

# Decolonizing Sustainability: Lessons from the Fairy Creek Conflict

## Introduction

*“Decolonization is not a metaphor. It is not a synonym for social justice, diversity, or inclusion. It is the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.” (Tuck & Yang, 2012)*

The fight for sustainability often masks deeper struggles over land, power, and sovereignty – especially in settler-colonial states like Canada, where conservation efforts can perpetuate the very colonial structures they claim to resist. The Fairy Creek conflict, one of Canada’s largest acts of civil disobedience (The Narwhal, 2024), exposes these contradictions, revealing how state-led conservation and settler-led activism can undermine Indigenous sovereignty. This paper uses a Decolonial Political Ecology (DPE) approach to examine the conflict and argues that achieving true sustainability requires the material return of land and the recognition of Indigenous governance as the rightful authority over environmental stewardship.

## Research Question & Positionality

This paper explores the following research question:

*“How does the Fairy Creek conflict reveal the limits of state-led conservation and settler-led environmental activism, and what does this indicate about the need for a decolonial political ecology approach to sustainability struggles in Canada?”*

By applying a DPE framework, this paper critically examines how sustainability efforts within settler-state systems often reinforce colonial control while sidelining Indigenous sovereignty. It argues that resolving sustainability struggles requires more than conservation – it demands systemic change that centers Indigenous governance and land back. As an Irish settler with Canadian citizenship, the author’s perspective is shaped by Ireland’s history of colonialism, though this is not equated with the realities faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada. Aware of the risk of reproducing extractive research practices, this paper avoids treating Indigenous struggles as case studies and instead amplifies Indigenous scholarship on land stewardship, decolonization, and sustainability.

## Literature Review: Colonial Legacies, Indigenous Stewardship, and the Contradictions of Settler Environmentalism

Postcolonial Political Ecology (PPE) critiques how colonial legacies shape modern environmental governance (Fuentes-George, 2023), but it often treats colonialism as a past event, limiting its effectiveness in settler-colonial states like Canada (Collins et al., 2021). While PPE highlights historical injustices, it risks overlooking the active colonial structures – such as Crown land control and constrained Indigenous sovereignty – that persist today (British Columbia Government, 2024). DPE addresses this gap by framing colonialism as an ongoing system of power that continuously shapes land use, environmental policy, and Indigenous-state relations (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Unlike PPE, DPE examines how colonialism adapts over time, shifting from overt territorial conquest to more covert forms of control through legal frameworks and conservation policies, while its core logic of land dispossession remains intact. This makes DPE better suited for analyzing conflicts like Fairy Creek, where colonialism is not a historical residue but a living system that actively shapes present-day sustainability struggles.

The colonial foundations of modern environmental governance remain deeply embedded in contemporary sustainability policies. Fuentes-George (2023) argues that the legacy of colonialism persists in present-day neocolonial frameworks and land management practices, particularly through the commodification of nature and the marginalization of Indigenous communities. Building on these critiques, Collins et al. (2021) introduce the concept of the “coloniality of conservation”, which highlights how conservation often functions as a tool of dispossession rather than preservation. By framing nature as something to be protected *from* Indigenous peoples rather than *with* them, settler states reinforce narratives that erase Indigenous land stewardship. In this framing, conservation becomes another mechanism of colonial control, maintaining the state’s authority over land while sidelining Indigenous governance.

Fuentes-George (2023) highlights how colonial ideologies frame Indigenous lands as “wild” or “uncultivated”, justifying state intervention while sidelining Indigenous knowledge systems in favor of Western “scientific” models. This mirrors what Tuck & Yang (2012) identify as a core logic of settler colonialism – the systemic erasure of Indigenous epistemologies. Expanding on this critique, Robbins (Malik, 2024) states that political ecology must go beyond integrating Indigenous knowledge into existing systems and instead prioritize power dynamics. True decolonization, he argues, requires surrendering authority to Indigenous nations, enabling them to determine how their knowledge systems are mobilized and applied.

While settler-led environmental governance often frames sustainability through resource management and economic growth, Indigenous approaches to land stewardship are relational, place-based, and grounded in deep cultural and spiritual connections to land (David Suzuki Foundation, 2022). The Decolonial Model of Environmental Management and Conservation (Artelle et al., 2021) demonstrates how Indigenous-led conservation in the Great Bear Rainforest outperforms state-led initiatives – not only in ecological outcomes but also in fostering community resilience and cultural revitalization. Artelle et al. (2021) align with Tuck & Yang’s (2012) statement that decolonization requires the material return of land and the recognition of Indigenous legal authority. Even well-intentioned conservation efforts that fail to cede authority to Indigenous nations risk reproducing colonial dynamics or ‘recolonizing’ Indigenous peoples. The Governance Back report by the David Suzuki Foundation (2022) further explores how Indigenous nations across Canada are reclaiming their roles as stewards of their territories. This report critiques state-led co-management strategies that often appear collaborative but ultimately maintain settler control. It highlights successful Indigenous-led governance initiatives that favour full authority over land-use decisions instead of tokenistic inclusion.

Tuck & Yang (2012) offer a critical lens on settler-colonial dynamics and emphasize that decolonization requires the material return of land and the dismantling of settler-colonial structures – not symbolic gestures or surface-level reforms. They introduce the concept of “settler moves to innocence”, where settlers engage in actions that alleviate guilt without challenging colonial power, often framing themselves as allies while perpetuating settler dominance. Central to their critique is the idea of incommensurability – the fundamental incompatibility between settler environmental goals, like conservation for the public good, and Indigenous struggles for land sovereignty and self-determination. They argue that even progressive movements, such as environmental activism, risk reinforcing colonial frameworks when they prioritize land protection over Indigenous governance.

## Fairy Creek: A Clash of Conservation, Sovereignty, and Settler Colonialism

The Fairy Creek conflict, one of Canada’s largest environmental protests and acts of civil disobedience (The Narwhal, 2024), centers on the fight to protect one of British Columbia’s last old-growth forests (Simmons, 2021). The conflict exposes tensions between state-led conservation, Indigenous sovereignty and land stewardship, and settler-led environmental activism. While activists and the BC government framed Fairy Creek as an issue of resource management and conservation, Indigenous land defenders situated it within a broader struggle for land sovereignty, decolonization, and the right to govern their territories on their own terms (Kloster, 2021). This tension was heightened by industry pressure on the BC government to maintain logging as an economic driver and by the

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) enforcing injunctions through arrests and confrontations (Lindsey, 2021).

The Fairy Creek watershed lies on the unceded lands of the Pacheedaht First Nation, home to one of Vancouver Island's last old-growth coastal temperate rainforests. Smallpox epidemics introduced by European settlers reduced the Pacheedaht population from over 1,500 to fewer than 290 members today (Renner & Yunker, 2021). These forests, with trees over 2,000 years old, play a crucial role in biodiversity and carbon sequestration (Nair, 2021). In 2017, the Pacheedaht First Nation signed a forest revenue-sharing agreement with the BC Government, granting them financial benefits from resource extraction on their traditional territories (Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, 2017). However, these agreements do not equate to full autonomy, as land management remains bound by provincial forestry laws.

This decision was not universally supported within the Pacheedaht community. Elder Bill Jones, a leading voice opposing logging at Fairy Creek, condemned the agreement, emphasizing that old-growth forests hold cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance that cannot be reduced to financial terms (Galimski, 2021). Meanwhile, the elected Pacheedaht band council, led by Chief Jeff Jones, maintained that land-use decisions should be determined by the Nation itself—not “third-party activism” (Kloster, 2021). The Fairy Creek conflict reveals the deeper tensions between conservation, capitalism, and Indigenous sovereignty in settler-colonial states. The following analysis unpacks these dynamics through a DPE lens.

## Analysis: The Limits of Settler-Led Conservation and Environmental Activism

Colonialism in Canada has long been driven by the desire to control land and resources, justified through legal frameworks like the Doctrine of Discovery (1493) and the Indian Act (Government of Canada, 1876). Indigenous nations across Canada, including the Pacheedaht First Nation, have faced the dispossession of land, cultural erasure, and violent state interventions, all in interest of resource extraction and capitalist expansion (Assembly of First Nations, 2018). Capitalism has become one of colonialism's most enduring paradigms, creating conditions that uphold settler governance while economically binding Indigenous communities to systems that perpetuate their marginalization. Robbins (Malik, 2021) argues that environmental conflicts in settler-colonial states are fundamentally “struggles over production.” The Pacheedaht Nation internal conflict highlights this tension. While the 2017 forest revenue-sharing agreement with the BC government offered a means of economic survival, it came at the cost of supporting old-growth logging, which directly

undermines cultural and ecological ties to the land. This reflects the difficult trade-offs Indigenous nations are forced into within a colonial-capitalist framework. While PPE highlights the impacts of colonialism, it often treats colonialism as a historical event rather than an ongoing structure. In Fairy Creek, this lens risks overlooking how current legal and economic systems actively sustain settler-colonial control. A DPE approach, instead, centers the continued dispossession of Indigenous lands and the need for sovereignty restoration.

Conservation, when not grounded in decolonial frameworks, can serve as a tool of settler-colonial governance. The Fairy Creek conflict highlights the limitations of settler-led conservation in Canada, where state-managed environmental policies continue to operate within colonial frameworks that marginalize Indigenous sovereignty. The BC government's old-growth deferral policies and resource-sharing agreements with the Pacheedaht Nation offer the illusion of Indigenous participation while maintaining ultimate control within provincial law.

The Governance Back report by the David Suzuki Foundation (2022) highlights examples of Indigenous-led conservation initiatives across Canada that challenge these colonial structures. While some Indigenous nations have successfully regained *partial* governance over their lands, these victories often come after prolonged legal battles and extensive activism, and even then, sovereignty is rarely fully restored. In the context of Fairy Creek, the BC government's engagement with the Pacheedaht Band Council reflected this partial approach – offering financial participation in resource management without granting full autonomy over land-use decisions (British Columbia Government, 2021). This reflects a broader issue within Canadian conservation – efforts that do not center land back and Indigenous sovereignty ultimately reinforce the same colonial governance frameworks that have oppressed Indigenous nations for centuries.

While settler-led environmental activism can play a significant role in raising awareness about ecological issues, it often carries inherent contradictions when it comes to Indigenous sovereignty. In the case of Fairy Creek, the actions of settler-led groups demonstrated the complexities and limitations of solidarity in settler-colonial states like Canada. Decolonization has often been reduced to symbolic actions, such as land acknowledgments or co-management agreements, that leave colonial governance intact (David Suzuki Foundation, 2022). Tuck & Yang's (2012) concept of "settler moves to innocence" is especially relevant here. At Fairy Creek, settler activists framed their blockade as a fight for environmental justice but often failed to fully center the authority of the Pacheedaht Nation. Despite clear statements from the Pacheedaht Band Council expressing a desire for third-party activists to leave, many settler activists continued their

blockades, arguing that they were protecting the land for future generations (Renner & Yunker, 2021). This highlights the fundamental incommensurability between settler and Indigenous goals. While settler activists prioritized forest conservation for the public good, Indigenous land defenders framed the conflict within a broader struggle for sovereignty and self-determination. These divergent goals created tension within the movement and exposed the limits of settler environmentalism that does not prioritize land back.

While Fairy Creek reveals the limits of settler-colonial conservation and activism, gaps remain in understanding how Indigenous-led conservation can navigate state frameworks that resist ceding land governance. Further research is also needed on how settler activism can shift from performative solidarity to genuinely supporting land back movements without reinforcing colonial power.

## Conclusion

The Fairy Creek conflict highlights a critical truth: sustainability efforts that fail to address the ongoing structures of settler-colonialism are doomed to reproduce them. Both state-led conservation and settler-led activism, though framed as progressive, operated within colonial governance frameworks that marginalized Indigenous sovereignty. While the BC government's policies preserved an image of ecological stewardship, they upheld Crown control. Similarly, settler activists, despite their intentions, often prioritized conservation over Indigenous self-determination. This paper adopted a DPE approach not only as an analytical tool but because Fairy Creek itself demonstrates why DPE is necessary. Unlike PPE, which often treats colonialism as historical, DPE recognizes colonialism as an ongoing system of governance that continues to shape land use and policy. It reframes sustainability not as a neutral goal but as a political struggle over land, power, and sovereignty.

Fairy Creek is not an isolated case. It reflects broader sustainability struggles in settler-colonial contexts, where land protection efforts frequently sideline the very communities whose lands they seek to preserve. A DPE approach makes clear that sustainability without sovereignty is a colonial illusion. As Tuck & Yang (2012) state; "Decolonization is not a metaphor – it is the material return of land, the dismantling of colonial power structures, and the full recognition of Indigenous governance". Until environmental movements center this truth, they will continue to perpetuate the very systems they claim to dismantle.

## References

Artelle, K.A. et al. (2021) 'Decolonial Model of Environmental Management and Conservation: Insights from Indigenous-led Grizzly Bear Stewardship in the Great Bear Rainforest', *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 24(3), pp. 283–323. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2021.2002624>. (Accessed: 22 February 2025).

Assembly of First Nations. (2018). *Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery*. Available at: <https://www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/18-01-22-Dismantling-the-Doctrine-of-Discovery-EN.pdf>. (Accessed: 22 February 2025).

Bains, C. (2021). *B.C. agrees to defer old-growth logging for 2 years in Fairy Creek and central Walbran areas*. [online] CBC. Available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/fairy-creek-bc-defers-old-growth-logging-1.6059914>. (Accessed: 31 January 2025).

British Columbia Government. (2024) *Crown land policies*. Available at: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/crown-land-water/crown-land/land-policies>. (Accessed: 23 February 2025).

British Columbia Government. (2025) *Old growth deferral areas*. Available at: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/forestry/managing-our-forest-resources/old-growth-forests/deferral-areas>. (Accessed: 9 February 2025).

British Columbia Government. (2025) *Old growth forestry management*. Available at: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/forestry/managing-our-forest-resources/old-growth-forests> (Accessed: 9 February 2025).

British Columbia Government. (2021). *Pacheedaht First Nation Forest & Range Consultation and Revenue Sharing Agreement (FCRSA)*. Available at: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/agreements/pacheedaht\\_signed\\_february\\_17\\_2021\\_1.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/agreements/pacheedaht_signed_february_17_2021_1.pdf). (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Bryant, R. 2015, *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, Cheltenham. Available from: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/suss/reader.action?docID=2198060&ppg=133>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Carrigg, D. (2025). *B.C. RCMP investigates Fairy Creek tree spiking as logging ban extended*. Vancouver Sun. Available at: <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/bc-rcmp-investigate-fairy-creek-tree-spiking-logging-ban-extended>. (Accessed 31 January 2025).

CBC. (2025). *B.C. extends deferral of logging in Fairy Creek amid reports of tree spiking*. Available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/fairy-creek-defer-old-growth-logging-extension-2025-1.7445346>. (Accessed 31 January 2025).

Collins, et al. (2021). Plotting the coloniality of conservation. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 28. Available at: <https://journals.librarypublishing.arizona.edu/jpe/article/4683/galley/4726/view/>. (Accessed: 22 February 2025).

Cox, S. (2020) *B.C.'s old-growth forest announcement won't actually slow down logging: critics*, *The Narwhal*. Available at: <https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-old-growth-forest-logging/>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

David Suzuki Foundation. (2022). *Governance Back: Exploring Indigenous Approaches to Reclaiming Relationships with Land*. Available at: <https://davidsuzuki.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/DSF-governance-back-September-20-v2-003.pdf>. (Accessed: 22 February 2025).

EJOLT (2023) *Fairy Creek old-growth logging protests in the southern Vancouver Island region of British Columbia, Canada* | *EJAtlas, Environmental Justice Atlas*. Available at: <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/fair-creek-old-growth-logging-protests>. (Accessed: 31 January 2025).

EJOLT (2023) *Fairy Creek Logging Conflict, British Columbia, Canada* | *EJAtlas, Environmental Justice Atlas*. Available at: <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/fairy-creek-logging-conflict>. (Accessed: 31 January 2025).

Fagan, E. (2023). *Why protest group 'Savage Patch' continues to protest old growth logging in the Fairy Creek injunction area*. [online] CBC. Available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/savage-patch-fairy-creek-1.6941401>. (Accessed: 31 January 2025).

Fuentes-George, K. (2023). 'The Legacy of Colonialism on Contemporary Climate Governance', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 24(1), 91-98. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/gia.2023.a897706>.

Galimski, N. (2021). *Pacheedaht elder's support for Fairy Creek protesters puts him at odds with own council*. [online] Times Colonist. Available at: <https://www.timescolonist.com/islander/pacheedaht-elders-support-for-fairy-creek-protesters-puts-him-at-odds-with-own-council-4690615>. (Accessed: 31 January 2025).

Government of Canada. (1876). *The Indian Act*. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. Available at: [https://nctr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/1876\\_Indian\\_Act\\_Reduced\\_Size.pdf](https://nctr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/1876_Indian_Act_Reduced_Size.pdf). (Accessed: 17 February 2025)

Joshi, S. (2014). *Postcoloniality and the North–South Binary Revisited: The Case of India's Climate Politics*. *Journal of Environment & Development*, 23(3), 331–354. DOI: [10.1177/1070496514536042](https://doi.org/10.1177/1070496514536042).

Kloster, D. (2021) *Pacheedaht First Nation says old-growth activists 'not welcome' in Fairy Creek area*, *Times Colonist*. Available at: <https://www.timescolonist.com/local-news/pacheedaht-first-nation-says-old-growth-activists-not-welcome-in-fairy-creek-area-4688651>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025)

Lindsay, B. (2021) *Judge ends injunction against Fairy Creek protests, citing 'substantial infringement of civil liberties'*, *CBC*. Available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/b-c-fairy-creek-court-civil-liberties-injunction-1.6192827>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Malik, I.H. (2024) Can political ecology be decolonised? A dialogue with Paul Robbins. *Geo: Geography and Environment*, 11, e00140. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/geo2.140>.

Mapes, L. (2022) *The Pacheedaht people finally started making money from Vancouver Island timber. Then the protesters arrived*, *The Seattle Times*. Available at: <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/the-pacheedaht-people-finally-started-making-money-from-vancouver-island-timber-then-the-protesters-arrived/>. (Accessed: 31 January 2025).

Nair, R. (2021) *How B.C.'s newest war in the woods shows the complex web of environmental politics*, CBC. Available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/fairy-creek-blockade-election-1.6161196>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, B.C. (2017) *Pacheedaht First Nation Forest & Range Consultation and Revenue Sharing Agreement (FCRSA) (the 'Agreement') Between: Pacheedaht First Nation as Represented by Chief and Council (Pacheedaht First Nation), and Her Majesty the Queen in Right of British Columbia as Represented by the Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation*. Available at: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/agreements/pacheedaht\\_signed\\_february\\_17\\_2021\\_1.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/agreements/pacheedaht_signed_february_17_2021_1.pdf). (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

*Old Growth Forest Ecology* (2022) *Fairy Creek*. Available at: <https://oldgrowthforestecology.org/fairy-creek/>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Reed, R. and Diver, S. (2023) 'Pathways to healing: Indigenous revitalization through family-based land management in the Klamath Basin', *Ecology and Society*, 28(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5751/es-13861-280135>.

Renner, S. and Yunker, Z. (2021) *The Fairy Creek blockaders: inside the complicated fight for B.C.'s last ancient forests*, *The Narwhal*. Available at: <https://thenarwhal.ca/fairy-creek-blockade-bc-old-growth/>. (Accessed: 31 January 2025).

Sergieieva, K. (2021) *Clear-Cutting: Pros and cons of the typical forestry practice*, *EOS Data Analytics*. Available at: <https://eos.com/blog/clear-cutting/>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Simmons, M. (2021) 'We don't have time': scientists urge B.C. to immediately defer logging in key old-growth forests amid arrests, *The Narwhal*. Available at: <https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-old-growth-forest-deferrals-scientists-2021/>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025)

Survival International and Survival International (2023) *Decolonize Conservation - Survival International*, *Survivalinternational.org*. Available at: <https://survivalinternational.org/campaigns/conservation>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

The Canadian Encyclopedia (2024) 'The Indian Act', *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Available at: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/timeline/the-indian-act>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

The Narwhal (2024) 'Fairy Creek Blockades.', *The Narwhal*. Available at: <https://thenarwhal.ca/topics/fairy-creek-blockade/>. (Accessed: 31 January 2025).

Thomson, J. (2023). *Exclusive: Docs Blocked by BC NDP Raise Questions about First Nation Statement on Fairy Creek Protests*. [online] The Walrus. Available at: <https://thewalrus.ca/fairy-creek-protests/>. (Accessed: 31 January 2025).

Tuck, E. and Yang, K.W. (2012) 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), pp. 1–40. Available at: <https://clas.osu.edu/sites/clas.osu.edu/files/Tuck%20and%20Yang%202012%20Decolonization%20is%20not%20a%20metaphor.pdf>. (Accessed: 17 February 2025).