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<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-04122-x>

OPEN

From paternalism to self-determination: examining evolving tribal-federal relationships and co-management arrangements through three case studies

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As governments around the world seek to develop and implement co-management practices with Indigenous peoples and local communities, there are many questions about how to foster collaborative and just agreements that support self-determination. Despite policy advancements enabling more co-management and shared stewardship within the United States (U.S.), possibilities for co-management are complicated by historical injustices that have hindered Tribal access to ancestral land and cultural practices. We use a multiple case study approach, examining three case studies from the Western U.S. that illustrate challenges facing Tribes and interventions used to improve land management relationships. The first case study focuses on the relationship between the Oglala Sioux Tribe and the U.S. government and highlights that historical injustices continue to affect Tribal land management. The second case study explores the collaborative management of Bears Ears National Monument, showcasing a decolonized approach endorsed by Tribes seeking to reclaim their inherent rights to the land. The third case study examines the Snoqualmie Tribe as an example of a sovereign Tribe embodying the concept of “Land Back.” Tribes have utilized strategies, such as co-management, coalition building, and land reacquisition, to maintain control over lands important to their populations. These strategies promote power-sharing, resource distribution, trust-building, and the integration of Indigenous knowledge with Western science. Nonetheless, failure to recognize and account for the weight of broken treaties, discriminatory laws and policies, and the historical trauma caused by these injustices emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamics surrounding Tribal land management. As government-led land management paradigms around the world shift to consider self-determination of Indigenous nations and communities as a critical piece of improved stewardship, decision makers have many historically-informed dynamics to consider when shaping future co-management practices. **KEYWORDS:** co-management, Indigenous, “Land Back”, stewardship, Tribes, and sovereignty.

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Introduction

Increasingly, settler colonial states around the world are identifying opportunities to leverage thousands of years of Indigenous land management practices to improve both environmental outcomes and relationships with Indigenous communities (Schmidt and Peterson, 2009; Brooks, 2022; Mustonen et al., 2022). In the United States (U.S.), federal policies continue to advance opportunities for Tribal co-management, broadly referencing the movement towards increased Tribal authority in federal public land management and decision-making processes (Lefthand-Begay et al., 2024; Stark et al., 2022). Understanding Tribal co-management first involves delving into the ongoing impacts of land dispossession and genocide on Native peoples in the U.S. (Madley, 2016). These injustices have significantly affected American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) access to land and cultural practices, serving as barriers to the full realization of their sovereignty (Brooks, 2022). Although Tribal sovereignty is inherent to federally-recognized Tribes in the U.S., colonial systems have excluded them from management decisions for centuries (Diver, 2016). Specifically, under the 19th century ideology of Manifest Destiny, the U.S. government forcibly displaced Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands to make way for settlers, leading to a series of treaty negotiations that were often coercive and unjust (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). The U.S. pursued Tribal territory acquisition, prioritizing the safe passage of settlers—such as miners, missionaries, trappers, traders, Oregon Trail travelers, and railroad workers—over the wellbeing of Tribes (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). As settlers moved West, the Dawes Act of 1887 divided reservation lands into allotments. Consequently, many Western Tribes were relocated to reservations, giving up their remaining ancestral lands to the U.S. government (Dorman, 2018). Scholars, such as Mendoza et al. (2019) and Pevar (2024), have outlined the Dawes Act and several other significant federal Indian policies, clearly describing the policies of colonialism and dispossession. In the 21st century, Tribes persist in their efforts to regain ancestral lands to strengthen Tribal sovereignty and self-determination, remedy past injustices of land dispossession, and promote sustainable environmental practices that protect life for present and future generations.

Despite forceful relocations, many Native Americans resisted, making significant sacrifices to remain in their ancestral homelands (U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Solicitor, 2020). By 1934 the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) was passed as an effort to reverse and end the assimilationist policy of the Dawes Act and promote self-governance and self-determination for U.S. Tribes. Through increasing Indigenous activism, starting in the 1970s, Tribes advanced the legal and political foundation for Tribal co-management of U.S. public lands. Under the landmark Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975, Tribes fought for the authority to petition certain agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Indian Health Service (IHS) for contracts to operate federal programs (Washburn, 2022). Successive Tribally-driven legislation, including the Tribal Self-Governance Act of 1994, the Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004, and the Farm Bill of 2018, further expanded Tribal authority and created opportunities for partnerships between Tribes and federal land management agencies (FLMAs) such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service (USFS) (Stark et al., 2022; Washburn, 2022). With legal and political infrastructure in place to support Tribal co-management of public lands, federally-recognized Tribes have been actively working to achieve their goals and values, fostering community and land healing through the revision of co-management approaches. Fundamental to advancing self-determination is representation of Tribal leaders in key-decision making roles where their influence

and power can guide the advancement of the interest and rights of Native communities, particularly in regard to land management and sovereignty.

U.S. federal legislation and standards of practice increasingly acknowledge Tribal expertise, as evidenced by House Resolution 6032; the Katimíin and Aameekyáaraam Sacred Lands Act; the Memorandum on Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Federal Decision Making, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Regarding Interagency Coordination and Collaboration for the Protection of Indigenous Sacred Sites; and the MOU Regarding Interagency Coordination and Collaboration for the Protection of Tribal Treaty Rights and Reserved Rights (McGrath et al., 2022). These developments offer a critical opportunity to study self-determination trends in land arrangements (Jacobs et al., 2022; Stark et al., 2022). In fact, while U.S. federal changes are underway, certain Tribes are making even greater progress. Notably, the “Land Back” movement, led by Indigenous people advocating for the return of land to Tribal nations, is playing a crucial role in strengthening Tribal sovereignty and self-determination (Fisk et al., 2021). This article provides insights into the shifting power dynamics that have influenced land management in the U.S. By examining three case studies of Tribes who have asserted their sovereignty and self-determination through prominent land management relationships, valuable lessons can be learned that can be applied on the international stage (Mills and Nie, 2022). This paper examines three case studies that highlight the complex relationship between the U.S. Tribes and the government in regard to co-management, land stewardship and Tribal sovereignty. The central focus is on addressing the research question: How do historical injustices, changing power dynamics, and evolving Tribal-federal relationships influence the progress of Indigenous Tribes in the U.S. towards greater levels of sovereignty and self-determination in land management and co-management practices?

Methodology

Decolonial positionality statement. In this paper, we employ a decolonial theoretical approach to our analysis by examining the legacies of colonization on American Indians in the U.S., and by centering and upholding the voices of Indigenous peoples (Kovach, 2009, pp. 80–82). We are a research team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers spanning three universities, a U.S. federal research institute, and members and leaders of Tribal communities who either currently or previously represented their own Tribal governing bodies. Lastly, we followed the terminology style guide recommended by the Native Center Governance Center (2004) and capitalized specific words such as “Indigenous,” “Treaty Rights,” “Tribe,” and “Tribal” regardless of their usage as part of a proper noun.

Research design. We used a multiple-case design to gain a deeper understanding about the events leading up to shared stewardship agreements, including MOUs (Yin and Campbell, 2018). In particular, we were interested in cases where the U.S. government has formal agreements with at least one Tribe. To select cases, we employed a purposive sampling approach. We included cases when sufficient information in the literature were available about the issues around co-management, collaborative management and/or shared stewardship (or similar terms) such as the Tribal-federal relationship, the evolving strategies to come to agreements, and the role Tribes have taken in these dynamics over time. Lastly, we picked cases that separately reveal variance in co-management agreements. Using a historically informed understanding of processes of

Table 1 Key insights on Tribal-federal relationships regarding land management and stewardship, including a description of how each key insight appeared within the findings by case study.		
Key Insight	Description	Case Study
Historical and Ongoing Injustices	The historical treaties and coercive arrangements, such as the Horse Creek Treaty (1851) and the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868), have perpetuated cycles of dispossession and marginalization among indigenous communities like the Oglala Sioux Tribe.	Oglala Sioux Tribe
Shifts Towards Collaborative Management	Initiatives like the establishment and resizing of Bears Ears National Monument under different U.S. administrations demonstrate the evolution and challenges within collaborative management frameworks. This reflects a shift from paternalistic oversight to partnerships that are based on somewhat mutual trust and recognition of Tribal sovereignty.	Bears Ears National Monument
Evolving Approaches to Tribal Sovereignty and Co-Management	The Bears Ears National Monument case illustrates changes in governance where Tribes lead efforts advocating for the collaborative management of sacred lands. Unlike historical interactions, this represents a shift from paternalistic oversight to trust and partnership. The Snoqualmie Tribe study regarding the “Land Back” movement, further shows progress in acknowledging and reinstating tribal sovereignty, displaying a current era where Tribes actively seek and gain significant control over land management, reflecting greater self-determination.	Bears Ears National Monument and Snoqualmie Tribe
International Influences on Tribal Policies	U.S. federal policies towards Tribal rights and land management are increasingly aligning with international norms like the UNDRIP, which advocate for enhanced Indigenous participation and rights.	All

colonization, we present three cases, from oldest to newest co-management arrangement.

Tribal co-management typology. Tribal co-management is a collaborative approach to land and resource management that involves the sharing of power, responsibilities and decision making between Tribal communities, governmental agencies, and other entities (Mills and Nie, 2021; Stark et al., 2022; Washburn, 2022; Glendenning et al., 2023).

Considering these case studies, we developed a typology of Tribal co-management that is specific to the U.S. federal and Tribal interaction. Drawing inspiration from Murray (2023), we leveraged their framework as the foundation of our analysis, integrating Tribal sovereignty into the discourse. Our typology centers on the degree of control and the nature of partnerships among the Tribal community, government agencies, or other entities. We classify four primary types of co-management arrangements in this study.

- **No Tribal input:** In the past, federal agencies ignored input from Tribal nations in co-management decisions, reflecting the historical concept of manifest destiny. Despite this historical precedent, Tribes resisted and negotiated to maintain control over their lands and protect their cultural practices. As Tribes assert their sovereignty more firmly, the outdated practice of excluding Tribal input is no longer acceptable in the U.S., especially as more Tribes adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), such as Article 25.
- **Consultative co-management:** Tribal-federal consultation requires federal agencies to consult with Tribes as part of land management decisions, as mandated by statutory requirements. This process leads to formal agreements that enhance cooperation and compliance between Tribes and agencies.
- **Collaborative co-management:** This structure includes a governance framework where decision-making responsibilities and authority are shared collaboratively between Tribal nations and government agencies.
- **Tribal Sovereignty and Self-determination:** This marks a shift towards the full recognition of Tribal sovereignty, with

Tribal nations progressing towards entirely Indigenous-led models. Actions and initiatives aimed at reclaiming ancestral lands by Tribal nations and peoples in order to support their sovereignty, self-determination and to strengthen their connection to their culture and environment.

These four types of Tribal co-management are viewed along a non-linear spectrum, where the level of Tribal control and self-determination progresses from minimal Tribal involvement to full decision-making power.

Data collection and analysis. We conducted a search of peer-reviewed and gray literature including journal articles from a wide range of sources such as websites from governmental, nonprofit organizations, Tribal nations, reports written by Tribal entities and U.S. government agencies and news articles. Literature was identified by searching university databases (e.g., Environmental Complete) and Google. Keywords were used and hand-searched references were included. This research did not warrant human subject requirements because data were mainly collected from secondary sources, with one exception where up-to-date information was lacking and was supplemented with personal communication with park staff. We analyzed the cases to identify patterns across the data sources, and we synthesized our findings described in the literature.

Results
Land injustices between the U.S. government and the Oglala Sioux Tribe. After decades of war and escalating tensions resulting from an influx of settlers and the displacement of the Oglala Sioux Tribe the federal government and Tribes across the Plains, especially the Oglala Sioux (hereinafter referred to as the Oglala) began negotiating peace terms, even though it was not the preferred course of action for some Native peoples (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). As a result, the U.S. Congress and the Oglala, along with more than seven Northern Plains Tribal Nations, signed the Horse Creek Treaty, also known as the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 (Fort Laramie Treaty of, 1851, 1851; Harjo, 2014; Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian [NMAI], 2016; National Park Service [NPS], 2022) (Table 1). The treaty delineated territorial jurisdiction among signatories, guaranteed

infrastructure such as shelter, and established a U.S. government military post and railroad within reservations (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2016). It also acknowledged the reserved rights of Tribes to access traditional hunting and fishing sites. However, upholding unanimous agreements in the Horse Creek Treaty was challenging, given settler migration and a changing landscape, and the numerous signatories who were at stake. Disputes over provisions sometimes led to fatal retaliations (U.S., 1867). On the U.S. side, after making only one payment to the Oglala, the government moved to ignore or abrogate the treaty (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2022).

After 17 years of discord, the Treaty of Fort Laramie 1868 was signed between the Sioux (Brule, Oglala, Miniconjou, Yanktonai, Hunkpapa, Blackfeet, Cuthead, Two Kettle, Sans Arcs, and Santee), Arapaho, and the U.S. government, with a primary focus on peaceful coexistence and the establishment of reservation boundaries. Article One specified that “from this day forward all war between the parties to this agreement shall for ever cease” (U.S. Congress, 1867). Article Two defined land boundaries as “absolute and undisturbed use and occupation” by the Sioux Tribe, and in doing so began to further delineate reservation lands (U.S. Congress, 1867; Egli, 2019). Similar to the 1851 treaty, the 1868 treaty reserved hunting and fishing rights, allowed safe passage for settlers, building of railroads, and establishment of military structures.

After the signing of the Treaty of Fort Laramie 1868, ongoing contention prevented the attainment of a lasting peace. Instead, discontent grew among the Tribes due to limited access to buffalo hunting and dissatisfaction with unmet annuities and provisions, such as flour, meat, sugar, blankets, money, clothes, and housing, all provisions stipulated in the Treaty (Marsh, 1875). The U.S. government’s distribution of spoiled meat, sugar, and flour to these Tribes demonstrated a blatant disregard for the treaty, and even the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs (BIA Commissioner) was unaware of his duty to ensure proper distribution (U.S., 1875). In 1874, Red Cloud, a respected Tribal leader and a signee of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, set into motion an investigation that brought attention to the mismanagement and fraud of these supplies at the Red Cloud Agency and along the Great Plains (Marsh, 1875). On May 28, 1875, leaders of the Oglala Sioux, including leaders Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, met with the Assistant Secretary and BIA Commissioner in Washington, DC. In that meeting, Red Cloud described the conditions at the Red Cloud Agency to be bitterly cold with provisions that were of extremely poor quality and with insufficient blankets and other supplies to keep anyone warm (U.S., 1875, p. 832).

Later that same year, U.S. representatives traveled to the Plains to investigate the poor conditions reported to them by previous Tribal leaders and others. In an interview held on August 16, 1875, between U.S. representatives and a council representing the Brule Sioux, Good Hawk stated:

[...] At the old agency we know that our agent did treat us well and gave us provisions, but, from that time on, our provisions have decreased regularly, until now there is a great deficiency. The sugar we received here was just as yellow as the sun-flower, and it was so bad that it killed some of our people, and you can see the graves of those on the hill yonder, who died from eating the sugar. (U.S., 1875, p. 503)

In 1874, the discovery of gold in the Black Hills brought a flood of settlers, derailing previous efforts under the Treaty of Fort Laramie 1868. The government sought to purchase the sacred Black Hills from the Sioux Nation, but the Oglala refused to cede these spiritually and culturally invaluable lands. This conflict

culminated with a military conflict, referred to as the Great Sioux War, between the U.S. and the Great Sioux Nation (Utley, 2004, p. 41–42). This war consisted of numerous battles, one of which was the Battle of Little Bighorn, where Tribal warriors, backed by other nearby Tribes, handily defeated the 7th Cavalry Regiment of the U.S. Army, killing Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and several hundred U.S. Army soldiers (Deloria, 1985, p. 64). In the following months, once warriors from neighboring Tribes had returned home, the U.S. Army augmented its forces and returned to defeat the Sioux. As a consequence of the U.S. Army’s victories on the battlefield, the government compelled the 1877 Manypenny Agreement that forcibly appropriated 900,000 acres of the Black Hills against the Tribe’s wishes (Doctor, 2011).

In addition to inflicting an enormous loss of territory, the 1887 Dawes Act opened up lands to be sold to white settlers that were previously held for the benefit of the Tribes. The Act sought to quickly assimilate Native peoples into the dominant colonial culture (National Archives, n.d.). Thus, the Act precipitated a dramatic restructuring of Tribal society, fragmenting communal land holding arrangements by assigning parcels of 160 acres to individual Native households. Any remaining land was deemed surplus and made available to European homesteaders (Deloria, 1985; Malan, 1958). This posed a threat to the cultural wellbeing of Tribal members by physically breaking family bonds and destabilizing cultural worldviews (Merjian, 2010). Shortly after, in 1889, the Great Sioux Reservation was further divided into six reservations, including the Pine Ridge Reservation, abrogating previous treaties and dividing Tribes in their resistance to the growing power of the U.S. government (H. Rep. No. 1686, 1895; Greene, 1970).

The U.S. also criminalized crucial aspects of Tribal culture. In December 1890, the U.S. Army perpetrated the Wounded Knee Massacre, killing nearly 400 children, women, and men. Shortly thereafter the Ghost Dance, an Indigenous movement that through dance envisioned the reunion of traditional territories to Native peoples along with a new era of peace, was outlawed (Deloria, 1985). In this same attack, the government assassinated Sitting Bull, a spiritual leader, as means to weaken the influence of the Ghost Dances on Tribes. During the massacre, many Lakota sought and found safety from the U.S. Cavalry in what is now the South Unit of Badlands National Park, leading to its nickname, “The Stronghold,” as a place where the last Ghost Dances were held. This area is still considered by Tribal members as a healing place with strong medicine (Bills, 2013). Despite the opposition Tribes faced, the Ghost Dance represents a powerful example of Native resistance to colonization and cultural suppression. It also serves as a reminder of the importance of spiritual and cultural practices in Native communities and the ways in which they have been used in times of hardship and struggle.

As Tribal members resisted and fought against the settlement and occupation of their land, scientists at the time began to view the Badlands as a valuable site of paleontological research, and with the construction of the railroad across South Dakota in the early 1900s, white settlement grew rapidly (Mattison and Grom, 1968). In 1909, the South Dakota legislature petitioned the U.S. government to designate the township of Badlands as a National Park. In 1929, on his last day in office, President Calvin Coolidge authorized the Monument (Mattison and Grom, 1968). Coinciding with the Great Depression and Dust Bowl, some white settlers were unable to make a living off the land, leading to some of them selling their land back to the U.S. government. As a result of acquisitions and sales, the boundaries of the National Monument shifted across the years and continued to change through the 1970s as the shape and size of Badlands evolved (see Mattison

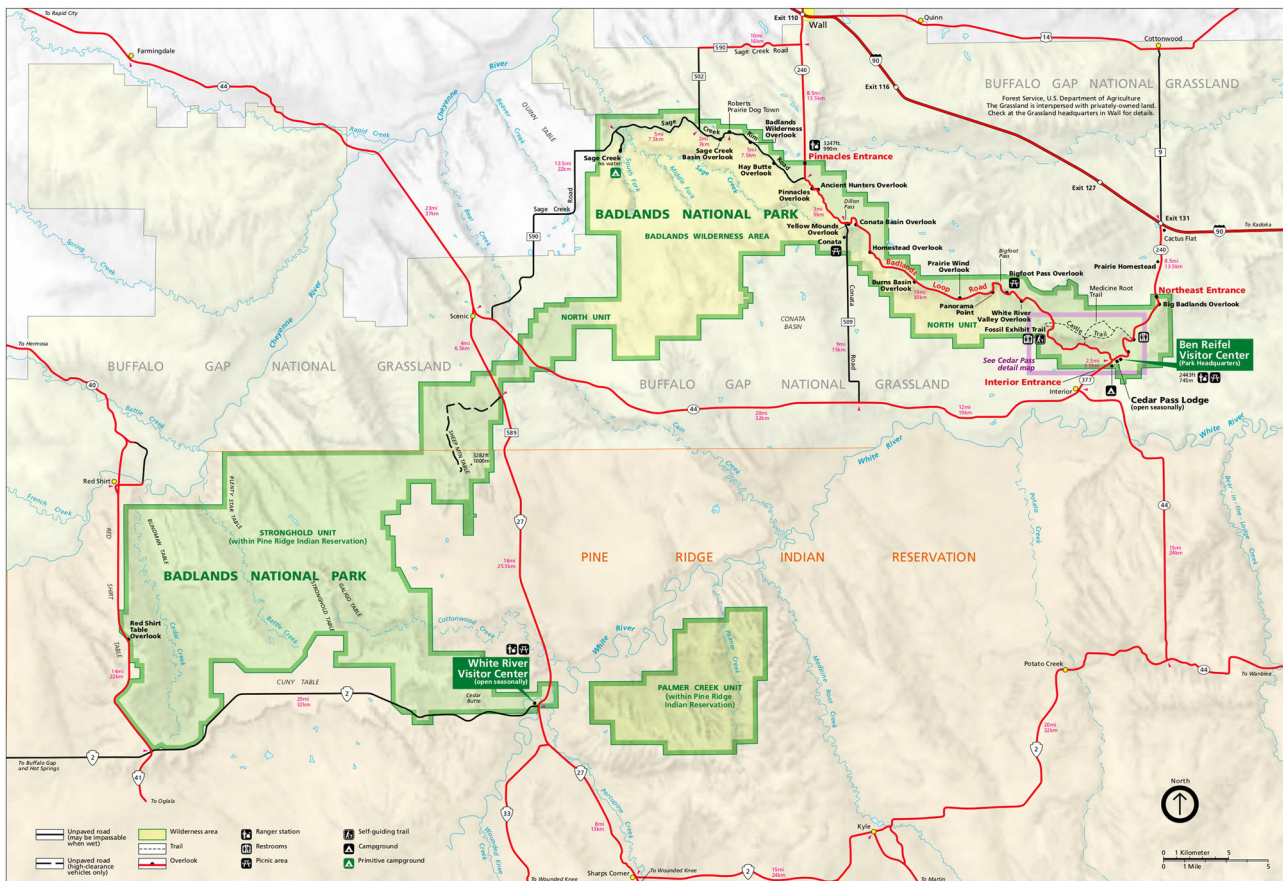


Fig. 1 Present day map of Badlands National Park, including the North Unit and South Unit, showing an overlay with the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation (Courtesy: National Park Service, 2021).

and Grom, 1968, section 5). Eventually, the South Unit, which comprised 133,000 acres held by the Oglala, was included in the Monument's expansion (Fig. 1).

In 1942, during World War II (WWII), the U.S. government signed an agreement with the Oglala's Council to remove 341,725 acres of land from the Pine Ridge Reservation to be used as a gunnery and bombing range (Bills, 2013; Lovell, 2014). This resulted in the forced removal of 125 Tribal families from their land, under the false promise that it would be returned once the U.S. no longer needed it (Lovell, 2014). However, even after the U.S. was no longer using the land, 2,500 acres were held by the Air Force, and the rest was never wholly returned to the Tribe, leading to ongoing struggles over land tenure (Brewer and Dennis, 2019). The declaration that the remaining land was considered "excess" led to the Oglala competing with former individual landowners, the FWS, and the NPS (Upton, 2015). Ultimately, in 1968, Congress decided that 133,000 acres of the former bombing range, Tribal land previously resided on by the Oglala, would be transferred to the Department of the Interior, held in trust for the Tribe, an act that Upton (2015) referred to as "little more than extortion" (p. 114). The DOI decided that this land would expand the neighboring Badlands National Monument, managed by the NPS (Public Law 90-468), ultimately creating the South Unit of the Badlands National Park (Bills, 2013; Lovell, 2014).

Under the management of the NPS in 1976, the Oglala and the NPS signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to detail the arrangement whereby half of the visitor entrance fees for the Badlands would be paid to the Oglala Sioux Parks Board twice a year, which would provide a relatively significant income to the

Tribal government (Oglala Sioux Tribe of South Dakota and NPS, 1976). In 2012, these fees totaled around \$650,000, comprising four times the NPS annual budget for the South Unit (Bills, 2013). The MOA also mandated that the NPS and the Tribe jointly develop and lead training opportunities, develop interpretive programs, build a cultural heritage center, and manage and protect natural and cultural resources, including continued Tribal access to the area for hunting and fishing activities (Oglala Sioux Tribe of South Dakota and NPS, 1976).

In 2012, Tribal leaders and the Badlands Park Superintendent signed an updated general management plan for the South Unit of the Badlands National Park that envisioned the potential of converting the area into a Tribal National Park (Bills, 2013). For some, a Tribal National Park offered hope for a new generation of Oglala Sioux Tribal members of the Pine Ridge Reservation in their fight for authority over lands, self-determination, and dignity, and presented the opportunity for an entirely new management paradigm for other Tribes across the country (Bills, 2013). The redesignation as a Tribal National Park held possibility of autonomy in management, federal funding for development of amenities, and full management and staffing of the park by Oglala Sioux Tribal members, yet since that signing, pending Tribal action has stalled progress towards that vision (Zach, 2016).

While the management planted the idea of a Tribal National Park as significant achievements, some community members believe that the relationship between the Tribe and the Park still heavily favors the federal government, giving them unilateral power over the Tribe (Bills, 2013). This perception stems from a lack of federal investment in the necessary infrastructure of the

Tribally-connected South Unit, as well as ongoing federal supervision of the land (Bills, 2013). Furthermore, Tribal members face difficulties in accessing the promised benefits of the 1976 MOA. For example, obstacles like navigating cumbersome federal hiring systems, limited internet connectivity, and inadequate housing and transportation options pose obstacles to federal employment.¹ Despite the potential for reconciliation offered by the MOA and the 2012 General Management Plan, the Sioux continue to contest the Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1868, which they perceive as perpetuating a colonial ideology (Cutlip, 2018). Consequently, the path towards reconciliation remains uncertain and fraught with tension.

Collaborative management of Bears Ears National Monument.

The cultural, environmental, historical, and scientific significance of Bears Ears dates back millennia (Executive Office of the President [EOP], 2017; 2021). As Zuni Tribal member Phillip Vicenti explained:

The importance of Bears Ears for our people is through our ancestral sites that were left behind eons ago by our ancestors. They documented the sites by using oral history, pictographs, and by leaving their belongings. When we visit Bears Ears, we connect with our migration history immediately without doubt. (Wilkinson, 2018, p. 319)

This deep-rooted connection, appreciation, respect, and intrinsic responsibility were key drivers in efforts by local Tribes to protect and preserve these sacred spaces for past and future generations.

Tribes play a crucial role in the protection of ritual ceremonies and traditions important to land management using traditional knowledge. Bears Ears is a living cultural landscape, providing Tribal elders an opportunity to convey to the younger generation their origin stories. Alfred Lomahquahu, former Hopi co-chair of the first Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition (BEITC) group, reflects that Bears Ears, “is a part of our footprints, a path that tells a story. History is crucial to man because it tells us who we are. Those who lived before us have never left. Their voices are part of the rhythm or heartbeat of the universe and will echo through eternity” (Wilkinson, 2018, p. 319).

The Bears Ears area holds immense cultural and spiritual significance for many generations, providing a place of healing and connection for Tribal citizens, elders, youth, and ancestors alike (Baca, 2017; Lee, 2021; Wilkinson, 2018). Tribal nations use this sacred land for traditional cultural and ecological practices that serve as a source of rejuvenation (Lopez-Whiteskunk, 2016). Through an Indigenous-led movement, the importance of these practices is being emphasized and elevated:

For Native people from the Four Corners region, Bears Ears is a sacred landscape where the spirits of the ancestors still dwell. Certain medicinal plants grow only in this area, and important ceremonies are performed here. Because of its diverse terrain ranging from red rock canyons to alpine mountains, local Ute and Navajo people also depend on this area for firewood collection and subsistence hunting—crucial sustainable resources in a notably arid region. (Bsumek, 2023, p. 11)

On July 16, 2015, around 100 people gathered for a full-day meeting at the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation, serving as the inaugural gathering to establish the five Tribal sovereigns who would lead the BEITC (Wilkinson, 2018). After this meeting, Tribal members maintained the energy and momentum by insisting on a different approach for Bears Ears that reflects their expertise and knowledge systems. In a meeting held in August

2015, every hand in the room went up in agreement when Regina Whiteskunk, former Chair of Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, stood up and said, “We have been talking all day about what kind of management we want, and we have a spectrum and we understand that spectrum.... I want to say I am for very strong collaborative management. Everyone in favor, raise your hand” (Krakoff, 2018). This show of unity and determination set the tone for future decisions made by the Coalition.

Originally conversations with the Diné Bikéyah, an Indigenous-led non-profit organization based in the southwestern U.S., led to negotiations between the region’s Tribes, local officials, the state of Utah, and U.S. congressional representatives. Their goal was to develop a plan that would safeguard a 1.9-million-acre land area, known for its ecological fragility and archeological significance, located in some of Utah’s most remote and rugged lands (Murphy and Baca, 2016). On October 15, 2015, a coalition of five Southwestern Tribes—namely the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and Pueblo of Zuni—requested that then-President Barack Obama utilize his authority under the federal Antiquities Act to permanently protect the sacred Bears Ears region by designating it as a national monument (Krakoff, 2018; Executive Office of the President, 2021). This Tribal proposal called for the “collaborative management” of the Bears Ears between the U.S. and the Tribes through the Coalition (Krakoff, 2018; Wilkinson, 2018). On December 28, 2016, after multiple meetings between federal officials and the Coalition, President Obama signed Proclamation 9558, which established Bears Ears as a 1.35-million-acre national monument, making it the first national monument proposed by U.S. Tribes (Franz, 2021). The proclamation acknowledged the significance of Tribal voices both past and present in the Monument and as a foundational aspect of a collaborative management approach, and in doing so, called for the BLM, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the USFS to work collaboratively with the members of these five Tribes through the establishment of the Bears Ears Commission, or simply the Commission (Krakoff, 2018; Franz, 2021; U.S. Department of the Interior [DOI], 2022a). The creation of the Commission marked an important shift in the United States’ management of federal lands by seeking to meaningfully involve Tribal authorities in the development, protection and management of a national monument. Though President Obama’s proclamation still maintained important limits on the Commission’s authority, the model ensured that Tribal representatives had a critical seat at the decision-making table.

While the proclamation was cause for celebration among the Coalition and representative Tribes, the establishment of the Monument erupted in political controversy, with pressure from Utah’s federal and state politicians demanding that the national monument designation be revoked (Tipple, 2017; Wilkinson, 2018; Franz, 2021). In April 2017, 3 months into his term, President Donald Trump issued an executive order to conduct a review of all national monuments proclaimed since 1996 that were over 100,000 acres, and provide a report within 120 days (Tipple, 2017; Ruple, 2019).

On December 4, 2017, the Trump administration drastically reduced the size of the Bears Ears National Monument by excluding 1.15 million acres (~85 percent) of federal lands that had been designated by President Obama and formulating two smaller, separate areas: the Indian Creek and Shash Jaa’ units (Executive Office of the President, 2017; Branch and Cordalis, 2018; Penn-Roco, 2018; Britton-Purdy, 2019; Franz, 2021; Executive Office of the President, 2021). Many thought that the decision to shrink the protected area was motivated by energy and mining development interests (Eilperin, 2017; Branch and

Cordalis, 2018). The move not only renamed the Commission established by President Obama to the Shash Jáa Commission, but also brought about significant changes in its members, constituents, and authority under new federal leadership (Penn-Roco, 2018; Franz, 2021). At the time, DOI Secretary Zinke claimed to have consulted with coalition Tribes in formulating the report that led to President Trump's actions, but key Tribal leaders disputed Zinke's claim (Franz, 2021). According to Penn-Roco (2018), Carleton Bowekaty, Lieutenant Governor of the Pueblo of Zuni and former co-chair of the Coalition, as well as councilman David Filfred, a delegate for the Navajo Nation, stated:

It is time to set the record straight. The President, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, the Utah congressional delegation and Utah's governor did not consult with us in making their decision to shrink Bears Ears. This is the work of powerful politicians playing the same old game, and attempting to bring the swamp to southern Utah. They did not work with us, despite their claims that they heard the voices of Tribes. The voice of the Navajo Nation, the Hopi Tribe, the Ute Indian Tribe, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe and the Pueblo of Zuni has been uniform, consistent and loud: Protect our homelands, histories and cultures by preserving the Bears Ears National Monument. (Penn-Roco, 2018, pp. 39–40)

Despite the external political chaos, the Coalition of Tribes established a solid and unwavering unity that served as a crucial factor in decision-making. Nonetheless, President Trump's proclamation weakened Tribal control over their sacred lands and excluded significant Tribal input in the shaping of the Shash Jáa Commission (Franz, 2021). Clark Tenakhongva, vice-chairman of the Hopi Tribe, criticized the administration's approach, stating it “shows the Trump administration's disrespect of their trust responsibility to our Tribal nations, their utter dismissal of our government-to-government relationship, and their serious disregard for our cultural patrimony” (Franz, 2021).

This setback intensified the determination of the Tribes. Supporters of Obama's Proclamation pointed to the fact that the Antiquities Act of 1906 granted the President the legal authority to declare federal lands—either owned or controlled by the federal government—as a national monument through public proclamation, but it did not confer upon a subsequent President the power to revoke, modify or shrink already-established monuments (Tipple, 2017; Branch and Cordalis, 2018; Penn-Roco, 2018). On December 4, 2017, armed with this knowledge, the Coalition sued President Trump, Secretary Zinke, the Director of BLM, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the Chief of the USFS challenging the changes to the monument (Complaint for Injunctive and Declaratory Relief, 2017; Penn-Roco, 2018). This Tribal suit was joined by others brought on behalf of a coalition of environmental, conservation, and outdoor recreation groups and all were eventually consolidated from three lawsuits into one specifically related to Bears Ears (Robinson, 2018). The lawsuits asserted that shrinking a national monument by the President was a violation of the Antiquities Act and the U.S. Constitution, and that President Trump had “exceeded” his authority and acted unlawfully (Penn-Roco, 2018; Macary and Gillig, 2022).

As the legal challenges persisted, the political winds shifted in 2021, when newly-elected President Biden issued Proclamation 10285, restoring a significant portion of the Bears Ears National Monument, by designating over 1.36 million acres as a monument under the Antiquities Act, less than ten months into his term (Executive Office of the President, 2021). The Biden Proclamation stated:

Protection of the Bears Ears area will preserve its spiritual, cultural, prehistoric, and historic legacy and maintain its diverse array of natural and scientific resources, ensuring that the prehistoric, historic, and scientific values of this area remain for the benefit of all Americans.

The collaborative management of the Bears Ears monument, as outlined in both Biden's Proclamation and Obama's Proclamation 9558, clearly defines the roles of the USFS and BLM (Executive Office of the President, 2021). The USFS manages boundaries within the NFS as a part of the Manti-La Sal National Forest, while the BLM manages the remainder of the monument as a unit of the National Landscape Conservation System. Each of these agencies are responsible for creating management plans, which they will then discuss and consult with the Monument Advisory Committee, the Bears Ears Commission and other Tribal nations and stakeholders to gather input and discuss recommendations (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2016; Bureau of Land Management, 2021; Executive Office of the President, 2021). On June 18, 2022, the USFS, BLM, and five coalition Tribes collaborated and signed a cooperative agreement to protect and manage Bears Ears National Monument (Bureau of Land Management, et al., 2022). As per the agreement, members of the Coalition would assist with the development of the Monument's management plan and provide insights into their traditional systems of land stewardship. They would assist in coordinating, engaging, and supporting the planning, management, and implementation of conservation, restoration, and protection efforts for Bears Ears (Bureau of Land Management, 2022).

The ephemeral nature of governing bodies can greatly impact cultural preservation and conservation efforts as priorities may change at the policy level. When the federal government fails to safeguard cultural landscapes important to Native peoples, Tribal nations and partnering organizations become essential in upholding Indigenous identity and heritage (Fletcher et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2011). The protection of Bears Ears is a notable win and a testament to persistent advocacy, but it remains vulnerable to potential legislation by Utah and shifts in federal leadership. Tribal sovereignty and the incorporation of Indigenous values facilitated a collaborative approach to land management, resulting in the preservation of Bears Ears (Asay et al., 2022; Lee, 2021). Decades of consistent effort by Tribal nations have successfully safeguarded lands of shared historical, spiritual, and cultural significance (Smith, 2020).

The achievements of the Snoqualmie Tribe in the “Land Back” movement.

Broadly, the “Land Back” movement is a growing Indigenous movement that “addresses the root pain of colonization—the theft of Indigenous lands, alienation of lands for resource extraction, the violence and genocide committed against Indigenous peoples for statehood and capitalism, and the hundreds of years of devastating aftereffects” (Pieratos et al., 2021, p. 51). The land back movement, being a relatively new concept, is still a topic of ongoing discussion. In a recent article, the term “Land Back” is used to describe the gradual transfer of specific federal public lands to trust status for individual tribes through federal legislation, subject to various stipulations, over the past several decades. While presented as a valuable tool for Tribes, it has been limited in both scale and scope thus far (Glendenning et al., 2023). Another perspective, as reported in a news article (Ishisaka, 2022), defines “Land Back” as a movement and set of initiatives focused on Indigenous peoples reclaiming their ancestral lands to support their sovereignty, self-determination, and connection to their culture and environment. Scobie et al.,

2024 reinforces the notion that Land Back constitutes Indigenous communities advocating for their sovereign access to their ancestral lands, which extends beyond the confines of reservation land determined by the government. Jaime Martin, the Snoqualmie Tribe's executive director of governmental affairs, characterized the Land Back movement as "a whole spectrum of policies, actions, and initiatives all working to restore and reclaim Native ancestral lands" (Ishisaka, 2022; Snoqualmie Tribe, n.d.). In Washington, 30 miles southwest of Seattle, one federally recognized Tribe, the Snoqualmie Indian Tribe, or simply the Snoqualmie is practicing a "Land Back" approach to great success.

The Tribe refers to themselves as *sdukʷalbiw* translating to "People of the Moon" due to their deep relationships with local rivers and especially the Snoqualmie Falls, a 268 foot-waterfall (hereafter referred to as the Falls) (Snoqualmie Tribe, 2021). Due to its cultural significance as a sacred site to the Snoqualmie people, Snoqualmie Falls is listed as a Traditional Cultural Property on the National Register of Historic Places (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1990). Guided by responsibility to and for the land, the Snoqualmie prioritize the safeguarding of their sacred sites, ancestral lands and waters. The Falls have served as a location for past and ongoing prayers and ceremonies for the Snoqualmie (Krishnan, 2005; Snoqualmie Tribe, 2019). Moreover, this awe-inspiring natural wonder is not only considered a gift from their creator but is also believed to be the place where their first man and woman emerged (Krishnan, 2005; Snoqualmie Tribe, 2019).

Unfortunately, the treaty history between the Snoqualmie Tribe and the U.S. government mirrors a familiar pattern of conflict surrounding broken promises. Although this conflict between the Snoqualmie and the U.S. spans several centuries, the signing of the Point Elliott Treaty in 1855 marked the official beginning of a complex struggle for land ownership by the Snoqualmie people (Governor's Office of Indian Affairs, n.d.). The purpose of this treaty was to define new land boundaries, and provide similar provisions of those in other treaties with U.S. Tribes. The Snoqualmie, like many Tribes in the Pacific Northwest, reluctantly signed this treaty, which guaranteed them reservation lands and recognized their sovereign rights to hunt, gather, and fish in those territories (Snoqualmie Tribe, 2020b). However, like in other cases, the U.S. government failed to uphold their obligations outlined in this treaty and never legally transferred the reservation land to the Snoqualmie (Dorman, 2018). This failure would result in the Snoqualmie losing federal recognition because the federal government implemented policies only recognizing Tribes with lands during the Termination Era as federally-recognized. This would later hinder the Tribe's efforts to reclaim their lands, presenting Tribal members with tremendous challenges to maintaining a continuous connection to the land, water and knowledges that define and sustain their livelihood and well-being since time immemorial (Dorman, 2018).

With the passage of the Dawes Act, Snoqualmie reservation lands were divided into allotments by the U.S., and the Snoqualmie were relocated to other reservations, giving up their remaining ancestral lands to the government (Dorman, 2018). Yet many Snoqualmie individuals fiercely resisted the loss of their land and continued to advocate for return of their ancestral homelands in the Snoqualmie Valley (U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Solicitor, 2020). In this effort, the importance of land to the Snoqualmie Tribe was acknowledged, which led to the federal government promising them a reservation in the Tolt River Valley. However, once again, this promise went unfulfilled. Instead, the federal government declared the Snoqualmie as a landless Tribe during the Termination Era, rendering them ineligible for federal recognition (Fixico, 1990). This vicious cycle persisted for decades,

where land, taken by force, was paradoxically required in order for the Tribe to receive federal recognition, yet the Tribe was unable to claim land because they were not federally-recognized.

In 1999, after decades of relentless effort by the Snoqualmie for federal recognition, their status was reaffirmed, ultimately enabling them to purchase land as a Tribal government and establish government-to-government relations with both federal and other Tribal governments (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1997; Dorman, 2018). With land acquisitions, the Snoqualmie Tribe has regained jurisdiction and autonomy to manage the lands in accordance with their economic and ecological values, including through Tribal enterprises and natural resource conservation priorities in a rapidly urbanizing part of Washington (Opong, 2022). For example, following the purchase of 12,000 acres of the Snoqualmie forest, which had been operated as a commercial tree farm for over a century, the Snoqualmie Tribe has prioritized sustainable forest management over timber production, balancing ecosystem and economic health in their planning and operations (Snoqualmie Tribe, 2022a).

Another big purchase by the Snoqualmie Tribe came in 2019 when they acquired additional lands back in the City of Snoqualmie. Specifically, the Tribe purchased the Salish Lodge and forested land from the Muckleshoot Tribe, a nearby Tribe located just south of Snoqualmie. By purchasing the land, the Snoqualmie Tribe was able to achieve its goal of ceasing any plans to develop a conference center, hotel, and more than 100 homes which were permitted to be built on the adjacent forested lands (Cornwell, 2019).

The Snoqualmie Tribe has secured Tribal sovereignty through federal recognition, enabling them to independently manage their land and potentially move beyond co-management agreements. However, there remain barriers to complete autonomy for Snoqualmie, particularly regarding culturally and spiritually significant sites like Snoqualmie Falls. Currently, Puget Sound Energy owns and operates the hydropower plant at Snoqualmie Falls, preventing the Tribe from purchasing the Falls. Although these plants generate 53 megawatts of energy for parts of the U.S. (Puget Sound Energy, n.d.), their operations are considered a desecration by Snoqualmie Tribal members. Over time, the Snoqualmie people's sovereignty, culture and wellbeing have been disregarded while the hydropower corporation benefits from the energy and profits produced by the hydropower plants at Snoqualmie Falls. Other Tribes in the Pacific Northwest have similarly felt the impacts from the legacy of hydroelectric power (Sadin, et al., 2011). The Snoqualmie could seek to address this issue through co-management or another collaborative approach that empowers them to define land determination in their own way, but full legal ownership of the Falls is the only way for them to fully protect their sacred site. Their connections to the ecosystems, rivers, and falls are paramount in this process (Snoqualmie Tribe, 2020a; Snoqualmie Tribe, n.d.).

Over the past century, the Snoqualmie Tribe has made significant strides in reclaiming their ancestral lands. Starting with the Point Elliott Treaty and progressing to their federal recognition, each step has brought them closer to their goal. In just 22 years since their federal re-recognition, the Tribe has successfully regained ownership of over 12,000 acres of their homelands. This accomplishment exemplifies the Land Back movement occurring nationwide. By acquiring this land, the Snoqualmie not only restore ownership but also gain the ability to implement their own visions and values in land management. This shift represents a departure from co-management to primary ownership, accompanied by new forms of Tribally-led land management.

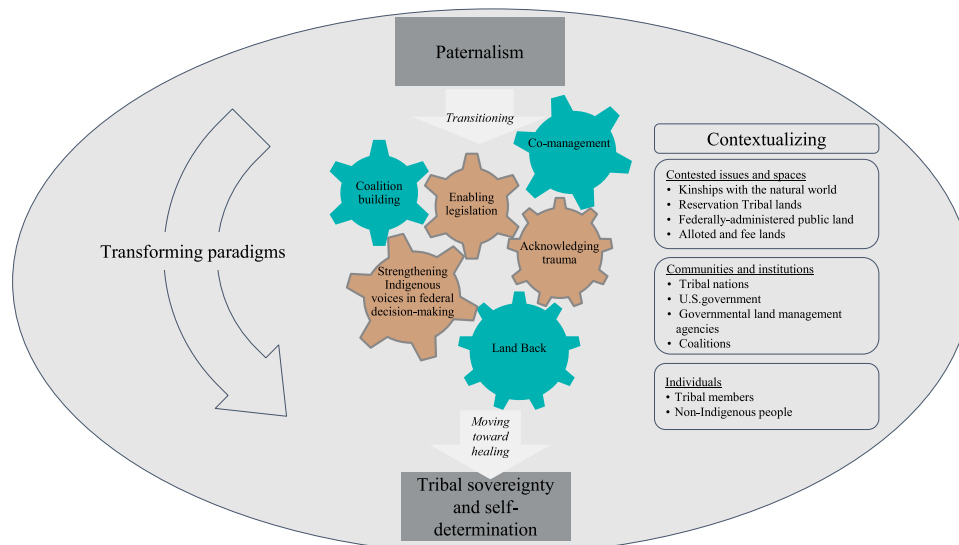


Fig. 2 A conceptualization of the integral processes driving the transition from paternalism to Tribal sovereignty and self-determination. These processes occur within an embedded context of contested issues and spaces, are negotiated across communities and institutions, and are driven by individuals from across different groups. As we move through this process, Tribal nations are transforming the paradigm of land management, leading us towards healing and new visions for self-determination.

Discussion

The colonization of Indigenous peoples resulted in treaties that restricted land access to enforce assimilation. Despite policies promoting paternalistic dynamics, Indigenous peoples in the U.S. have consistently resisted these genocidal acts, recognizing the importance of their ancestral lands for their worldviews, well-being, and environmental responsibilities. Therefore, reclaiming land is also a reclamation of Indigenous autonomy.

Acknowledging trauma in the relationships between Tribal Nations and the U.S. Federal Government. When taken out of context, elements of these case studies may initially appear minor or merely part of the compromises that come with negotiations between two governmental entities. For instance, in the case of Badlands National Park, in 1942 the U.S. government and the Oglala reached an agreement to remove 341,725 acres from the reservation to be used as a bombing range for WWII efforts. This agreement was made under the promise that land would be returned after the war was over. It is possible that Tribal citizens, also U.S. citizens, may have considered this as a significant display of their patriotism and commitment to the war effort. Indeed, many Tribal citizens contributed to war efforts by enlisting in the armed forces where, for instance, they also contributed significantly as code talkers (Aaseng, 2009; Meadows, 2003). Still, following the war, the land was never returned but was designated as DOI National Park land, with an offer to the Tribe for co-management. Notably, NPS officials still held ultimate decision-making power. Without considering historical and ongoing traumas, this change in plans might be perceived by some as an unfortunate turn of events. However, for the Oglala, it represents another broken promise dating back to the Treaty of 1868 and adds to the list of traumas they have endured throughout history at the hands of the U.S. government. Recognizing the Native peoples' genocide in the U.S. is significant to land management relationships and co-management agreements (Jacobs et al., 2022). Whyte (2016, p. 131) argues that colonialism inherently and strategically undermines the social resilience and self-determination of Indigenous communities, hindering their "collective continuance" and ability to adapt and

avoid "reasonably preventable harms." In this context, the removal of Oglala Sioux Reservation land without following through on its return, would likely not be perceived as a trivial transgression, or an inherent characteristic of compromise. Instead, it would be perceived as the perpetuation of a system where sacred land was obtained by the government under false pretenses to be bombed, and then returned pock-marked with the offer of co-management. In other words, Badlands' case study exemplifies what Whyte (2016, p. 138) refers to as an "insidious loop", which is a pattern in which historic settler industries that initially violated Indigenous peoples are also implicated in subsequent acts of environmental violence many years later. The political vacillation in decision-making by different presidential administrations regarding the inclusion and subsequent exclusion of significant portions of the Bears Ears National Monument further underscores this insidious loop. Recognizing and fully acknowledging the political context surrounding land management discussion is a crucial step towards healing. These case studies did not show any evidence of acknowledging trauma within these arrangements. This could be due to an informal process happening behind the scenes, or the possibility that it did not happen at all, which could impact the development of relationships required for genuine engagement towards Tribal-federal co-management (Brooks, 2022). Wong et al., (2020) have documented the persistent compartmentalization of natural resources and social systems that hinders a comprehensive understanding of the interconnections between colonial legacies, land management, and the pursuit of full self-determination. We emphasize the importance of fully acknowledging these deep histories and dynamics to raise awareness among those involved in co-management arrangements and mitigate the likelihood of perpetuating harmful cycles.

The gears driving the progress from paternalism to self-determination. The three case studies explored herein highlight that, for Tribes and Indigenous communities, the path from governmental paternalism to self-determination is not linear. We suggest that progress is driven by a variety of interlocking processes that interact in complex ways. Figure 2 provides a

conceptual illustration of six important interlocking gears driving the process. The green gears represent the varying levels of acknowledging Tribal sovereignty in land management processes. The brown gears are processes that are generally fundamental to the land management processes. All six processes can occur simultaneously, influence each other, take place within the context of contested issues and spaces (e.g., federally administered lands), and involve broad communities and institutions of individuals with diverse identities.

For instance, experiences from a co-management process can be influential in making progress towards a more decolonized approach. For example, the 1976 MOA between the Oglala and the government was viewed by some as simply institutionalizing federal government paternalism, perpetuating the unjust methods originally used to seize their ancestral lands, and driving them into a co-management arrangement that prioritizes the U.S. government's interests (Bills, 2013). In contrast, the collaborative management of Bears Ears National Monument is viewed as a decolonized approach endorsed by Tribes to reclaim their rights to the land. They stand united against external forces, recognizing that political fragmentation does not serve their cause. Despite this, some scholars question whether this coalition of Tribes' efforts to gain sovereignty involves a degree of mirroring the State. The argument is that this could potentially deepen assimilative outcomes (Nadasdy, 2017). In this way, Tribal governments may benefit politically from "seeing like a state" while Tribes and Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to the land might be sidestepped in the process (Wilson, 2019).

The Snoqualmie Tribe exemplifies self-determination and "Land Back" by promoting cultural responsibilities in response to historical injustices (Native Movement, 2021; NDN Podcasts, 2023). Land loss has deeply affected the lives of Indigenous peoples, impacting their identity, sovereignty, and health (Native Movement, 2021; NDN Podcasts, 2023). By acknowledging the trauma of colonization and leveraging the existing processes available, Tribes can work towards breaking insidious loops that are typical of relations with the federal government. Indeed, the reacquisition of land is crucial for the cultural revitalization, ecological restoration, and socio-economic development of all Tribes and promotes healing from historical trauma through land reconnection. Ultimately, this movement centers on the cultural responsibilities to the land and living in healthy relationships with ancestral territories (Native Movement, 2021).

The Snoqualmie Tribe is also an example of a sovereign Tribe embodying "Land Back," illustrating the principles of self-determination that can promote a return back to Indigenous cultural responsibilities. For instance, "Land Back" not only advocates for land reclamation but also urges a significant shift in land management (Jacobs et al., 2022). It promotes moving from co-management models to fully supporting the rights of Indigenous peoples to make their own decisions about their ancestral territories. This shift empowers Indigenous communities with authority over the use and preservation of their lands for both current and future generations. Such decision-making has the ability to center Indigenous knowledge systems and stewardship practices. Furthermore, it offers the possibility of reducing or halting environmental injustices that impact ecological and social wellbeing, such as the chronically harmful extractive practices like mining that impact several Tribes (Corntassel, 2021; Fisk et al., 2021; Petriello et al., 2024; Thompson, 2020).

Returning Tribal lands and advancing Tribal land management. Another step in this transformation is currently underway. Not all Tribes are financially able to repurchase their ancestral

lands, and in some cases, this may not be the most ideal approach, especially considering the broken treaties, and discriminatory legal frameworks such as the Dawes Act, which favored settler acquisition of land (Smith, 2021). In 2023, in an article by *High Country News*, Rosalyn LaPier stated that "the federal government should be ready to return public land to Tribes who want it now, without requiring co-management as a first step" (Smith, 2023). Although this statement specifically referred to the Bison Range managed by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, it represents a broader perspective on the return of lands to Tribal nations and the potential deprioritization process of co-management as an option. As an example, in October 2023 the City of Minneapolis sold land to the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians for a nominal fee of two dollars. By securing land for this Tribe, they can establish vital services for their constituents and move closer to healing their citizens.

While initiatives like these demonstrate localized steps toward repatriation and empowerment in land ownership, broader policy shifts also signal significant developments at the federal level, which can reinforce these localized efforts. For example, under the direction of the first Native American DOI secretary, Deb Haaland, new guidance was announced to "advance Tribal co-management of federal public lands and waters" (Department of the Interior, 2022b). The guidance details how each agency will support collaborative management with Tribes (Bureau of Land Management, 2022; U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2022; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2022). As another example, Indigenous representation in key decision-making roles is evident in the recent USFS Tribal Action Plan, which focuses, in part, on enhancing co-stewardship with Tribal nations and fulfilling trust and treaty obligations (U.S. Forest Service, 2023). As guiding core principles for co-management, the documents will further the goals of an unprecedented joint secretarial order that calls for greater efforts to engage in co-stewardship (DOI and U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). These developments in the U.S., along with an increasingly expansive scope of Tribal co-management and land back agreements, offer a critical opportunity to determine and comprehend the extent of future co-management and land stewardship practices in settler colonial states (Stark et al., 2022; Sène, 2024). Moreover, despite existing tensions and disagreements, the invaluable knowledge systems of Tribes in land stewardship are increasingly valued, recognized, and shaping dynamic conversations.

Conclusions

In this work, through three cases of land management and land stewardship we examine how historical injustices, changing power dynamics, and evolving Tribal-federal relationships influence the progress of Indigenous Tribes in the U.S. towards greater levels of sovereignty and self-determination in land management and co-management practices (Table 1). These case studies offer a unique perspective on land stewardship in the U.S. The insights gained from these perspectives are not only relevant in the U.S. but also have implications on a global stage as settler colonial states navigate challenges in addressing international demands for environmental justice and respect for Indigenous rights (Sène, 2024). Our examination of these studies—ranging from the historical injustices of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, through the collaborative efforts at Bears Ears National Monument, to the proactive "Land Back" movement of the Snoqualmie Tribe—reveals a significant evolution in Tribal-federal relationships within the U.S. (Fig. 2). The trajectory from paternalistic

oversight to partnerships marked by growing mutual trust and shared governance underscores a pivotal shift towards enhanced Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

The historical backdrop of this analysis underlines the violations of Tribal sovereignty, where land dispossession and genocide have severely affected Native access to culture and wellbeing. Reflecting on this dynamic, it is evident that acknowledging historical injustices is instrumental in redressing them and provides a foundation for evolving equitable policies. Recent legislative changes and changing Tribal governance models not only heed the calls for justice but align domestic policies more closely with international norms like UNDRIP, advocating for strengthened Indigenous participation and rights. This alignment has been significant in mediating past conflicts and supporting environments where Tribes can thrive.

The efforts of Tribes, seen through the “Land Back” initiatives and collaborative management at Bears Ears, highlight how Indigenous groups are empowering themselves and proactively asserting their rights. These cases exemplify proactive engagement with federal entities, leading to more effective stewardship and protection of cultural and environmental values held by these lands. In addition, by integrating Indigenous knowledge systems and leadership in land management, we move toward enhancing sustainability efforts that benefit the broader community.

Such movement allows us to progress toward self-determination underpinned by Indigenous representation within the federal government in key decision-making roles. As the Tribal-federal governance relationship adjusts to encompass respect, recognition, and genuine collaboration, the promise of further empowering Tribal nations is optimistic. Future policies should continue focusing on empowering Tribal governance, incorporating Indigenous systems of knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge, and ensuring that collaborative management structures not only exist but flourish.

As support for the principles outlined in the UNDRIP grows, it becomes important to evolve these policies and practices to empower Tribal nations and communities to have a voice and assume leadership in managing their ancestral lands (Lefthand-Begay et al., 2024). Encouraging this evolution requires further collaborative research with Tribal leaders to understand how existing land management agreements promote Tribal and Indigenous decision-making and power within settler colonial nation states. Given the diversity among the 574 federally recognized Tribes in the U.S., and the unique challenges posed by climate change, primary research on co-management practices and agreements would provide valuable insights. Tribal and Indigenous communities approach land stewardship from varying perspectives based on their origin stories, but also due to the complex relationships between Tribal and Indigenous leaders and settler colonial nation states. These arrangements often involve multiple communities and institutions, such as sovereign Tribal nations, Indigenous communities, national governments and land management agencies, and coalitions. Overall, the path from paternalism to self-determination is non-linear, and lacks a clear endpoint. However, the stories within these case studies offer hope for the healing and empowerment of Indigenous communities in the U.S. and around the world.

Data availability

This study did not generate any new datasets as it primarily involved the synthesis and analysis of existing published literature.

Received: 14 December 2023; Accepted: 12 November 2024;

Published online: 07 January 2025

Note

1 B. Todd, personal communication, December 7, 2023.

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Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Fellowship Program (Grant No. 2236419), the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through the Just Futures Institute at the University of Oregon; the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute. The findings and conclusions in this publication are those of the authors and should not be construed to represent any official U.S.D.A. or U.S. Government determination or policy. In addition, we express our gratitude to Ranjit Arab for his valuable feedback on this manuscript. Furthermore, because of the nature of conducting work with Indigenous communities, we would like to acknowledge the Utah Diné Bikéyah, the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, the Bears Ears Commission, and the local grassroots efforts of elders, traditional knowledge holders, and Tribal community members. We also recognize other Tribes and bands connected to the Bears Ears landscape, even if they are not officially part of the coalition. Without their involvement, the movement to protect Bears Ears and other sacred ancestral lands would not have been possible to the extent of combining traditional knowledge and western research and management approaches. We are honored to be part of these communities.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: CLB, LR, CA, JB, KC, and DC; methodology: CLB & LR; formal analysis: CLB, LR, CA, JB, DC, KC; fund acquisition: CLB and LR; project management: CLB; validation: CLB, AB, RLW, JM, MR, and AL; writing/original draft preparation:

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not necessary for this study since it did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not necessary for this study since it did not involve human participants.

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