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Author: Evelyn Arce and James Stauch

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Drops in the Soil, Not in the Bucket: The Case for Borderless Indigenous Philanthropy

By Evelyn Arce and James Stauch

This article is the eleventh in a [series](#) on Indigenous Communities and Philanthropy, guest edited by The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada.

SUMMARY: This article begins with the question of how philanthropy can possibly address the magnitude of the environmental and cultural change which is occurring on a global scale. Philanthropy can be more effective by making true partnerships with Indigenous Peoples whose accumulated knowledge and understanding is increasingly making our collective response to change more effective.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article pose d'abord une question : comment la philanthropie pourrait-elle apporter des solutions à l'ampleur des changements environnementaux et culturels qui se produisent à l'échelle mondiale? La philanthropie peut être plus efficace si elle s'appuie sur de véritables partenariats avec les peuples autochtones dont la somme de connaissances et la compréhension peuvent rendre encore plus efficace notre réponse collective au changement.

Many scientists believe that the planet is experiencing its sixth mass extinction event with over half of the world's marine and land species vanishing by the year 2100 if current trends hold.^[1] The first five extinction events were natural occurrences, but the sixth lies directly at the feet of our species. We take too much fish, clear too much land, and drive on an unknown road to an uncertain destination.

At the same time, every 14 days on average, a language disappears from the face of this earth.^[2] Each time the last speaker of a language breathes their last breath, we lose an entire way of interpreting reality: a vast library of knowledge, every fortnight, turned to ash.

So, as agents of change we must ask, what hope does philanthropy have of turning this tide? Are our efforts just drops in the bucket? The containers we have built to solve the problems that the planet faces – our programs, logic models, social returns on investment, the “non-profit sector” – are the buckets. They contain the funding – whether drops or streams – that might better be scattered on the soil, on the clay from which we are all shaped.

The Greek word “autochthanous” refers to humans as having “sprung from the earth.” Its English synonym is “Indigenous.” Philanthropists everywhere must forge partnerships with Indigenous

Peoples if we hope to solve the most complex and existential challenges of what Carl Sagan poignantly referred to as our tiny pale blue dot... “the only home we have ever known.”^[3] And may ever know.

In one sense, all Indigenous-partnered philanthropy is international. A grant, a site visit, a drink of tea and a drum dance, say, between a Winnipeg-based foundation and the Peguis First Nation is as international as an exchange between a Chicago foundation and a Maasai Tribe. Indigenous Peoples who are typically at the margins of their respective societies the world over – as true of the Saami in Scandinavia as the Kayapo in Amazonia – are also on the front lines of our planetary imbalance.

Arguably, in the philanthropic social change toolkit, resilience may stand above all other qualities as the collective trait we need most, a trait that Indigenous Peoples have in abundance. Moreover, the humility, grace and insight that Indigenous philanthropic relationships can foster may also allow us, finally, to collaborate with shared purpose, sufficient breadth and enduring impact. An Ethiopian proverb submits that when spider webs unite, they can ensnare a lion.

There are many positive signs that philanthropists are taking an active interest in Indigenous issues. According to the US-based Foundation Center, international giving to (or involving) Indigenous Peoples has grown eight hundred-fold in the past decade, albeit from a microscopic 0.38% of all giving from US foundations in 2012. That’s 85 million out of 22.4 billion dollars! The Ford Foundation alone accounts for nearly 45% of funding for Indigenous Peoples, but most of it goes to non-Indigenous led NGO’s and intermediaries like Tides Canada Foundation and the International Institute for Education. Other top foundations are W.K Kellogg Foundation, The Christensen Fund and Novo Foundation, all of whom have hired Native program officers to support their Indigenous grant-making programs.

The Foundation Center data shows that funders currently supporting these communities often do so in several ways, but the top three are environmental, human rights, and international affairs programs. Few funders actually have a dedicated Indigenous Peoples’ program. Some funders have also created broad program areas that can incorporate intersecting issues, such as climate change or food sovereignty

Affinity groups and networks are springing up in many countries, and initiatives such as the [Arctic Funders Collaborative](#) and the [Progressive Philanthropy Project](#) are aiming to realign the priorities of NGOs and philanthropic investment toward supporting the priorities and cultural practices of local communities.^[4]

But philanthropy is now facing its most profound challenge. The present framework of dispensing charitable contributions to the disadvantaged will always be tinged with shadows of guilt, pity or personal salvation. More importantly, it won’t make much of a difference. Nor is this charity framework fundamentally improved either through professionalizing our giving, or by practising “strategic philanthropy.” Safe in our programmatic silos, assured by our theories of change, we need to look at whether we are practising the craft *to, for, with* or *of* the communities and Nations we purport to be allies of.^[5] Do we actively seek contact and build relationships with the people who may take us to an uncomfortable geographic, mental, emotional – or dare we say it, spiritual – place?

We must rediscover the root idea of *philanthropos* – a love not just of humanity, but of the essences that make us human (read: cultures.) We must open ourselves up, not merely to the *plight* of the planet’s Indigenous inhabitants, the holders of vast stocks and flows of knowledge, but also to their indispensable role as hosts, stewards and guides. *Wayfinders*, to borrow ethnographer and human ecologist Wade Davis’ term^[6], to steer us – with many paddles – away from a journey up the

excremental creek.

As we engage with Indigenous Peoples, we must do so with respect, with reciprocity and with intention to build and maintain human – not blithely transactional – relationships. These are not just words. Efforts to engage Indigenous communities through pharmaceutical bioprospecting – just as one example – have resulted in nefarious forms of bio-piracy (stealing medicinal knowledge of plants and the intellectual property contained in local peoples' use of those plants). Yes, we now know that the Madagascar rosy periwinkle treats Hodgkins and leukemia, and that the bark of the Quinine tree treats malaria, among thousands of other “discoveries.” But as pockets in economic metropolises are lined, little more than spare change dribbles out to help build community centres or addictions treatment programs. Only in a Huxleyan novella could this pass as “philanthropy.”

This is not to imply that extractive industries are singularly exploitive. Rio Tinto has long been regarded as among the more progressive forces for Indigenous-settler reconciliation and Aboriginal-engaged corporate philanthropy in Australia. This year witnessed a breakthrough moment in Canada's extractives sector: Forestry company Tembec, along with Suncor Energy, well regarded for its support of First Nations education innovation in Canada, have both proclaimed their support for the principles of *Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)* enshrined in the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.^[7] The essence of FPIC is that, if a development does not meet with the *consent* of the Indigenous Nation on whose territory a proposal resides, it does not go through.

It is an interesting mental exercise to apply the FPIC principles to the program, platform, protected area or other intervention an NGO or foundation might find attractive. Those organizations that harbour a strategy to “save the planet” – whether biosphere or anthroposphere, or a corner thereof – without Indigenous people at the table, should think on the sanitized notions of “wilderness” propagated by conservationists such as John Muir, and their devotees.^[8] Teddy Roosevelt – who bankrolled and championed Muir's protected spaces campaigns — loved nature, but he thought otherwise of those who protected it for millennia: “The settler and pioneer have at bottom had justice on their side; this great continent could not have been kept as nothing but a game preserve for squalid savages.”^[9] This ‘civilizing’ imperative was a defining feature of how Europeans rationalized their imperial conquests. Described earnestly by Rudyard Kipling as the White Man's Burden, this ethos also underscores Canada's most grotesque exercise of charitably-dispensed education – the residential school system. Vestiges remain in our culture's embrace of “voluntourism” and perhaps even within social entrepreneurship, through what Courtney Martin describes as the “reductive seduction of other people's problems.”^[10]

The tradition of people-less conservation continued for years through the practices of the large conservation organizations, bankrolled by mega-philanthropy, most famously in the Amazon. But echoes of these attitudes remain, not just in habitat conservation and climate change mitigation, but in so many other areas of how we have defined, bounded and professionalized well-meaning social intervention. Think, for example, of our recent still-tentative “re-discovery” of restorative justice, kinship care, the role of elders in child development or the use of natural supports in frontline human services. To state the obvious and redundant, reciprocity works both ways. If “giving” is unidirectional, where the dignity of communities struggling to assert their often fragile autonomy is at stake, we may actually run the risk of “killing with kindness.”

For our own wayfinding on this “way-late” field of Indigenous-partnered philanthropy, there is now an

abundance of resources: The global donor affinity group [International Funders for Indigenous Peoples \(IFIP\)](#) educates its members and allies to practice a new paradigm of giving based on The Four R's of Indigenous Philanthropy — *Respect, Reciprocity, Responsibility and Relationships*. IFIP recently partnered with the Foundation Center to produce a new [Grantcraft guide: Funding Indigenous Peoples: Strategies for Support](#), containing 40 interviews with both donors and global Indigenous leaders that share their wisdom and practical advice for how philanthropic foundations can partner effectively with Indigenous Peoples around the world.^[11] It is encouraging to note that there is a hunger to learn more: In the first two weeks following its release, there were over 1,000 downloads of the publication.

There are now legions of better practices (the use of the term “best practice” being an unhelpful chimera in this realm). The California-based [Christensen Fund](#) has blazed an important trail, backing the stewards of cultural and biological diversity in the African Rift Valley, Central Asia, Northwest Mexico, and Melanesia. In Aotearoa (New Zealand), the [J.R. Mackenzie Trust](#) and [Foundation North](#) have shifted their attention emphatically toward Maori-partnered philanthropy. Indigenous-led re-granting vehicles such as the [Samdhana Institute](#), based in Indonesia and the Philippines, and the [Seventh Generation Fund](#) and [Alaska Native Fund](#), both operating in the US, are serving as vital bridges between the vastly different worlds of mega-foundations and local communities. We are even seeing progressive foundations collaborating to support Indigenous-led philanthropy such as the Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Learning Fund supported by the [Tamalpais Trust](#), [Swift Foundation](#), The Christensen Fund and [Novo Foundation](#). Here in Canada, we can find guidance from our own [Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada's Philanthropic Community's Declaration of Action](#), built on the seven sacred lessons of *Truth, Humility, Honesty, Respect, Courage, Wisdom, and Love*.^[12] We can also turn to the reflections of such global wayfinders as Cree lawyer, Wilton Littlechild, one of the key early visionaries and champions behind the *UN Declaration*, and Sheila Watt Cloutier, who magnificently makes the case for the Inuit [Right to be Cold](#) (and, previously, for the right of Inuit not to have unsafe body burdens of dioxans, furans, PCBs and DDT).^[13]

As the uncertain future is upon us, a transformed philanthropy must be more than a drop in the bucket. The charity pail must be overturned to moisten the soil where the seeds of change are yearning to be idle no more. Let us rediscover truly borderless giving, sharing and the reciprocal exchange of earth-wise knowledge – *autochthonous philanthropia*.

[1] Pimm, SL, CN Jenkins, R Abell, TM Brooks, JL Gittleman, L Joppa, PH Raven, CM Roberts, JO Sexton. “The biodiversity of species and their rates of extinction, distribution, and protection”, in *Science*, 344:6187, May, 2014.

[2] Rymer, Russ. “Vanishing Voices”, in *National Geographic*, July, 2012.

[3] “Pale Blue Dot”, from *Cosmos*(television series). PBS. 1980.

[4] Terramar Consulting. *The Progressive Philanthropy Project: Realigning Foundation-NGO-Local & Indigenous Community Relationships to Sustain Ecosystems, Economies, Cultures & Communities*. Santa Fe, NM: 2013.

[5] The “to-for-with-of” continuum is a concept developed by Katharine McGowan at the University of Waterloo and described in Darisi, Tanya. “Down the Snakes and Up the Ladders: Community

Collaboration in Practice”. Presented at the annual conference of the *Canadian Evaluation Society*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2012.

[6] Davis, Wade. *The Wayfinders*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2009.

[7] UN General Assembly, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly*, 2 October 2007, A/RES/61/295, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/471355a82.html> [accessed 1 February 2016]

[8] See, for example, Dowie, Mark. *Conservation Refugees: Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples*. Boston: MIT Press, 2011. Dowie has also written critically on the practices of philanthropic foundations in the US.

[9] Roosevelt, Theodore. *The Winning of the West*. Vol. 1, 1889.

[10] Martin, Courtney. “The Reductive Seduction of Other People’s Problems.” Blog post, retrieved from <https://medium.com/the-development-set/the-reductive-seduction-of-other-people-s-problems-3c07b307732d#.5netq4b07> March, 2016.

[11] Grantcraft. *Funding Indigenous Peoples: Strategies for Support*. New York: Foundation Center and International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP), 2015.

[12] The Declaration can be accessed and signed here: <http://www.philanthropyandaboriginalpeoples.ca/declaration/> It was previously featured in *The Philanthropist*: <http://thephilanthropist.ca/2015/06/the-philanthropic-communitys-declaration-of-action/>

[13] Watt-Cloutier, Sheila. *The Right to Be Cold: One Woman’s Story of Protecting Her Culture, the Arctic and the Whole Planet*. Toronto: Allen Lane, 2015.