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From the Magazine

Winter 2022



Bethany Fackrell (right), a member of the Snoqualmie Tribe in eastern Washington, harvests cedar according to traditional sustainable practices in May 2020. Photo: Sabeqwa de los Angeles/Snoqualmie Indian Tribe Communications & Multimedia Design Dept.

From Audubon Magazine

# How Tribes Are Reclaiming and Protecting Their Ancestral Lands From Coast to Coast

*Three recent examples address historic wrongs and showcase a conservation vision guided by Indigenous values.*



By Chris Aadland  
Contributor, Audubon magazine

Winter 2022

Birds in This Story

Bald Eagle

Latin: *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

Western Meadowlark

Latin: *Sturnella neglecta*

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Since settlers arrived in the United States, tribal nations have lost nearly 99 percent of their lands through treaty cessions, forced migration, theft, and devastating government policies designed to erode Native sovereignty and culture. These wrongs coincided with the destruction of habitat and wildlife populations that tribes had long lived alongside and actively shaped in beneficial ways.

By the late 19th century, an emerging conservation movement began efforts to stem damage to the environment but didn't concern itself with past and ongoing atrocities toward Native Americans. Like the government, it, too, perpetuated and embraced policies to take land and restrict Indigenous practices.

Today some land and wildlife managers, officials, and conservationists are beginning to recognize these injustices and appreciate the power of Indigenous methods, such as prescribed burns, to maintain resilient ecosystems. That goes to the highest levels: The U.S. Secretary of the Interior, [Deb Haaland](#), and National Park Service Director, Charles F. Sams III, both the first Indigenous leaders in their positions, are now facilitating greater tribal involvement in overseeing federal public land—all of which was once Indigenous land. In June, for

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example, the Interior Department formalized a historic partnership with five tribal nations to co-manage Bears Ears National Monument in Utah.

Many nations are also now finding ways to regain some of the ancestral terrain they lost, such as by purchasing property, cultivating land donations, and partnering with conservation groups and agencies. While tribes have been reclaiming homelands since at least the early 1900s—and numerous obstacles and challenges still exist—the movement sometimes dubbed “Land Back” is picking up momentum, says Cris Stainbrook, president of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation. “Land forms the jurisdiction, really, for tribal nations,” he says. “The more inside their boundaries, the more solidified their sovereignty is.”

While each tribe has its own reasons for acquisitions, such as building much-needed affordable housing, many are acting with an expansive conservation vision at the center of their agenda. They aim to heal generational trauma, enhance their culture and language, and revive traditional hunting, gathering, and cultivation practices—all while protecting and restoring key habitats and wildlife species and often welcoming public visitors.

From [California](#) to [Kansas](#) to [New York](#), recent examples span the country. The three highlighted here showcase how returning land to tribal stewardship seeds a better future for everyone.

## Return of the Range



western Montana, again belongs to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Photo: Tailyr Irvine

When the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes’ ancestors ceded more than 20 million acres to the federal government in the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, they believed their people would live in perpetuity on the 1.25-million-acre Flathead Reservation. But the United States changed its mind.

During **the allotment era** from the 1880s to 1930s, Congress turned over parcels of reservation land to non-Indigenous homesteaders and individual tribal members, undercutting tribal government control. By 1934 the tribes held only 30 percent of the original Flathead Reservation in western Montana. These losses upended their ways of life, including a symbiotic relationship with bison for food, shelter, supplies, and customs, says Tom McDonald, tribal council chair of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). He, like many people, calls the animals buffalo.

In this time, the great irony of the National Bison Range was born. Seeing the buffalo's precipitous decline—the result of a federal strategy of encouraging the animal's slaughter to push Native peoples off their lands across the West—a tribal member named Little Falcon Robe established a free-roaming herd on the Flathead Reservation. By the early 1900s it was the nation's largest remaining one. But then allotment policies fractured the landscape and forced the animals' sale.

Soon after, spurred by wealthy conservationists rallying to save the species, President Theodore Roosevelt took 18,800 acres of the Flathead Reservation (an action a federal court ruled unconstitutional in 1971) to create the **National Bison Range**, one of the nation's first wildlife refuges, in 1908. To stock it, officials bought bison belonging to the reservation's original herd and installed fences to keep wildlife in—and Native Americans out. "It was like an island in the middle of the reservation that the tribes weren't welcome to," says McDonald.

Now it's theirs again. This spring the CSKT held a celebration of the transfer of the Bison Range from the Interior Department back to the tribes. The long-sought action was part of a larger deal in which the CSKT relinquished thousands of off-reservation water-right claims in exchange for a nearly \$2 billion trust to improve its water supply.

Today the tribes' natural resources department is managing the herd, using fire to maintain grasslands, eliminating invasive species, and restoring native ones. The work builds on the CSKT's modern conservation leadership: They created the nation's first tribal wilderness area, helped reintroduce locally extinct Trumpeter Swans that have spread beyond the reservation, and crafted a climate change plan.

The transfer creates new opportunities and challenges, says McDonald. People are moving to and visiting the region at historic rates, with tourists driving through the reservation to Glacier National Park. The CSKT aim to open a second Bison Range visitor center and entrance on the main road to Glacier to reduce the carbon footprint of exploring the refuge and to attract more people, whose fees are needed to help fund operations. And in contrast to the historic era of homesteaders flooding the West, the tribes now have a better chance to shape newcomers' relationships to the landscape. They'll share their history, culture, and ways of living—and how those practices carry into the future.

Buffalo have survived disease and slaughter, McDonald notes, and as drought- and heat-tolerant creatures, they'll be resilient to climate warming. The CSKT will use stock from its herd to support other tribes restoring bison. Meanwhile, across the West, bison ranching is on the rise, and ecologists are embracing the species' role in maintaining healthy prairie. The mammals graze grasses to varying heights, creating bird nesting habitat

### Visitor Tip

Seek out buffalo, elk, and dozens of bird species as you wind along the Bison Range's three wildlife viewing drives. First, **stop at the visitor center** to pay a \$10 vehicle entry fee and explore exhibits about the site's tribal history, culture, and wildlife. You'll learn the Indigenous names and significance of species you may spot: The song of Western Meadowlarks, for example, heralds summer's return. For a tougher trek, buy **a permit** to hike the Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness.

and water-filled wallows. McDonald is excited to share the message: “The time of the buffalo is coming,” he says. “They are a perfect symbol for endurance: that persistence will prevail.”

## A River of Revival

Anne Richardson still recalls her father, then the Rappahannock Tribe’s chief, shedding tears 25 years ago when he entered the tribe’s new cultural center. “He said, ‘I never dreamed that I would live to see the day that we would have this back in our community—a place where we can gather and be together and be protected,’” she says.

Soon after, Richardson succeeded him as the fourth elected chief in her family of the Rappahannock in Virginia. Her ancestors **were among** the first Indigenous peoples of the United States to encounter Europeans. In 1608 when John Smith famously traveled the Rappahannock River, he documented Native villages as they volleyed arrows at him from the cliffs. By the 1640s illegal settlers encroached, and in the 1660s, forced removals began. More than 300 years later, in 1998, Richardson and others revived a long fight to restore sovereign rights to her people. In 2018 the tribe finally received federal recognition for the first time.

Earlier this year the tribe achieved another milestone: acquisition of 465 acres of woodlands and towering rock face overlooking the east side of Rappahannock River and its marshlands near Chesapeake Bay. The area, called Fones Cliffs, was once the site of at least three Rappahannock villages, and today it’s one of the most important nesting habitats for resurgent Bald Eagle populations on the East Coast. “Because the eagles are sacred birds to us, we don’t want to do anything to disturb them. We’re so glad they’ve come back,” Richardson says. “I believe that they’ve come back there waiting for us to return.”

Several organizations **helped facilitate** the return of the land, where an ancestral village called Pissacoack stood. The tribe worked with conservation groups for years to fend off development on the larger Fones Cliffs area. A small portion was protected as part of the nearby Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge, the site of another village called Wecuppom, in 2019. Later, a landowner approached the tribe and offered to sell his parcel, and a close partner, the Chesapeake Conservancy, worked with donors and grant providers to strike a deal. The nonprofit transferred the fee title to the tribe and a conservation easement to the FWS. Now Richardson, the Conservation Fund, and the other partners are seeking a way to protect a developer’s larger parcel—which the **fund bid on** in a sale in a bankruptcy auction in November—and preserve the iconic cliffs forever.

Activities at Pissacoack are ramping up as the tribe prepares to open the land to the public, possibly as soon as 2023. They are planning a network of trails and a replica 17th-century village, Richardson says, “so people can learn the truth of how we lived and who we are.” She also is expanding their **Return to the River program**, which trains tribal youth about traditional ecological practices, culture, and skills such as canoeing. John Smith once wrote he could “walk” on the river’s fish. That density, Richardson notes, was thanks to her ancestors’ stewardship. Today the Rappahannock are advising scientists on work to restore river herring—a traditional subsistence food—that have declined so drastically that they’re now illegal to fish in Virginia.

### Visitor Tip

Search for Bald Eagles when you visit Fones Cliffs, part of a globally significant **Important Bird Area** that hosts one of the East Coast’s densest populations of the species. Though the Rappahannock land isn’t yet open to the public, enjoy the area’s wildlife at the nearby **Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge**. Or canoe or kayak on a portion of the 3,000 miles **of water trail** known as the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. For a taste of the Rappahannock Tribe’s culture, seek out tickets to its annual powwow, held most recently **in October 2022**.

During a land transfer ceremony in 2022, Richardson once again saw elders weep: Though the Rappahannock already had some land, this expansive ancestral home on the tribe's namesake waterfront hits differently. "It's a strong foundation for long-term sovereignty for the tribe—like a stake in the ground, so to speak," Richardson says. Tribal youth didn't cry at the event; they exuded excitement. "They know that this is really all being done for them," she says. "They have a responsibility now to steward this land into the future."

## A Place of Their Own

At more than twice the height of Niagara Falls, Snoqualmie Falls is a breathtaking sight to some two million yearly visitors who come to relax, canoe, and hike 30 miles east of Seattle. But for the **Snoqualmie people**, one of Washington's most popular attractions has a deeper meaning. It's the site of their creation story, a place where tribal members pray, and a part of the ancestral lands where they've gathered plants, fished for salmon, and hunted deer and elk since time immemorial.

Since the late 1980s the tribe has fought to protect the land immediately around the falls from myriad threats, including development and desecration by visitors who may be unaware of its importance, says Jaime Martin, the tribe's executive director of governmental affairs and special projects. As part of its push to gain more authority over the falls area and halt development, the tribe purchased the Salish Lodge & Spa and surrounding 45 acres in 2019.

More recently, Martin and other tribal members **formed the** Snoqualmie Tribe Ancestral Lands Movement to raise broader awareness of the region's Indigenous history and provide visitors with steps to reduce their impact. With an increase in helicopters and drones hovering at low elevations at the falls, the tribe **is also** lobbying for airspace regulations.

In February the tribe **announced** another key acquisition: 12,000 acres of forest on the Tolt River, which flows into the Snoqualmie River. A vast majority of tribal members voted to approve the deal for a landscape they'll exercise full control over. "There was a lot of support for this idea of being able to connect to this space under our own terms and really execute sovereignty," Martin says.

Now known as the Snoqualmie Tribe Ancestral Forest, the parcel is near an area where the federal government had once promised the tribe a reservation but never provided one. The consequences of that failure reverberated through the 20th century: The tribe's landless status made it easier for the U.S. government to terminate its federal recognition under destructive 1950s-era Indian assimilation policies and to continue violating its hunting and fishing treaty rights. It wasn't until 1999 that the Snoqualmie people regained federal recognition, enabling them to secure a small reservation elsewhere. Today the tribe is one of the Snoqualmie Valley's major employers.

With the acquisition of the Ancestral Forest, the tribe has hired a wildlife biologist and is creating a management plan and meaningful names for numbered and unnamed roads. The former tree farm had been densely planted and logged for more a century, and the tribe will work to thin its trees to restore healthy ecological function. Included in any plan, Martin says, will be goals to restore or maintain habitat for wildlife such as Marbled Murrelets, Northern Spotted Owls, and mountain goats.

Snoqualmie members of older generations who worked in the timber industry, partly to stay connected to their ancestral lands, can now take part in reviving the habitat, says Martin. Particularly exciting is the chance to restore and cultivate traditional medicinal and edible

### Visitor Tip

The Snoqualmie Tribe's ancestral lands include busy recreation spots such as Snoqualmie Falls, Mount Si, and

species, such as wapato and camas, that tribal members can gather as they see fit. “There’s healing that comes from this property,” she says, “not just in being able to control what happens there, but also getting to physically be out in the environment and be a part of caring for it.”

She hopes to see more land managers consult tribes on key issues that affect them and involve tribes in land stewardship. For the foreseeable future, access to the Ancestral Forest will be limited to tribal members. So many other Snoqualmie ancestral lands, including the falls and other popular areas, are enjoyed by others. This is a place just for them.

Lake Sammamish. Be a respectful guest by **following the tribe’s pointers**: Dispose of trash and pet waste, stay on trail, and **acknowledge** you’re recreating on tribal ancestral land. Adopt an attitude of “mindfulness, rather than conquest,” they advise. This lesson applies to any natural area you visit. Learn about a place’s Indigenous history and the issues important to tribes there today.

*This story originally ran in the Winter 2022 issue as “Back To Their Land.” To receive our print magazine, become a member by [making a donation today](#).*

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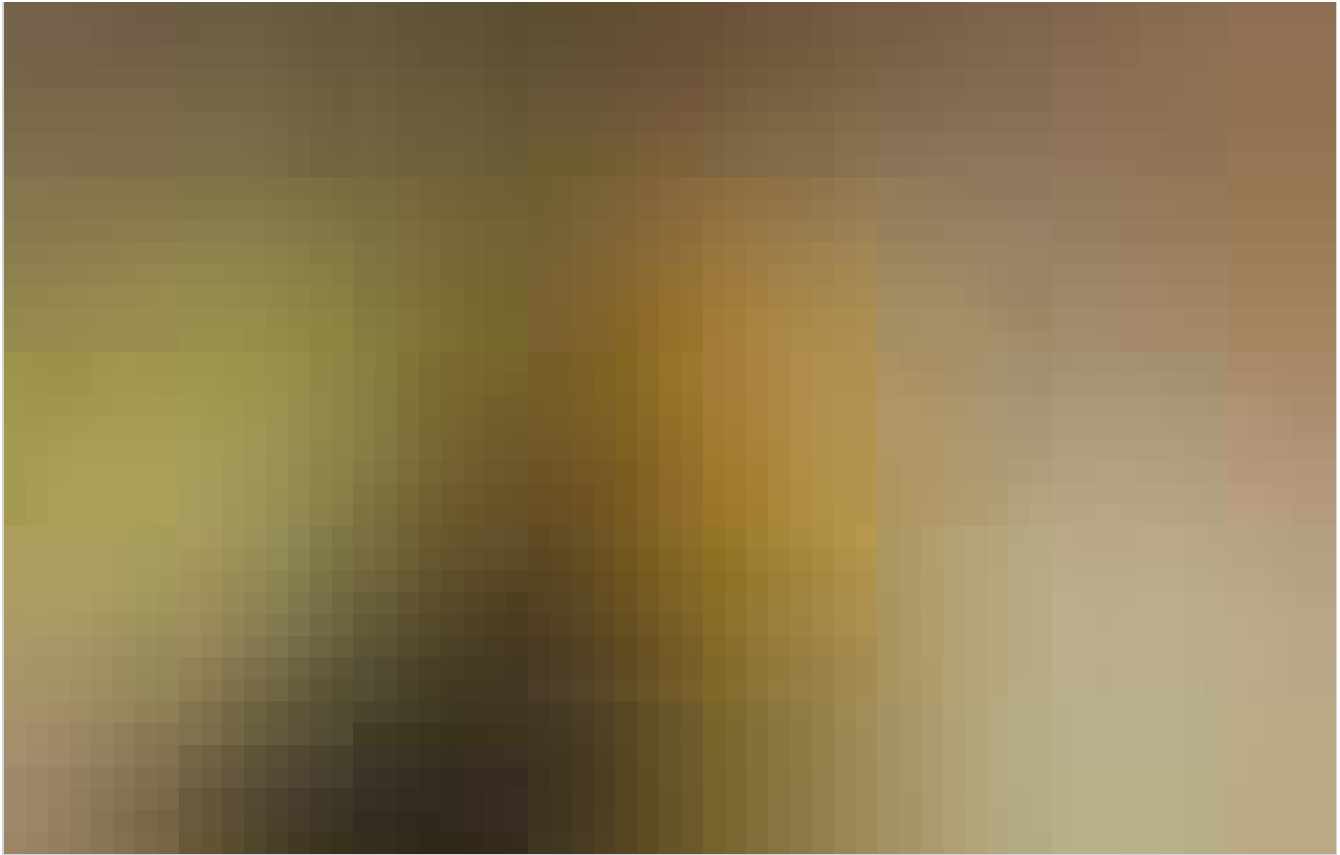
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