hiłniiš ʔaḥḳuu

NÍTSAAKIITÁPAISPIŃNAAN

PA̱ E MA̱YA

NUU VURA ÔOK VA̩'ÁRAAR

ahsoñh dyoñgwaya?dagoñhsotha? tsha? noñ shoñgwahweñjya·stha?

SHÉ:KON KÈN:'EN ÍAKWE'S

WE ARE HERE

NORTH AMERICA'S INDIGENOUS NATIONS ARE RECLAIMING THEIR SOVEREIGNTY: CONTROL OF THEIR LAND, LAWS, AND HOW THEY LIVE.

BY CHARLES C. MANN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KILIII YÜYAN

Quannah Rose Chasinghorse, a groundbreaking Indigenous model, uses her fame to support her activism, reminding people "whose land you're living on." Native sovereignty, she says, is key to "defending my ways of life, trying to protect what's left." She is Hän Gwich'in and Sičangu/Oglala Lakota, but was born on Diné (Navajo) land in Arizona. Here, Chasinghorse stands in Tse'Bii'Ndzisgaii (Monument Valley), a park administered by the Diné.

"We Are Here" appears in the languages of these Indigenous peoples, identified by color: Tla-o-qui-aht, Siksikaitsitapi, Chahta, Karuk, Onondaga, Mohawk

SOVEREIGNTY to Native nations means both the **FREEDOM** to decide one's actions and the **RESPONSIBILITY** to keep **THE WORLD IN BALANCE**, an idea the Siksikaitsitapi (Blackfoot) express by the word **AATSIMOIYIHKAAN**.

Carrying cedar boards to repair a walkway, Joe Louie passes the welcome sign to the Tla-o-qui-aht's Meares Island tribal park, near Vancouver Island in British Columbia. The island has been effectively controlled by the nation since the 1980s, when it stopped loggers from working there. Today Tla-o-qui-aht parks guardians, including Louie, maintain and protect the land.

This totem pole will rise in the village of Opitsaht on Meares Island to commemorate the Tla-o-qui-aht's recent history. The skulls (at far right) symbolize victims of COVID-19, students who died in residential schools, and murdered and missing Indigenous women. "When the Europeans came, they said we were illiterate," explains Joe Martin, the master carver who is overseeing the pole's creation. "But so were they—they couldn't read our totem poles."

CHAPTER ONE

RECLAIMING THE LAND

TLA-O-QUI-AHT • BRITISH COLUMBIA

For nearly two decades, the Tla-o-qui-aht have been in negotiations over their homeland, which includes rugged Radar Beach on Vancouver Island. Because most of British Columbia's first peoples never signed treaties with Canada, they maintain the country's constitution guarantees that the land is still legally theirs—along with its valuable forests and fisheries. Increasingly, Canadian courts have agreed with them.

THE BLOCK OF RED CEDAR was about six feet long and three feet high and almost as wide. Gordon Dick was slicing off its rounded top. The chainsaw bit into it, spraying sawdust. Noise-canceling headphones on, Joe Martin crouched to watch where the blade poked through. With his right hand he made little signals—up a bit, down, good. The air filled with the sharp, almost medicinal scent of cedar.

Martin is a Tla-o-qui-aht artist on the west coast of Vancouver Island, in British Columbia. Dick, another carver, is from the Tseshaht, a neighboring nation. They were making the first rough cuts on a statue of a wolf sitting on its haunches—a short totem pole, in effect. Nearby were two larger poles, almost complete, 24 feet and 30 feet tall. Up one side of each pole, stacked atop each other, were symbolic figures: bears, suns, mythical sea serpents, more wolves.

This summer, Martin will erect one of the poles in his family's home village of Opitsaht on Meares Island, near the Vancouver Island resort town of Tofino. Opitsaht had hundreds until an 1884 Canadian law forced Native peoples to let collectors and museums freely take them—which they did. Like stained glass windows in cathedrals, totem poles are visual representations of traditional teachings. But their imposing presence makes them more than that, Martin told me. "They say, 'We are here. This is *our* space.' "

Meares Island is part of the Tla-o-qui-aht homeland. So are Tofino and scores of islands in Clayoquot Sound (Clayoquot is an older spelling of the nation's name). Canada says these 400 square miles are a mix of national park, provincial timber zones, and private land, with a few tiny Native village sites. But the Tla-o-qui-aht say it's all their territory and always has been. They have declared the entire area to be tribal parks.

Much of this area has been logged—badly, by firms that stripped the country of its valuable

The National Geographic Society, committed to illuminating and protecting the wonder of our world, has funded Explorer Kiliii Yüyan's storytelling around Indigenous people and conservation since 2021.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE McKENDRY

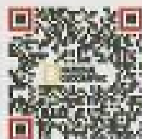
ancient cedar and created erosion and ruin. "They came and left," said Saya Masso, head of the Tla-o-qui-aht natural resources department. "That was 50 years ago. And they didn't restore the land, and neither did British Columbia or Canada. So *we're* doing it."

The Tla-o-qui-aht are rechanneling streams, re-creating the prelogging ecosystem, protecting herring spawning areas, and blockading logging roads in delicate spots where visitors shouldn't go. On top of the conservation work, they are beginning the tedious but vital business of nation building: starting their own education programs, hiring their own rangers (known as parks guardians), and, possibly most important, persuading businesses to add something akin to a sales tax—a voluntary one percent surcharge—to their customers' bills to support the nation's endeavors.

When Native people talk about this work, they often use the word "sovereignty." Typically, sovereignty means "self-rule." But people like Masso and Martin mean more than that by the term. It stands for a vision of Native societies as autonomous cultures, part of the modern world but rooted in their own long-standing values, working as equal partners with nontribal governments at every level. "The closest English term that I know to what we mean by sovereignty is 'self-actualization,'" said Leroy Little Bear of the Kainai (Blood). An emeritus law professor at the University of Lethbridge, Little Bear played a key role in the enshrinement of Indigenous rights in the Canadian Constitution in 1982. "Sovereignty is having access to all of ourselves."

The Tla-o-qui-aht are not alone, or even exceptional. All over Turtle Island—a common Indigenous name for North America, from origin stories about the world being atop a turtle's shell—its original inhabitants are reclaiming a status that they have never surrendered, and in the process are changing their own lives and those of their neighbors. And—perhaps most remarkable—they have gained a measure of acceptance from the nontribal world.

The effects range from tribal police in Montana successfully defending their right to detain



Listen to the podcast "This Indigenous Practice Fights Fire With Fire." Use your phone's camera to scan the QR code.

TLA-O-QUI-AHT
BRITISH COLUMBIA

WHAT DOES SOVEREIGNTY MEAN TO YOU?

'Language is part of who we are, and so who we are is trying to relearn our language and regrow as a community.'

TIMMY MASSO
LANGUAGE ACTIVIST

HIGHLIGHTING the recovery of Nuu-chah-nulth, the Tla-o-qui-aht tongue, Masso displays two masks—one with no mouth to symbolize the loss of the language, one with an open mouth to show its revival. Beginning in the 1830s, Canada forced about 150,000 Indigenous children into residential schools and forbade them to use their mother tongues, which nearly put an end to them. Masso wrote a song and his brother, Hjalmer Wenstob, carved these masks for a performance they created to promote learning Nuu-chah-nulth—a vital part of reestablishing Tla-o-qui-aht culture.

Sacred parks

The Tla-o-qui-aht, one of the 14 nations of the Nuu-chah-nulth on Vancouver Island, established four adjacent tribal parks as an expression of their inherent rights to oversee the land, air, water, and spirit of the territory—as they have done for millennia. The nation manages the watershed, ecotourism, and policing by parks guardians. Indigenous land-use methods are restoring terrain ravaged by timber operations.

non-Natives whom they suspect of committing crimes on their lands to boards in Canada that take input from Indigenous and government representatives and jointly oversee environmental issues across nearly 1.7 million square miles—about 40 percent of the country. Most of this work is small scale, almost under the radar, such as the collaboration among the Nakoda (Assiniboine), the Aaniiih (Gros Ventre), and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to restore prairie land in Montana. But some of it has thunderous impact, like the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2020 that led lower courts to affirm nearly half of Oklahoma is Native land.

Much as African American activists pushed civil rights through litigation and legislation that built incrementally, Native nations have pushed to regain sovereignty methodically—one lawsuit, one negotiation, one law, one program at a time. For decades the Tla-o-qui-aht protested that they had never signed a treaty with British Columbia, and thus had given up none of their rights or land. Until 1993, the province refused even to negotiate. Only in October of last year, after 19 years of talks and several side agreements, did it agree to a framework for discussions. The process has been grindingly slow, but the change is as undeniable as the roadside sign that greets visitors entering tribal territory: Tla-O-Qui-Aht Ha'houlthee—Tla-o-qui-aht Homeland.

None of this is foreordained to continue. More than 42 percent of the officially recognized tribes in the United States have no federally or state-recognized reservation, and the reservations of

ROSEMARY WARDLEY AND PATRICIA HEALY, NGM STAFF
SOURCES: GISELE MARIA MARTIN; TLA-O-QUI-AHT TRIBAL PARKS; NATURAL RESOURCES CANADA; FIRST NATIONS HEALTH AUTHORITY

Indigenous community
Canadian Indian reserve
Nuu-chah-nulth cultural region

The borders extend into the ocean to include fishing and whale-hunting waters.

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tribes that possess them are a tiny fraction of what they had in the past. Native peoples are among the poorest and unhealthiest on the continent, with some of the highest rates of drug-overdose deaths of any racial or ethnic group. Indigenous women in particular face violence at horrific rates. Most worrisome for activists, the U.S. and Canadian governments retain the power to dismantle Native victories at any time.

When I asked Saya Masso what he hoped to see in five or 10 years, he gave me a list: improved health care; a museum and cultural center; a tribal longhouse to replace the one destroyed in the 19th century; a bigger, higher-paid parks guardian force; better sewage treatment; an entire Tla-o-qui-aht school system. The key to all that is building the tribal economic base, he said. "And the root of doing that is sovereignty, nation to nation."

"The world doesn't know we're equal," he said. "But we're getting better at telling them."

The government not only went after tribal land, it also went after the tribes themselves, setting dates to 'terminate' them as legal entities.

CHAPTER TWO

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

CHAHTA • OKLAHOMA

THE FIRST TIME I TRIED to use the *ishtaboli* sticks was at the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's Labor Day Festival, the biggest official gathering of the Chahta, as they call themselves. Held in Tuskahoma, the nation's capital, it's in some ways like any county fair—and in some ways not. One of the biggest nots is ishtaboli.

A team sport older than any played by their colonizers, ishtaboli is called stickball in English. Each team puts 30 players on a soccer-like field with a 12-foot post at each end. Every player has two sticks—always handcrafted—with the wood bent over and lashed into a loop at the end. The loop has leather strips that form a pocket barely big enough for the small, leather-covered ball. Using only their sticks, players carry, pass, or shoot the ball—hands aren't allowed. Each side tries to hit its goalpost with the ball while preventing the other from doing the same thing. Few rules limit how the players can do this.

When some Chahta acquaintances at the festival tried to teach me how to catch the ball, I could barely do it. One of the few times I was successful, they rushed me. I looked up to see four guys with sticks charging in my direction. Did I mention that the game is played without padding or helmets? That some people play barefoot? The guys plowed into me. One reached out a hand to help me up. "Now you're Choctaw for today," he said, kindly. "You're ready to play," said another.

In the old days the game was played in the open countryside, often with hundreds of players on each side. Entire communities gathered. Competition was so intense that ishtaboli is known as the little brother of war. It was sometimes used to settle disputes. Some of that rowdiness is still present. Games stop for little but jump balls and injuries. The crowd yells and bangs drums as people collide on the field. When players catch the ball, opponents pile onto them. "I'm not sure I'm ready to play," I said.

The Chahta homeland was the fine bottomland of Mississippi. After Europeans arrived, Chahta leaders played Spain, France, and England against each other, trading with all sides and creating prosperous farms and ranches. The nation's first decades with the new United States were largely peaceful—the Chahta even allied with it against Great Britain and its Native allies in the War of 1812. The great Chahta leader Pushmataha was commissioned as a brigadier general.

Despite their alliance, the Chahta became in 1830 the first of more than 40 nations forced to

The Chickasaw Nation owns and operates the huge WinStar World Casino and Resort in Thackerville, Oklahoma. The nation has 31 casinos and gaming operations that help pay for, among other things, education, housing, and health care for its 73,000 citizens, as well as the salary of its ambassador to the United States.

MUSCOGEE
OKLAHOMA

Principal Chief David Hill was at the forefront of the fight that led to the landmark *McGirt v. Oklahoma* decision in 2020. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Muscogee reservation still exists legally, which led to similar recognition of tribal lands for five other Native nations in the state.

Sovereignty reaffirmed

In the 1830s the federal government forced members of dozens of nations to resettle in Indian Territory, which became part of the new state of Oklahoma in 1907. A landmark Supreme Court decision in 2020 reaffirmed the existence of the Muscogee Nation's reservation based on its 1833 treaty boundaries. That recognition of tribal land has been extended to five other nations in Oklahoma.

1890
Indian Territory is cut in half by the newly established Oklahoma Territory.

1907
Oklahoma gains statehood; most reservations are eventually dissolved.

2020-present
Courts have restored tribal jurisdiction over crimes on tribal lands involving Native Americans.

leave their homelands and move to what was then called Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). Their journey inaugurated the infamous Trail of Tears. In return for ceding their land, the Chahta made one crucial demand: sovereignty. In the treaty the U.S. promised that "no territory or State shall ever have a right to pass laws for the Government of the Choctaw Nation... and that no part of the land granted them shall ever be embraced in any territory or State."

That promise was not kept. In the next few decades much of the new Chahta homeland was parceled off to other Native nations. The rest was converted from communal to private land and distributed to tribe members who were often strong-armed into selling it to settlers. In 1907 Indian Territory was incorporated into the new state of Oklahoma. Indigenous nations

ROSEMARY WARDLEY, PATRICIA HEALY, AND SOREN WALLJASPER, NGM STAFF
SOURCES: HISTORIC PRESERVATION DEPARTMENT, CHOCTAW NATION OF OKLAHOMA; OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU; USGS

CHEROKEE
OKLAHOMA

WHAT DOES SOVEREIGNTY MEAN TO YOU?

'Sovereignty is the right for us to decide what we want to become.'

SARA HILL
CHEROKEE NATION
ATTORNEY GENERAL

THE MCGIRT DECISION is a hot-button issue in the state, and Hill now spends much of her time wrestling with the consequences, including what it means for the Cherokee Nation's sovereignty. "I tend to think about it in terms of not only preserving what was," she says, "but the right to be a separate people with a separate destiny." For her, that means the tribe's descendants creating their own future. "People took away Cherokee children for a century, putting them in boarding schools so they could become what others wanted them to be."

Nineteen-year-old Andrew Amos runs for a pass in a co-ed practice game of *ishtaboli* (stickball) in Durant, Oklahoma. A member of Tvshka Homma, the Choctaw Nation's men's team, Amos has played since he was seven—in contrast with previous generations, which faced government efforts to suppress the game and other expressions of Native American culture. Players are in constant motion and wear no padding, no helmets, no gloves, and, sometimes, no shoes.

outside Oklahoma faced similar losses. Today the average reservation is 2.6 percent of the size of the original homeland.

Not only did the government go after tribal land, it also went after the tribes themselves, setting dates to "terminate" them as legal entities. The Chahta came within a whisker of termination. Other nations weren't so lucky.

If there's a single beginning for the turnaround in Native America, it may be the passage of the Indian Self-Determination Act in 1975. Pushed through by a wave of Indigenous activism, it created mechanisms for tribes to establish and, most important, direct their own programs. It meant bringing back Chahta dance and Chahta language, which had been suppressed by missionaries. And it meant the first openly played games of ishtaboli in decades—the game had been forbidden in the old Indian schools.

All the while, nations across Turtle Island were fighting to escape state laws that restricted their actions, often keeping them from having an economic base. After two legal battles that reached the U.S. Supreme Court, establishing that Native nations are not subject to many local or state laws, Congress in 1988 passed a law that cleared the way for them to run gaming operations.

Today the Choctaw Nation has seven casinos in southeast Oklahoma—and more than 200,000 enrolled members. The nation has become a powerful economic force, responsible for almost 100,000 jobs. And it's rebuilding its land base, having bought some 60,000 acres. With the income from their casinos and businesses, the Chahta construct roads, support schools, put up clinics, and build homes for their elders. They

Low flames in cool weather—set during a Yurok-led training exercise—burn harmlessly through underbrush near Orleans, California, consuming fuel that could drive dangerous conflagrations. After miners, farmers, and state and federal governments took their lands, Native nations were forced to stop protective burning—a major reason that today's wildfires are so destructive.

YUROK
CALIFORNIA

WHAT DOES SOVEREIGNTY MEAN TO YOU?

'As a sovereign nation, we never gave up our right to use fire. We gave up a lot of things, but fire wasn't one of them.'

MARGO ROBBINS
BASKET WEAVER

AS SHE GREW UP, Robbins watched U.S. fire suppression policies transform the forests around her into monocultures of Douglas fir that no longer sustained species important to the Yurok people. Particularly painful was the loss of new hazel shoots, essential to making baskets, caps, and, especially, cradles. Not wanting to see her grandchildren raised without Yurok cradles, she co-founded the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network, which teaches fire-setting techniques to maintain the landscape as her ancestors did.

have erected 17 community centers—one in almost every town in the nation.

"Sovereignty is at the basis of everything we do," Sue Folsom, the cultural project manager for the nation, told me. Folsom supervised the development of the new cultural center, which opened last year. One of its most prominent exhibits treats the contentious history of the Chahta and the U.S. government. It's called "Protecting Our Sovereignty."

CHAPTER THREE

RENEWING THE WORLD

KARUK • CALIFORNIA

"KARUK PRAYERS DON'T sound like Christian prayers," Leaf Hillman said. "I don't close my eyes and bow my head—those are acts of subservience that are not part of Karuk belief systems."

One way to describe Hillman would be to say he's the former longtime director of natural resources and environmental policy for the Karuk Tribe. A second would be to note that he's an officiant during Pikyávish, the annual ceremonies that renew the world. A third would be as a key strategist of a long struggle that resulted in one of the most consequential environmental agreements in North America in many decades. But I like to think of him as the man who helped ruin Warren Buffett's big day.

The morning we met, Hillman was standing next to Bill Tripp, now the natural resources director. We were on a ridge, looking down at the center of the world. Hillman wore a T-shirt with a drawing of a salmon. His hair was neatly tied back, and there was a pencil behind his ear. A gray baseball cap shadowed Tripp's forehead and eyes. His T-shirt said, "Karuk Fire Management."

Below us was the confluence of the Salmon and Klamath Rivers—rushing together in a high-sided bowl ringed by mountain peaks. Near the junction was a gravel flat: the site of Katimîin, a former Karuk village and one of the places where the Karuk renew the world.

World renewal is a ceremony to align Karuk people with the living processes around them. Humans can lose the balance between giving and taking. The rites seek to correct for this.

"The prayers at world renewal tell the spirit people what we're doing," Hillman said. "It's like,

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'Listen, Mountain!' You explain the acts as you perform them."

Spirit people are creatures with supernatural aspects, which include anything from mountains to people. "Humans are the worst of the spirit people because we have the shortest memory," Hillman said. The prayer is "to remind people of their obligations to the other spirit people."

"Prayers are teaching devices," Tripp said. "It's a codification of our management processes—what we've learned from surviving in this place for a long, long time. The prayer says, 'This is what we're doing with the fire, this is what happens in the water.' "

Both men were born and raised around the Klamath River, which begins in south-central Oregon, cuts through the Cascade Mountains, and empties into the Pacific Ocean in far northern California. The river zigzags through forest scenery of the spectacular rugged variety. Like the Egyptians with the Nile, the river tribes are shaped by the Klamath—indeed, the Karuk have come to be known by their word for "upriver." Downstream are the Yurok, whose name derives from the Karuk word for "downriver."

The names are more than geographic markers. They position the societies with respect to their greatest resource: the enormous salmon runs that flow up the Klamath to spawn. Or rather, *flowed* up. The river used to be home to the third largest salmon migrations in the continental U.S., celebrated for its Chinook salmon. Now their numbers have been reduced by 90 percent.

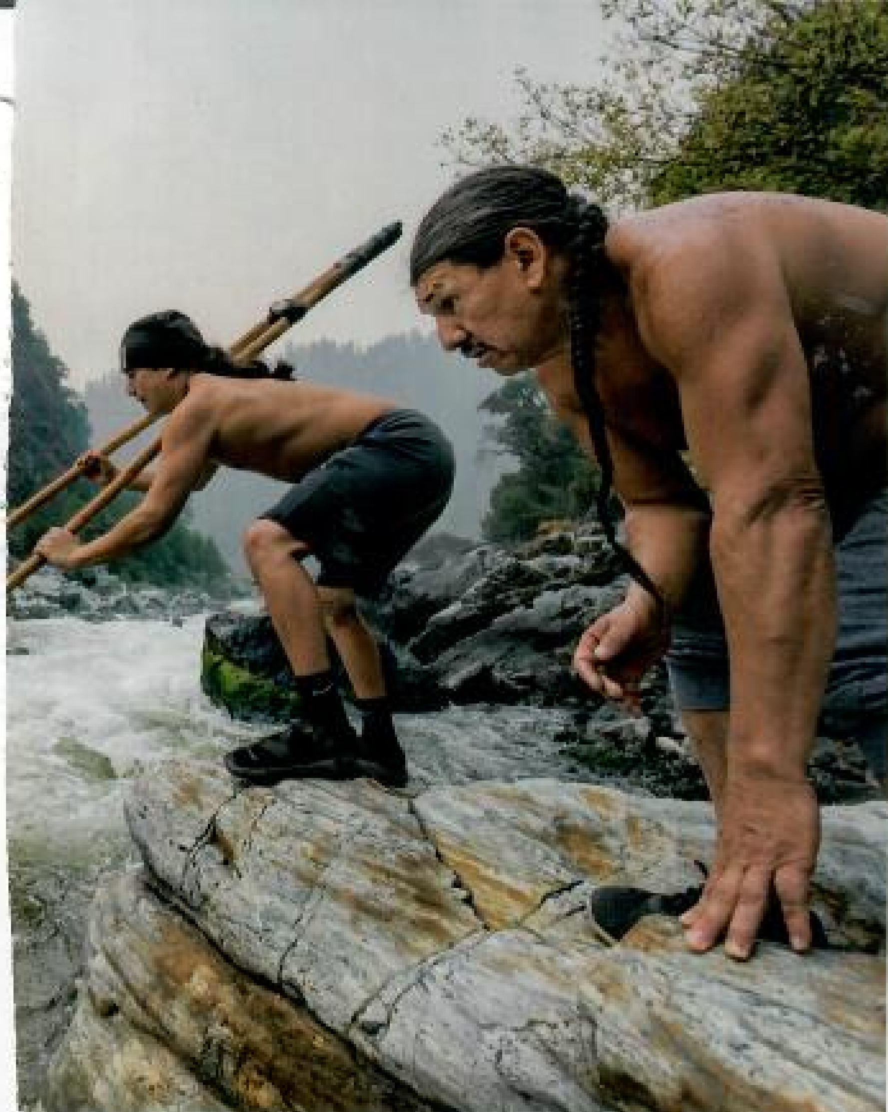
The annual movements of the fish were a demonstration of the order and benevolence of the world. The Karuk, Yurok, Hupa (who live on a big Klamath tributary), and the Klamath Tribes (who live at the headwaters) kept that order by managing their landscape, regularly subjecting their terrain to low-level burns that prevent severe fires and maintain uncluttered areas, promoting game and useful plant species.

This arrangement abruptly changed in 1848, when the United States won California in the Mexican-American War and the gold rush began. California had several hundred Indigenous groups and a scattering of colonists. Within four years the U.S. had signed 18 treaties with 134 Native communities, including the Karuk, Yurok, and Hupa. But Congress refused even to consider them, and the government simply took most of their land.

California passed a law allowing "any white person" to effectively enslave Native people, and then the state and federal governments sponsored what amounted to death squads. Thousands of Indigenous men, women, and children were murdered. Bounties were offered: 50 cents for a scalp, five dollars for a head.

The federal government turned much of the Klamath Basin into national forest. And the California-Oregon Power Company (Copco) built four enormous hydroelectric dams on the river. All of them blocked salmon.

Worse, they helped spread disease. As rivers flow into reservoirs, the water slows down, warms up, and deposits sediment. Slow, warm, silty waters are ideal habitat for the tiny aquatic worm that hosts *Ceratonova shasta*, a parasite that kills salmon. In May 2021 a Yurok monitoring team found 97 percent of the juvenile salmon



With a dip net, Karuk fisherman Ryan Reed searches for Chinook salmon under the watchful eye of his father, Ron, on California's Klamath River at Ishi Pishi Falls. The Reeds caught no fish—in stark contrast to earlier times. Before California became a state, the river saw about 500,000 salmon each fall, but last year just 53,954 mature Chinook swam up, a 90 percent decline. The nation now restricts salmon fishing to Ishi Pishi Falls, but with the slated removal of four dams, the Karuk hope the salmon will return.

swimming downstream were infected with *C. shasta*. Most of them would die within days.

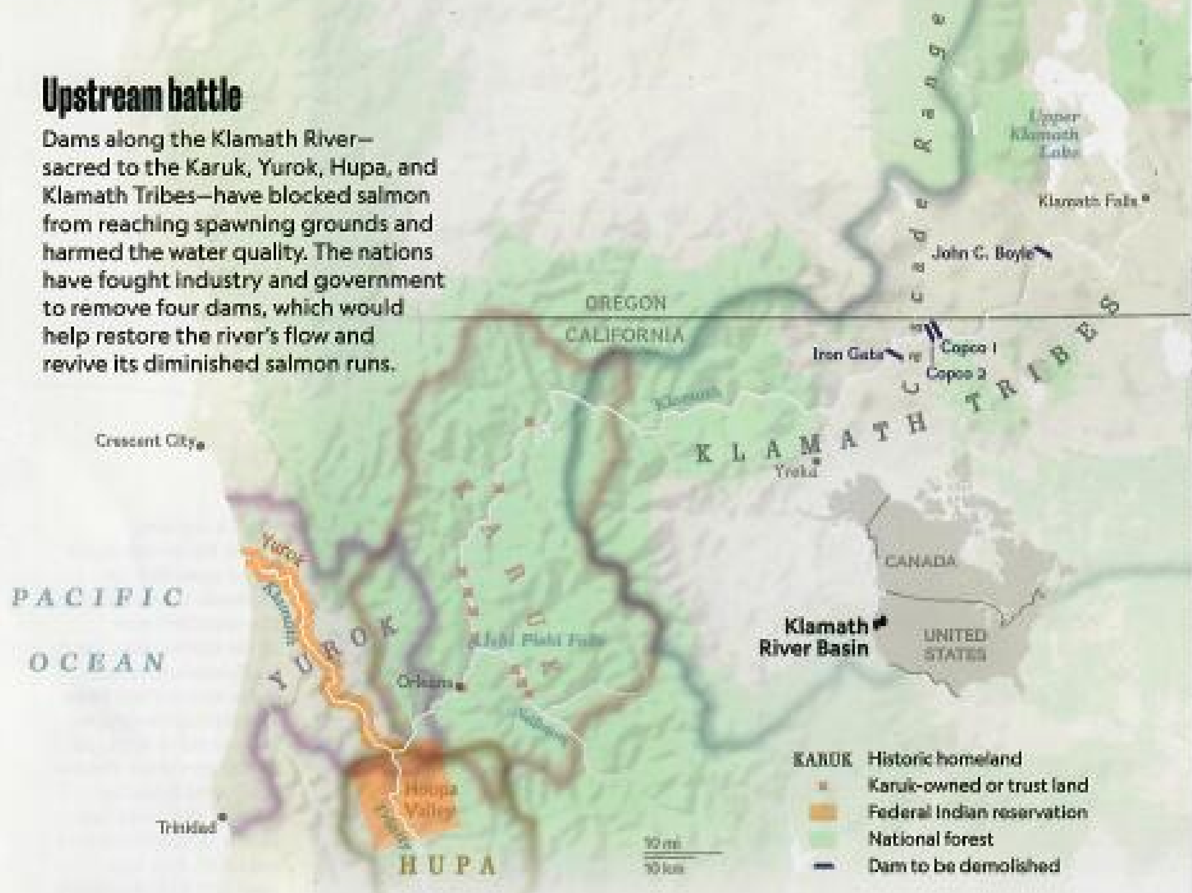
Reservoirs are also perfect habitat for a species of cyanobacteria called *Microcystis aeruginosa*. Not only does *M. aeruginosa* turn the water bright green and make it smell like rotting seaweed, it also releases a toxin linked to liver disease in salmon and people. In the world-renewal ceremonies, officiants had stood in the water. Now doing that would risk their health.

With fire suppression and dams transforming their homeland into something unrecognizable, the Klamath societies began to fight back.

The dams ended up being owned by Berkshire Hathaway, the giant holding firm controlled by Buffett, the Omaha, Nebraska, billionaire. Every year Berkshire Hathaway hosts a shareholders meeting in an Omaha stadium. Surrounded by nearly 30,000 delirious fans, Buffett holds court. "It is his favorite day," Hillman said. "They just love him. Well, we decided to ruin it."

In 2008 Karuk, Yurok, and Hupa activists, many dressed in traditional clothes, waited outside all night to be first in each of seven lines set up for people to ask questions. When Buffett brushed off the first question about the dams, the person in the next line also asked him about them, and the next, and the next. Flustered, Buffett cut short the Q and A, and security officers removed Hillman and some of the other activists.

"He just hated it!" Hillman said. "They had to drag us out yelling from their party." Eventually a deal was negotiated with PacifiCorp, the subsidiary that owns the dams. "They said they'd take down the dams if we promised never to go to Omaha again. I said, 'I never wanted to go there in



Upstream battle

Dams along the Klamath River—sacred to the Karuk, Yurok, Hupa, and Klamath Tribes—have blocked salmon from reaching spawning grounds and harmed the water quality. The nations have fought industry and government to remove four dams, which would help restore the river's flow and revive its diminished salmon runs.

the first place!'" Buffett had agreed to what might be the biggest dam-removal project in history.

It didn't happen right away. No clear legal process for taking down giant dams existed. Congress let legislation lapse, leaving California, Oregon, PacifiCorp, and the tribes to find the $450 million needed to take down the dams. Afraid of creating a precedent, politicians, dam operators, and risk-averse bureaucracies put up obstacles at every step. But after more than a decade of legal strife, the dams are scheduled to come down next year—a major step toward re-creating the landscape of Hillman's ancestors.

Similar struggles have been occurring all across Turtle Island. In 1984 the Tla-o-qui-aht began blockading Meares Island, preventing timber companies from clear-cutting ancient cedars in a confrontation so furious it's called the War in the Woods. The Oceti Sakowin—the seven branches of the Lakota and Dakota—are still in a standoff with the United States over the Black Hills, illegally seized in 1877. Cree, Métis, and Dene in Alberta have been fighting oil sands development for two decades. And fights against pipelines—the Dakota Access, the Keystone XL, and so on—continue to make headlines.

In Washington State a group of 14 nations battled local, state, and federal officials for decades over their rights to fish and manage salmon, a billion-dollar industry in the state. Treaties signed in the 1850s had guaranteed the region's first peoples the rights to fish and hunt "at all usual and accustomed grounds." Today, after multiple Supreme Court rulings, Indigenous and state governments co-manage coastal waters for salmon and steelhead; four nations in Oregon co-manage fisheries on the Columbia River. In 2018 the Supreme Court affirmed a lower court decision ordering Washington State to spend billions to fix or replace about a thousand salmon-blocking culverts—upholding that the right to fish was meaningless if a state destroyed the fish.

The last time I saw Hillman, I told him I'd visited one of the Klamath dams due to be removed next year. I had walked around the reservoir, which was thick with *Microcystis aeruginosa*. The water stank and was intensely green.

"With any luck," Hillman said, "you'll be one of the last people to see that."

ROSEMARY WARDLEY AND MATTHEW W. CHWASTYK, NGM STAFF
SOURCES: YUROK TRIBE GEOSPATIAL INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY; KARUK TRIBE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES; ALEX GONYAW, THE KLAMATH TRIBES

Standing in their field, members of the Onkwe community garden in Akwesasne, New York, display traditional varieties of corn, squashes, and beans they are reviving. Onkwe is one of about a hundred such projects in Haudenosaunee territory.

SENECA
NEW YORK

WHAT DOES SOVEREIGNTY MEAN TO YOU?

'It's brought me on a path that's leading me towards being grounded, being more connected with the earth.'

ANGEL MAREA JIMERSON
PRODUCTION MANAGER

CORN WAS A STAPLE of the Haudenosaunee diet, and Jimerson hopes the Iroquois White Corn Project at the Ganondagan State Historic Site in New York, where the Seneca had a town in the 17th century, will restore that role. Founded in the 1990s, the project hand-raises and hand-processes white corn. As a young Native American, Jimerson says they struggled in their early years but found their purpose working with their cultural heritage, learning patience, resourcefulness, gratitude, and mindfulness.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESTORING THE CORN

HAUDENOSAUNEE • NEW YORK

WHEN WE WALKED INTO the barn, Angela Ferguson was sitting in a camp chair, glasses propped on her head, ankle-deep in ears of dried corn. Around her the husking bee was in full swing: a dozen people in western New York, shucking and braiding, plastic crates beside them full of husks and cobs. The cobs were glossy and multicolored, a panoply of red and yellow and cream and slate blue-gray.

Inside the barn were three main rooms. Like a cheerful, exuberant general, Ferguson directed operations in the middle room. Behind her and the other huskers was a second room full of wheeled metal racks. Corn ears, braided together by their dried husks, hung from the racks—several dozen varieties, none of them remotely similar to supermarket corn. More braids, equally varied, dangled from the ceiling. All of this would be ground into flour for traditional dishes or preserved as seed for Indigenous farmers.

The third room remains closed with an attendant outside 24/7. Ferguson let us inside with a flourish. It's a library. But instead of books, the room is lined floor to ceiling with neatly labeled glass jars. Inside each jar are corn kernels—more than 4,000 varieties altogether. "I cried when I saw these for the first time," she said. "It was more than I could have imagined was possible."

Ferguson is Onondaga. The Onondaga are one of the six nations of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy), whose homelands are in what is now upstate New York and southern Ontario. In tales by early U.S. writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving, the Haudenosaunee are portrayed as fierce warriors. And it is indeed true that for three centuries the six nations have furiously resisted their colonizers. But that misses a much more important part of their identity. The Haudenosaunee thought of themselves as highly skilled farmers, people who transformed their northerly landscape into an agricultural powerhouse. The foundation of that powerhouse was ... corn.

The world's most important staple crop, corn was developed almost 10,000 years ago in southern Mexico. By about A.D. 1000, it had spread throughout Turtle Island. Everywhere it went,

It became ever harder for Indigenous peoples to grow and eat their own foods, as central to their identities as it is to other cultures around the globe.

local breeders adapted it, creating thousands of types, from two-inch cobs with tiny, deep red kernels for popcorn to cobs almost two feet long with thumbnail-size kernels that, Ferguson said, "dance atop boiling soup." This festival of diversity is preserved in the Onondaga library.

The U.S. takeover of Indigenous societies is often described in terms of land. But it also was an assault on culture: banning religions, suppressing languages, even prohibiting games like ishtaboli. A little-noticed aspect of the conquest was that it became ever harder for Indigenous peoples to grow and eat their own foods, as central to their identities as it is to other cultures around the globe.

Ferguson told me she is "just a traditional corn grower" who always had a "little family garden." Twelve years ago she decided to work on a larger scale, growing corn for elders.

"It was selfish," she said, laughing. "I just gave them some corn, and they gave me so much knowledge in return—recipes at first, and then the history of our people." In 2015 she persuaded the Onondaga Nation to help her expand. She and her collaborators staged community gatherings with free food—traditional Haudenosaunee varieties of corn, of course, but also beans, squashes, fruits, vegetables, fish, and venison.

"The food draws people together," Ferguson

ONONDAGA
NEW YORK

Angela Ferguson works with Indigenous colleagues to bring back varieties of corn nearly lost to colonization and industrialization. For Native people wanting to make a statement, she says, "the biggest protest you can make is to put one of your seeds in the ground."

Rich roots

Abundant corn crops were a source of sustenance as well as cultural and political stability for the six nations of the Haudenosaunee. Their Grand Council has governed for generations, even as members of the nations are now dispersed between the United States and Canada.

Haudenosaunee Cultural Region

CAYUGA Ancestral territory

Canadian Indian reserve

U.S. federal Indian reservation

said. "It's medicine—'medicine' in our sense, not the drugstore sense. I would get up from the table and feel the power of our community."

The next year Ferguson co-founded Braiding the Sacred, with the goal of bringing back Indigenous farms and foods across Turtle Island. Braiding the Sacred is part of a movement called food sovereignty. From this perspective, food is a bond that unites people, health, and land.

One of the organization's first tasks was to visit the home of Carl Barnes. Born in 1928 in the Oklahoma Panhandle, Barnes was fascinated as a child by the tales of his Cherokee grandfather. Like the Haudenosaunee, the Cherokee had a rich agricultural tradition—but one that had faded. Barnes worked his family farm and used his spare time to collect the seeds of ancient varieties from across North America. By the 1990s he had thousands of types of corn, beans, squashes, and other crops.

Barnes, who died in 2016, willed his collection to friends, who contacted Braiding the Sacred. A year later, the collection began arriving on Onondaga land. Ferguson had the melancholy realization that "some of these seeds no longer have their people—the people who grew them were wiped out or absorbed into other tribes. The seeds are here, but they're like ghosts." Now Braiding the Sacred is working with more than a hundred farmers in a dozen or so nations.

The younger generation is the key, Ferguson and others told me. I'd just seen students at the Akwesasne Freedom School harvesting in the fields. Founded in 1979, the Mohawk-immersion school in northern New York is a center of cultural resurgence—the Mohawk are another of the Haudenosaunee's six nations. Taken to a Mohawk community farm on a cold October day, the teenagers had fanned out into the field, snapping off ears from the plants. Unlike today's hybrid corn, traditional varieties grow to different heights—the students were harvesting Mohawk shortnose maize, usually from three to five feet tall. Typical agricultural machinery can't harvest it. The kids, talking across the corn rows in English and Mohawk, tossed the ears into a cart pulled by a trailer.

Watching them like a proud grandfather was Tom Kanatakeniate Cook, a Mohawk writer and longtime activist—he'd been one of the original stringers for *Akwesasne News*, the first pan-Indigenous newspaper, in the 1960s. I asked him if we were looking at a vision of the future. "I see what you're getting at," he said. "But this isn't the future—this is happening now."

ROSEMARY WARDLEY AND PATRICIA HEALY, NGM STAFF
SOURCES: NATURAL RESOURCES CANADA; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU; SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

At the Northwest Montana Fair and Rodeo in Kalispell, Indian Relay team members hang out at the stables. A new version of an old tradition, Indian Relay has reimagined the exuberant bareback riding style and intimate human-animal relations of the past.

CHAPTER FIVE

BRINGING BUFFALO BACK

SIKSIKAITSITAPI • MONTANA

IT WAS WINTER CAMP in deep snow, and the Siksikaitsitapi had no food. As the sun set, one young wife went looking for firewood. In a copse by a river, she heard chirping from a tree. In a fork in the tree was a stone. The stone gave her songs. Teach your elders to sing these songs, it said, and I will provide for all of you.

That night the Siksikaitsitapi elders came to her tipi. Everyone was faint with hunger but still sang the songs. A storm came up, burying the tipis in snow. But when families dug themselves out the next morning, they saw buffalo walking through the camp.

I first heard the story of the buffalo stone on a bluff above Two Medicine River, in northwest Montana—a place where the Siksikaitsitapi have gathered for centuries. Imprinted in the soil were scores of rings formed by laying stones on the edges of buffalo-hide tipis to hold their edges down in the wind. I had been invited to a tribal buffalo harvest—one of several held every year to teach Siksikaitsitapi children about the animals' role in their culture. In the cold, bright March morning were elders offering prayers and songs and the tale of the buffalo stone, sage and tobacco smoldering in a little cast-iron pan, wide-eyed kids in winter coats taking everything in, three eagles wheeling above like a sign.

The Siksikaitsitapi are a confederacy of four nations, three in Canada—the Siksika (Blackfoot), the Kainai (Blood), and the Piikani (Peigan)—and one in the United States, the Piikuni (Blackfeet). The Piikani and Piikuni are branches of the same culture, now split by the international border—known to the Siksikaitsitapi as the Medicine Line, a mocking reference to the supposed power of a border they don't accept.

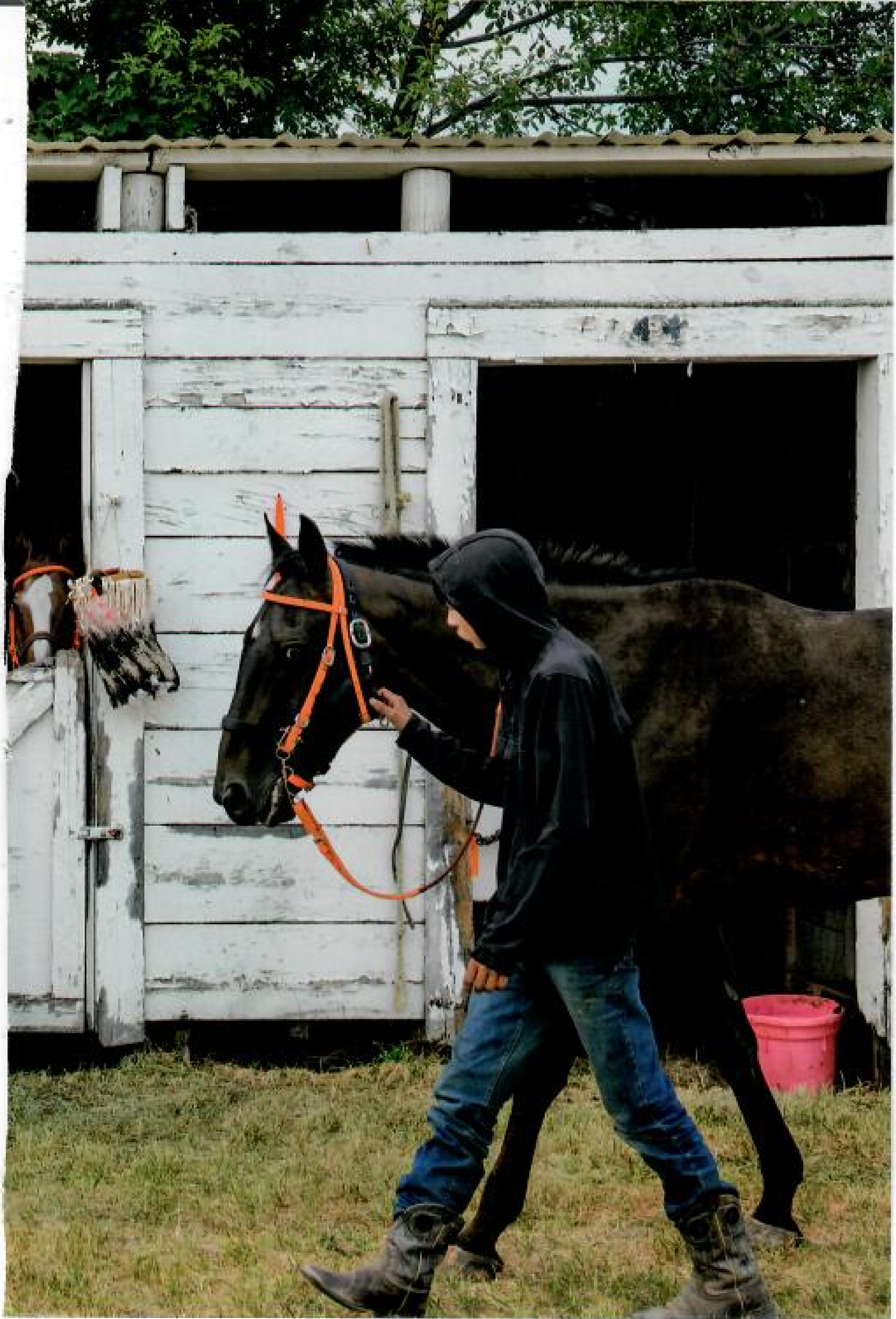
Not far from the ceremony was part of the tribal buffalo herd, a few hundred animals lured by hay scattered on the ground. I rode in a pickup toward them with two of their caretakers: Chazz Racine, leaning out of the passenger window with a gun, and his cousin Rob Wagner, careful at the wheel.

The buffalo slowly turned their heads to follow our progress. Their breath made clouds in the wintry air. Racine said he'd know which buffalo was right when he saw it. He said that often an

History and herds

The culture of the Siksikaitsitapi (Blackfoot) is intertwined with buffalo, a keystone prairie species sacred to nations of the northern plains. Millions of bison once roamed North America but were almost killed off by hunters in the late 19th century. Today many Native nations have restoration programs that allow buffalo to roam free on their tribal lands.

ROSEMARY WARDLEY AND RILEY D. CHAMPINE, NGM STAFF
SOURCES: INDIGENOUS VISION; NATURAL RESOURCES CANADA; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

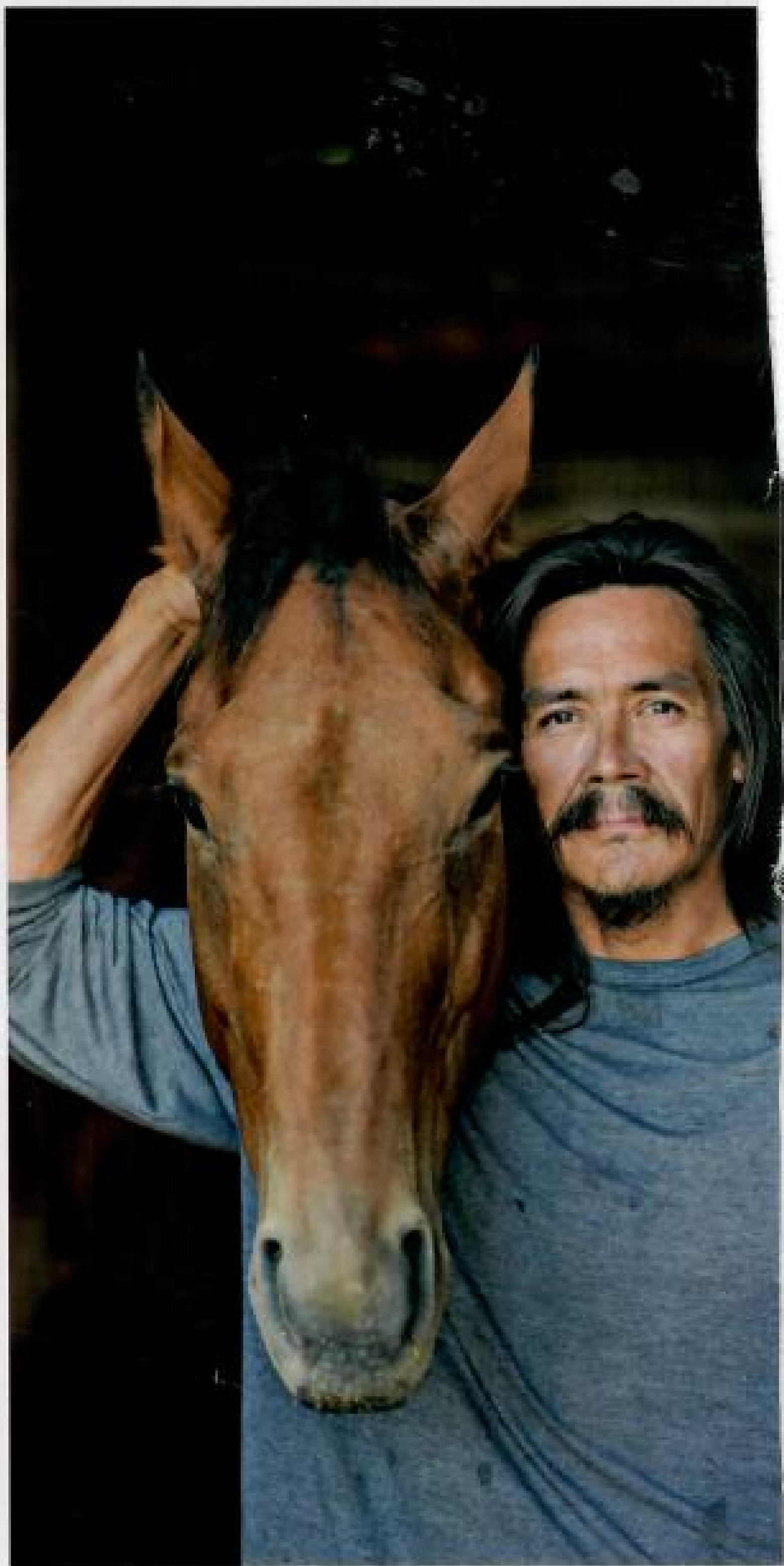


PIIKANI
MONTANA

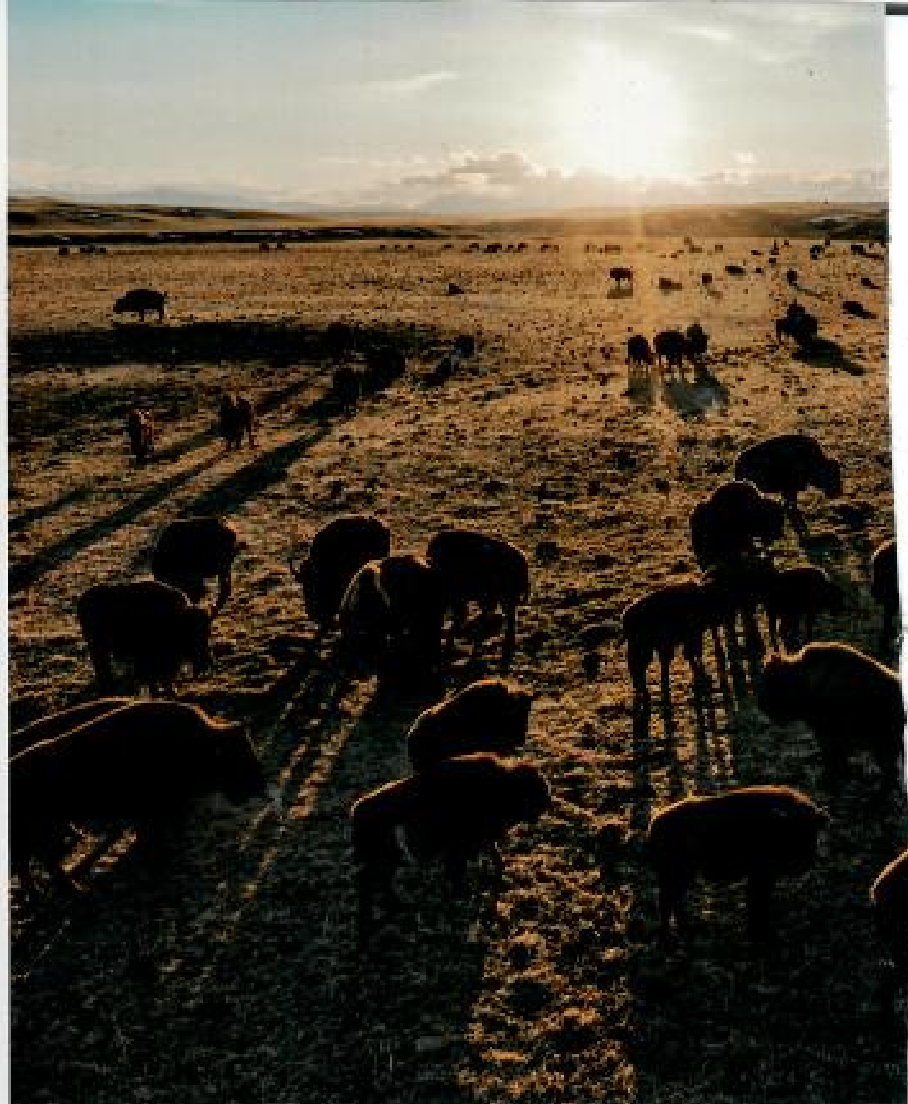
WHAT DOES SOVEREIGNTY MEAN TO YOU?

'Indian Relay is ours, all Native. Nobody in the world can take it, like they did everything else.'

DUANE KEMMER
INDIAN RELAY RACER



HUGGING A HORSE from his Inii Yawmahka (Buffalo Runners) team, Kemmer says Indian Relay is more than a sport. It's a way to connect with his son Cliff (far right, in race regalia) and his seven other children and to pass on his heritage. Kemmer started racing in 1990 but now mostly helps his children compete. From time to time, though, he still rides. In a recent race, a horse threw a shoe that hit him in the forehead. Despite the blood running down his face, Kemmer kept riding. "This is Indian Relay," he says. "You don't stop."



The Siksikaitsitapi have raised buffalo in Montana since the mid-1970s, but systematic restoration began there only in 2009 on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Today they have almost a thousand animals, and meat is available at the reservation grocery. But to buffalo program director Ervin Carlson, the larger goal is to recreate Siksikaitsitapi landscapes—ecosystems teeming with free-ranging buffalo.

animal presented itself to him—it was choosing to give its life. The Rocky Mountains, peaks agleam with snow, rose from the horizon like a cupped, protective hand.

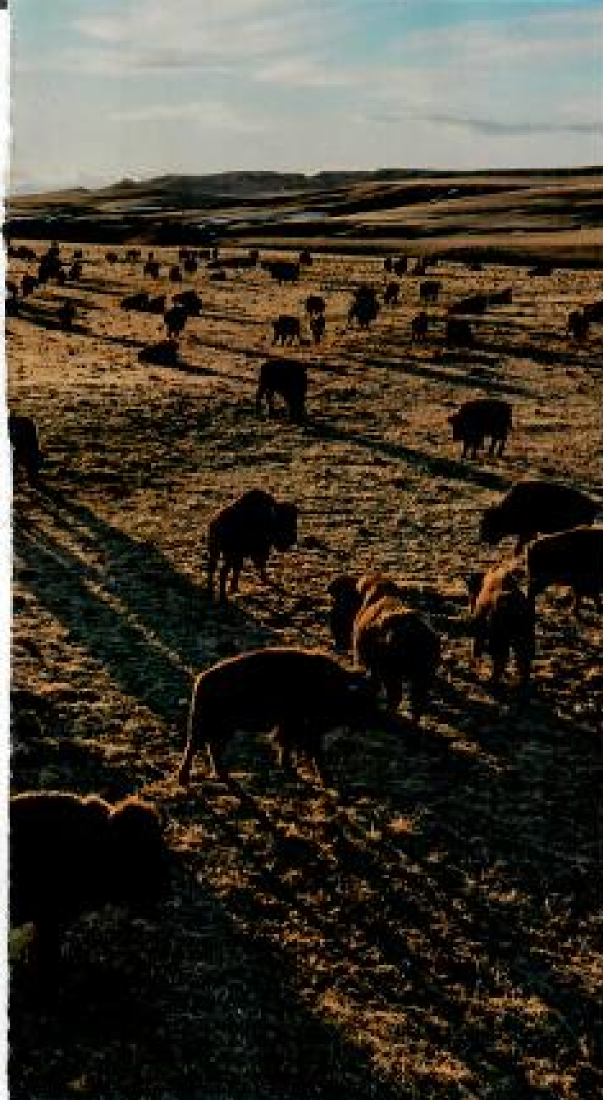
A cluster of buffalo ambled toward us. Then a big bull stepped out and lowered itself to the ground. The others moved away. The bull looked straight at us. Racine's gun had been blessed with sage smoke. Its report was startlingly loud. The bull slumped, dead in an instant.

"Did you see how it gave itself? Did you see that?" Racine asked. The two men winched the slain animal onto the back of a flatbed truck and drove it to a paddock where, after a prayer of thanks, the adults showed the children how to remove the head and fur and entrails. The stripped body was taken to a small butchering facility on the reservation where a couple cut it up with a reciprocating saw. Later it would be distributed to the school and community.

Less than a mile from the tipi rings was a steep hill, almost a cliff, its vertical face about 30 feet high: a buffalo jump. Hunters enticed buffalo onto the slope that approaches the cliff top. "Drive lanes"—lines of cut brush and shouting people—funneled the animals uphill. They didn't see the edge until too late. People waiting below dispatched any that survived. Generations of Siksikaitsitapi had hunted there. When I walked to the bottom, I saw a foot-thick layer of bones: the relationship of the Siksikaitsitapi and the buffalo inscribed on the earth.

Ecologists call bison, as buffalo are also known, a keystone species: an organism that the prairie ecosystem revolves around. But buffalo are more than that, said Leroy Little Bear, the Kainai leader

WHY CITIES ARE



and law professor. "It's a keystone for our culture, our songs, our stories, our ceremonies—they are all connected to that animal." Like corn for the Haudenosaunee, buffalo to the Siksikaitsitapi are a source of identity even more than they are food. A landscape with buffalo was Siksikaitsitapi space, warm and inviting.

Siksikaitsitapi space was called wilderness by Europeans, but it was as domesticated as the English countryside. In spring and fall Indigenous land managers set fire to it. Flames raced through the prairie at stunning speed, leaving miles of blackened land. The burns killed young trees and shrubs that otherwise would have overtaken the savannas. Prairie grasses, with their deep roots, survived and regrew. Bison are attracted to new growth. Centuries of Native torches transformed the western flatlands into so many huge pastures: utopia for bison.

By now, what happened to them is familiar: the terrible, wasteful slaughter, part of it a deliberate attempt to starve out Native societies that depended on them. As late as the Civil War, millions of bison walked the prairies. But when the Smithsonian Institution released the first ever bison census in 1889, there were only 85 free-roaming bison in the entire United States. A few hundred more remained in Canada. In a single generation, abundance had become absence.

Along with the loss of the buffalo came the loss of land. The loss includes what became the eastern half of Glacier National Park, which the U.S. bought in return for promises that the Siksikaitsitapi would always be able to use the land. Yet again, the promises weren't kept.

From Alberta to Oklahoma, scores of organizations are now trying to repopulate the grasslands with their original inhabitants. One of the most important steps occurred in 2014, when eight Indigenous nations agreed to a treaty for "cooperation, renewal and restoration" of the buffalo. Largely masterminded by Little Bear, the treaty committed its signatories to using their lands to create large, free-roaming buffalo herds.

The treaty, said Amethyst First Rider, "would empower the tribes—not anybody outside, not the government, but the tribes—to have relationships." First Rider, Little Bear's wife, was a key organizer of the Siksikaitsitapi buffalo program.

Today the treaty has 30 signatory nations. Its long-term goal is to create a network of lands where the animals can roam freely, ignoring state boundaries and the Medicine Line. In legal terms, such terrain would have shared or plural sovereignty, with much of the title in non-Native hands but effective control often in Native hands. This anomalous status is likely to become increasingly common on Turtle Island—the Tla-o-qui-aht tribal parks, under de facto management of that nation, are a sign of the future.

When I visited Saya Masso at his office, the walls were covered with maps and photographs of his homeland. At one point he showed me Meares Island and said that the Tla-o-qui-aht had preserved it for everyone. I asked him how he would describe the landscape they were protecting. "Ours," he said. □

Charles C. Mann is the author of *1491*, about the Americas before Columbus. **Kiliii Yüyan,** informed by his Chinese and Nanai heritage, photographs the human relationship with the land and the sea.

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KILIII YÜYAN

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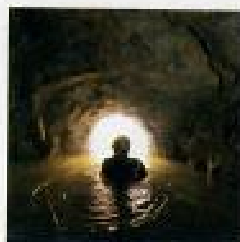

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