural change to the system of social relations through which inequalities are reproduced.” Nicholas Hildyard et al., “Pluralism, Participation and Power: Joint Forest Management in India,” in *Participation: The New Tyranny?* ed. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (London: Zed Books, 2001), 69. Similarly, Howitt and Suchet-Pearson draw on evidence from wildlife management in Australia to declare that employing “naïve or simplistic accommodations of diversity in ways that deny the embeddedness of power and privilege in social, economic and environmental relations at all scales will reproduce the problems in new forms rather than open up new possibilities.” Richard Howitt and Sandra Suchet-Pearson, “Rethinking the Building Blocks: Ontological Pluralism and the Idea of ‘Management,’” *Geografiska Annaler* 88, no. 3 (2006): 331.
  - 13 See, for example: J. Peter Brosius, “Endangered Forest, Endangered People: Environmentalist Representations of Indigenous Knowledge,” *Human Ecology* 27, no. 1 (1997): 47–69; Beth A. Conklin and Laura R. Graham, “The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-Politics,” *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 4 (1995): 695–710.

- 14 Indigenous activists' goals tend to include political empowerment, self-determination, human health, and economic development in addition to the environmental protection viewed as paramount by most non-Native environmentalists. See William H. Fisher, "Megadevelopment, Environmentalism, and Resistance: The Institutional Context of Kayapó Indigenous Politics in Central Brazil," *Human Organization* 53, no. 3 (1994): 220–32.
- 15 Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada lists a registered population of 1,587, with 970 living on the reserve as of December 2017. "First Nation Profiles," [http://fnp-ppn.aandc-aadnc.gc.ca/fnp/Main/Search/FNRegPopulation.aspx?BAND\\_NUMBER=149&lang=eng](http://fnp-ppn.aandc-aadnc.gc.ca/fnp/Main/Search/FNRegPopulation.aspx?BAND_NUMBER=149&lang=eng).
- 16 On the horrific consequences of relocation and subsequent mercury contamination, see Anastasia M. Shkilnyk, *A Poison Stronger than Love: The Destruction of an Ojibwa Community* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 17 Ibid. Also see Warner Troyer, *No Safe Place* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1977); and Kai Erikson and Christopher Vecsey, "A Report to the People of Grassy Narrows," in *American Indian Environments*, ed. Christopher Vecsey and Robert W. Venables (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 152–61.
- 18 On the health effects of mercury at Grassy Narrows, see Masazumi Harada et al., "Long-term Study on the Effects of Mercury Contamination on Two Indigenous Communities in Canada (1975–2004)," trans. Tadashi Orui, *Research on Environmental Disruption* 34, no. 4 (2005), <http://freegrassy.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Harada-et-al-2011-English.pdf>.
- 19 The lawsuit argued that the hunting and trapping rights guaranteed by Treaty 3 were federally protected under the 1982 Constitution Act and, therefore, that the Province of Ontario had no legal power to grant forestry permits to logging companies. In 2014, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled against the Grassy Narrows trappers (*Grassy Narrows First Nation v. Ontario (Natural Resources)*, 2014 SCC 48 [referred to as *Keewatin*]).
- 20 As noted above, I arrived in northwestern Ontario in May 2003. A constant presence at the blockade site was maintained from its inception through the fall of 2003. It subsequently remained standing in a symbolic sense, with community members present at the site for occasional organized events and frequent impromptu gatherings. The blockade at Grassy Narrows went on to become the longest-standing anti-logging protest in Canadian history. My experience and understanding of the Grassy Narrows blockade are summarized in Anna J. Willow, *Strong Hearts, Native Lands: Anti-Clearcutting Activism at Grassy Narrows First Nation* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012).
- 21 From a 2004 public statement entitled "No More!" <http://www.friendsofgrassynarrows.com> (accessed 6 October 2004, site discontinued).
- 22 Canada, Treaty No. 3 between Her Majesty The Queen and the Saulteaux Tribe of Ojibbeway Indians at The Northwest Angle on the Lake of The Woods with Adhesions (Ottawa: Queens Printer, 1966 [1871–74]).

- 23 An alternate version of the Treaty 3 agreement based on notes taken during the negotiations by a Métis man employed by one of the attendant chiefs to record the event is known the Paypom Treaty and is available online at <http://caid.ca/paypom010208.pdf>.
- 24 See <http://ran.org> for more information on Rainforest Action Network. For information on the Grassy Narrows partnership and anti-clearcutting campaign, see <http://freegrassy.net>. This was not the only partnership important to the Grassy Narrows blockaders. Friends of Grassy Narrows, a grassroots support group founded in Winnipeg, was instrumental in the early period of the blockade. A faith-based witness group called Christian Peacemaker Teams was also a critical ally (see <http://cpt.org> more information on this organization's current activities).
- 25 Personal communication with former RAN staff member, 9 May 2011.
- 26 "Environmentalists Block Highway Near Kenora to Protest Logging," *CBC News Manitoba*, 13 July 2006, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/environmentalists-block-highway-near-kenora-to-protest-logging-1.581630>; Rainforest Action Network, "Grassy Narrows Activists Blocking Trans-Canada Highway to Stop Weyerhaeuser Destruction," Press Release Issued 13 July 2006, <http://freegrassy.net/2006/07/13/grassy-narrows-activists-blocking-trans-canada-highway-to-stop-weyerhaeuser-destruction/>.
- 27 While logging has been suspended in the area since 2008, ending clearcutting remains on ongoing struggle for the Grassy Narrows community. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources' 2012–2022 forest management plan and an adverse Supreme Court decision in July 2014 mean that logging—and direct action protest—may resume in the near future. For more information and updates on the current situation at Grassy Narrows, see <http://freegrassy.net>.
- 28 Interview, 17 June 2013. With a population of just under 250, West Moberly First Nations is a predominantly Dane-zaa (Beaver Indian) community with a significant Cree minority. For additional information, see <http://www.westmo.org/>. Cree people arrived with the fur trade in the late 1700s and have since been incorporated into Dane-zaa families and communities.
- 29 René Fumoleau, *As Long as This Land Shall Last: A History of Treaty 8 and Treaty 11, 1870–1939* (1975, repr., Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004); Robin Ridington and Jillian Ridington, *Where Happiness Dwells: A History of the Dane-zaa First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).
- 30 Fumoleau, *As Long as This Land Shall Last*, 87–88. See also Hugh Brody, *Maps and Dreams: Indians and the British Columbia Frontier* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1981); David Leonard, *Delayed Frontier: The Peace River Country to 1909* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1995); Ridington and Ridington, *Where Happiness Dwells*; West Moberly First Nations Land Use Department, *I Want to Eat Caribou before I Die*, Initial Submissions for the Proposed Mining Activity at First Coal Corporation's Goodrich Property (2009).
- 31 Fieldnotes, 17 June 2013.

- 32 British Columbia First Nations Energy and Mining Council, Treaty 8 Tribal Association, and West Moberly First Nations, *Shale Gas, Cumulative Impacts and Reforming the Current Consultation Process* (Position Paper, 2012).
- 33 These groups include the Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative, David Suzuki Foundation, and the more local Peace Valley Environmental Association. See <http://paddleforthepeace.ca/> for more information.
- 34 On the legal challenge initiated by West Moberly First Nations, see Bruce R. Muir and Annie L. Booth, "An Environmental Justice Analysis of Caribou Recovery Planning, Protection of an Indigenous Culture, and Coal Mining Development of Northeast British Columbia, Canada," *Environment, Development, and Sustainability* 14 (2012): 455–76. See also West Moberly First Nations Land Use Department, *I Want to Eat Caribou Before I Die*. Those interested in the caribou conservation plan should see R. Scott McNay, Debbie Cichowski, and Bruce Muir, *Action Plan for the Moberly Herd of Woodland Caribou (Rangifer tarandus caribou) in Canada* [Draft] (West Moberly First Nations, Species at Risk Act Action Plan Series, 2012).
- 35 Annie L. Booth and Norm W. Skelton, "You Spoil Everything": Indigenous Peoples and the Consequences of Industrial Development in British Columbia," *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 13, no. 4 (2011): 685–702.
- 36 Annie L. Booth and Norm W. Skelton, "'We are Fighting for Ourselves': First Nations' Evaluation of British Columbia and Canadian Environmental Assessment Processes," *Journal of Environmental Assessment Policy and Management* 13, no. 3 (2011): 367–404.
- 37 Boreal Leadership Council, "Free, Prior and Informed Consent in Canada." (September 2012), <http://borealcouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/FPICReport-English-web.pdf>. Uniting First Nations members who want to practise traditional land-based lifeways and determine their homelands' future, environmentalist members who hope to protect as much of the boreal forest as possible, and corporate members who would like to develop the region's resources for sustainable profit, the BLC was established with the goal of identifying commonalities and encouraging constructive conversations concerning environmental use and protection. For more information on the group and its activities, see <http://borealcouncil.ca/>.
- 38 While not an official BLC member, WMFN has attended BLC meetings as an observer since 2010 and contributes to working groups focusing on caribou conservation, shale gas, and FPIC (free, prior, and informed consent). The BLC's recent work on FPIC is part of a growing international discussion and is based on the premise that Indigenous peoples have the right to "participate in decisions affecting their lands and resources" Boreal Leadership Council, "Free, Prior and Informed Consent in Canada," 3.
- 39 Works by contemporary Indigenous authors make this case in a variety of ways. See, for example, contributions to volumes edited by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Lighting the Eighth Fire: The Liberation, Resurgence, and Protection of Indigenous Nations* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2008); Gerald Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).
- 40 Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, "Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism," *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (2005): 597.

- 41 John Sandlos and Arn Keeling, "Claiming the New North: Development and Colonialism at the Pine Point Mine, Northwest Territories, Canada," *Environment and History* 18, no. 1 (2012): 5–34.
- 42 Innu Nation forester Guy Playfair, fieldnotes, 25 June 2012.
- 43 Fieldnotes, 3 August 2012. For more on Poplar River First Nation's conservation history, see Willow, "Doing Sovereignty in Native North America."
- 44 See, for example, Brosius, "Endangered Forest, Endangered People"; Conklin and Graham, "The Shifting Middle Ground"; Fisher, "Megadevelopment, Environmentalism, and Resistance."
- 45 Rainforest Action Network, "American Dream, Native Nightmare: A Report on Weyerhaeuser," (2006), [https://www.ran.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/weyerhauser\\_report\\_1.pdf](https://www.ran.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/weyerhauser_report_1.pdf).
- 46 Rainforest Action Network, "Grassy Narrows Activists Blocking Trans-Canada Highway to Stop Weyerhaeuser Destruction."
- 47 See, for examples of putting a human face to the environment: Susan Burgerman, *Moral Victories: How Activists Provoke Multilateral Action* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).
- 48 Rainforest Action Network, "Catalyzing A Movement," *Greatest Hits, 1985–2010: Rainforest Action Network 2010 Annual Report* (San Francisco: Rainforest Action Network, 2010), 4.
- 49 Personal communication, 9 May 2011.
- 50 Jocelyn Thorpe, "Temagami's Tangled Wild: The Making of Race, Nature, and Nation in Early-Twentieth-Century Ontario," in *Rethinking the Great White North: Race, Nature, and the Historical Geographies of Whiteness in Canada*, ed. Andrew Baldwin, Laura Cameron, and Audrey Kobayashi (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 193–210.
- 51 Arn Keeling and John Sandlos, "Environmental Justice Goes Underground? Historical Notes from Canada's Northern Mining Frontier," *Environmental Justice* 2, no. 3 (2009): 117–25.
- 52 Boreal leadership Council, "Canadian Boreal Forest Conservation Framework," n.d., <http://borealcouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Framework-2015ENG.pdf>.
- 53 Fikret Berkes, "Rethinking Community-Based Conservation," *Conservation Biology* 18, no. 3 (2004): 621–630.
- 54 Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 77. Although concerns related to environmental justice have a long history, the organized movement began in the early 1980s when African American protesters in the southern United States opposed the construction of a toxic-waste landfill (Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990]). The movement subsequently expanded throughout North America and around the

world to encompass multi-ethnic grassroots groups united by their demands for full participation in decisions that impact their communities' health, livelihoods, and immediate surroundings.

- 55 Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415, no. 6867 (2002): 23. See also Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36, no. 8 (2007): 614.
- 56 Egon Becker, "Social-Ecological Systems as Epistemic Objects," in *Human-Nature Interactions in the Anthropocene*, ed. Marion Glaser et al. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 39.
- 57 Keeling and Sandlos, "Environmental Justice Goes Underground."
- 58 Fieldnotes, 17 April 2005 and 5 August 2012.
- 59 Navajo activist Leroy Jackson, for example, died under suspicious circumstances in 1993 during his organization's struggle to protect the Navajo Nation's forests from overzealous logging. See John W. Sherry, *Land, Wind, and Hard Words: A Story of Navajo Activism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

