
[“It is Not Just the Takings of our Land... It is the Takings of our Identity”](#)

This article is part of the publication [15 Years of REDD:](#)

[A Mechanism Rotten at the Core](#)

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To reflect on what REDD+ has meant for Indigenous Peoples and their struggles requires inserting this mechanism into a much broader reflection on the history of Indigenous Peoples. A history marked by resistance to colonization and racism as well as to capitalism and neoliberal globalization. In this perspective, resistance to REDD+ is not an issue only for Indigenous Peoples in tropical forests; it is about their historical global struggle for justice.

WRM talks with Tom Goldtooth, from the Indigenous Environmental Network, and also a member of the WRM Advisory Committee.

WRM: Please say a bit about yourself, why and how you got engaged with the REDD+ issue, considering that you come from a region without tropical forests or REDD+ projects.

Tom: I was given a mandate by some Indigenous tribes, Indigenous spiritual leaders and grassroots groups in 1998 when we had a meeting about climate change in the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) I was representing. I think it is good for people to know that the US government recognizes all of our 574 individual tribes, including Alaska Natives, and some aspects of our sovereignty. IEN is a grassroots community-based organisation with our membership. We are not representatives of the elected Indigenous leadership. When I use the word traditional it means original ways.

In the 1700s and 1800s there was a tremendous conflict with the arrival of the settlers, the colonizers from Europe. At first, we were pretty nice to the settlers; that is our nature, how we are. But after a while, we learned that these people had their own agenda: taking over our lands. And it always has been recognized in the North that with colonization always comes the Church. The Church needs to give its blessings to the taking over of a whole country by basically European colonizers. International law at that time was based on laws from Europe, but it was illegal to conquer an entire continent without getting the blessings of the Church. They said we were uncivilized. In fact, they said we did not have souls, s-o-u-l-s, that we were less than human. That is part of the process of colonization. It is crucial to understand some of the background of Indigenous Peoples of the North. But the same process basically took place in those lands and territories of the Amazon and tropical forests with original Peoples there, Indigenous Peoples, inhabitants.

So there is a long history of colonization and the takings of land, t-a-k-i-n-g-s. **It has always been a**

land issue. And that includes all the different resources and concepts of how to look at nature. For example, the colonists that came to North America wanted the trees at the East coast to build their shipping fleet. Those shipping fleets were operated either as businesses of the State, of individuals or by corporations. And a lot of people don't know that over hundreds of thousands of years they had devastated their own forests in Europe. So they were searching for more timber for their ships and other products. The Spanish were looking for minerals for example, the Dutch had their own interests, but all based on colonialism.

So with that in mind, our Network was given the responsibility to start working on climate change in 1998. Buenos Aires was my first UN climate meeting and there were only five Indigenous Peoples in attendance. I was not familiar with the issues around [carbon offset](#) mechanisms. But as I continued to attend those meetings, I soon heard about emission trading mechanisms and I heard more about the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and it interested me, because IEN is not limited to the United States or Canada. In the formation of our Network in 1990, we have always had participation of Indigenous Peoples from the global South, especially around concerns of the protection of biodiversity. Those were the beginning years of the formation of the UN Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD). In those early years of 1990, most of the primary issues were about toxic chemicals around landfills, toxic dumps, and the dumping of nuclear waste on Indigenous lands. But as we continued, we started to identify the terminology of environmental injustice and [environmental racism](#), which expanded the dialogue with our 574 tribes and beyond with our people in so-called Canada.

Those terminologies created one of our frameworks for addressing the inequity issues that we were facing by the government of the United States. We were seeing how to maintain our healthy ecosystems, but they were seeing only so-called resources. The Indigenous Peoples that were and are practitioners of the Indigenous knowledge, the Indigenous lifeways, have always advised us to not look at nature as natural resources, to not look at it as resources. So, we were guided by traditional knowledge holders, who always said we should not participate in the colonialist framework that looks at nature from a capitalist or monetary perspective. Our Network was formed by this kind of community representatives of our tribes, members that still carry on our Indigenous traditional knowledge, our original instructions that were given to us from the beginning of time.

Since we had participation in the formation of IEN from Indigenous Peoples from Latin America and Africa, and the Philippines, we have always put ourselves in a position that we also have to explore what their issues are. We want to be engaged in issues that could violate the human rights of those brothers and sisters from the global South. That is why I accepted the invitation to go to [the UN climate meeting in] Durban. I started to see that mitigation plans were merging at the UN level, and that they talked as if those plans on carbon markets were going to save Mother Earth and save our People, and get us to a level where we don't have to worry about global warming, about a changing climate. I have always been cautious of the federal government here in the US, but I am more cautious of UN meetings where they bring governments, but also the World Bank, large NGOs and corporations. So all my red flags go out. It was in these UN meetings that I heard about Kyoto and some of the debates around forests, and that there was a fight to keep them from becoming an [offset scheme](#). So, I learned how the CDM became the biggest [offset](#) scheme in the world and later all these things come together including forests as carbon sinks. This really became a concern for me.

I do come from a forested region here in the Great Lakes along the borders of the U.S. and Canada. I am surrounded by forests. I understand the relationship to the trees. The trees have spirit. According to our traditional knowledge we understand how trees breathe, so I understand the concept of carbon. But I soon learned that people living in the forests in the global South are really at a huge risk and there are serious issues, like land grabbing if the forest were included not only in these carbon

sinks but also as a CDM. And I had to look at new terminology, like the concepts of afforestation, and reforestation, and how those could be considered as methodology in the CDM. But straight up calling them a forest carbon credit, was something we started to organize around, but then after a while came RED, with one D, and then it became REDD, and then REDD+.

Like the CDM, REDD+ was launched by the World Bank. I started to look at the financial mechanisms that were supporting this false solution, the development institutions. This is where I started to make the link between how we as IEN can help support the rights of our Indigenous brothers and sisters in the global South from forested areas, because we were also getting involved, since 1996, with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). And by going to the CBD is where these issues of concern started to come together, understanding the role of the World Bank and the development institutions. They are behind something that we are really familiar with here in the North and that is the neoliberal globalization that started to show its ugly head. And I remember we used that term, economic globalization and its link to capitalism.

Part of IEN was then also building alliances with other marginalized people of colour here in the U.S., and working and establishing networks globally with organisations that are fighting capitalism, fighting economic globalization. So, it all started to come together for us, to get more involved and try to put a stop to REDD+, it became a symbol of our resistance. **In many ways, the struggles against this economic globalization and against carbon markets are the same struggle.** I like to stress that. And, if for us carbon markets are part of the continuation of colonization, it was not a surprise that during the 2007 UN climate meeting in Bali, the World Bank, the UN and the development paradigm found a way to work around forest [offsets](#), which were couched inside a strange acronym and language like REDD+. I feel that it was meant to create confusion and conflict, very much loaded with climate misinformation.

Of course, the conservation organizations were behind it, like WWF, and we were already started to get profiled as the bad people. Even at that time, the NGOs tried to find friendly Indigenous Peoples that would work with them, and they were trying to put us against each other, not only here in the Americas, but also in SE Asia, in Indonesia, and a UN climate meeting in Bali. It was not surprising to me that the conservation NGOs who were behind this started to act as 'third party verifiers' and it started to show that they were going to make money from REDD+. And they have been making money: Conservation International (CI), WWF, Environmental Defence Fund (EDF), and others, based here in Washington D.C. They have built out their organisations in the last decades to set up carbon [offsets](#) and verifying these phoney programmes. That's my response to your question.

WRM: You said that REDD+ has become a symbol in your broader resistance struggle. What makes you say this?

I mentioned colonialism, colonization, so these colonist programmes, like REDD+, they are founded on the development logic. They are built on a primus that countries in the global South can follow the Western example of capitalist expansion and be pulled out of poverty. But as Indigenous Peoples of the North I know that this is not true. And we know this has been the lie since World War II. So, I think it has been beneficial for me coming from the belly of the beast, of the United States, to be able to understand this linkage to colonization, to the colonialist logic of development.

The impacts on Indigenous Peoples are profound and deep. **REDD+ is just a continuation of that same colonial, capitalist, patriarchal logic that has taken this planet to the brink of violence and damage.** It is almost impossible to say what the impacts of REDD+ have been in the last 15 years because REDD+ is embedded in a system that goes back more than 500 years. From my

perspective in the North, it brings up that historical trauma that comes with what took place since the colonization of our lands in the North. **It is not just the takings of land and our trees and our water, our mountains and our grasslands, but it is the takings of our identity. It is the replacement of our Indigenous traditional ceremonies with Christianity, it is taking of our language, it comes with literally the rape of our children, the historical trauma that is documented in Canada in the Church-founded residential schools. This is a serious point. If we compare 15 years of a global initiative that has such an impact on the lives and future of our Indigenous Peoples of the tropical forests, this is no different to us than the past 500 years.**

I'm concerned how these carbon market mechanisms with benefit-sharing promises are resulting in the division of our Indigenous Peoples and that hurts deeply, because it impacts our national, regional and global solidarity, and how we work together. Many of us worked for 19 years on the drafting of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and that was not easy to do. And to see initiatives such as REDD+ becoming a divisive tool, a divide-and-conquer strategy. But again, these are not new impacts, there has been a history of these type of tactics used by colonial governments and their agents: the corporations. This level of racism is not new. Indigenous Peoples, have the answers to climate change. But if we are being divided, then we are not able to lead the way that this world needs. The people who promote REDD+ are truly causing the climate crisis in this sense. They have a lot to answer for.

WRM: In response to the critiques and impacts, REDD+ promoters created the Cancun [safeguards](#), best practices, [certification](#) standards, participatory REDD+, and so on, arguing they can prevent human rights violations. What is your view?

I see [safeguards](#) as smokescreens that are used to silence us, to silence our indigenous brothers and sisters. To make it sound like they are going to take responsibility. **They create [safeguards](#) to confuse and shift the narrative away from the destruction, away from the violence that comes with that destruction, which they are responsible for.** They don't tell the people in the Amazon that the money comes from polluting companies. They don't tell them that in some far away place there might be a refinery, a city of refineries, that are continuing to emit toxic chemicals and greenhouse gases that are causing long contamination and respiratory illnesses to local communities where those oil refineries are, killing people. They will not tell them all the impacts of violence and destruction that REDD+ is responsible for.

I have talked to some Indigenous People after organisations like EDF or Conservation International (CI) do workshops, and I ask them "Did they tell you where the money comes from?" And they said, "No, I think it comes from the World Bank", I said, "No, it comes from Chevron", because in this case Chevron was the one, and they were surprised, appalled. "Gazprom", "What?", they said. So this is how it works. And I also told them "did you know that there are Indigenous Peoples, black people, poor white people, Mexican Spanish speaking people, who live next to the oil refinery in Richmond, California, in the San Francisco area, who are dying from respiratory illnesses from the emissions from those oil refineries? And these companies are telling people that they have become carbon neutral. They are telling people that they are investing their money in the forest in the Amazon to protect people".

In the North I have had to explain this greenwash. People in the forests don't understand how that works, but they feel that they are being violated, that they are being convinced that it is good to take money coming from REDD+. So that is why the sole discussion of [safeguards](#) confuses and shifts the narrative away from the violence and destruction that these carbon cowboys are responsible for, and

the governments who are pushing that. So many people in conservation organizations believe that REDD+ can work. They are confused and don't see how racist REDD+ and other [offset](#) programs really are. I have told them that **these are mechanisms certifying land theft**, and they don't like me to speak like that- Certifying Land Thefts. [Safeguards](#) for justifying more fossil fuels and pollution? It is just insane. Best practices? For what? Dispossession? It is ridiculous.

Multimillionaire Jeff Bezos established the Jeff Bezos Earth Fund. He put a hundred million US dollars right after the UN climate meeting in Bali to fund WWF, Environmental Defense Fund, CI and TNC. Behind that funding is the agenda to help pushing their conservation [offsets](#) and carbon, capture and storage programs. That is 400 million dollars in the pocket of organisations pushing this agenda! IEN and other organisations are still trying to put together our campaigns to fight this.

There will continue to be human rights violations, evictions. Who is going to hold the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo accountable? Who is going to hold the President of Brazil accountable? They want to erase the history of the original Indigenous Peoples of their countries. They want to re-write history. They want to ignore that the First Peoples have inherent rights. That is what they are afraid of.

WRM: Some indigenous organisations have actively engaged with REDD+, resulting in proposals like 'Indigenous REDD+' and campaigns like 'No Rights, No REDD'. Looking back, do you think it is possible to conciliate the fundamental rights and values IPs defend, with what REDD+ stands for?

That whole history I have working on REDD+ has caught up to us, you could say. It always has been an issue that has taken its toll. I was invited to the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil, in 2009. One invited me to a meeting with Indigenous Peoples to explain from my perspective the concerns and issues we have regarding the implementation of REDD+. When I showed up, Steve Schwartzmann from EDF looked at me and asked "why is he here?" He already had conflicts with me. It was that time that the NGOs started to reach out to our Indigenous Peoples. EDF had a lot of money and they got the favouritism from a lot of leadership from the Amazon, including COICA. So COICA started to work with the NGOs and developed the concept of 'Indigenous REDD+'.

But it has been a long road. I have a long history working on this, and there was a strategy in Bangkok, Thailand, when there was a UN climate meeting there, and we strategized [about rights and REDD]. I did not think then and I still don't think now that the governments where forest-dwelling communities and Indigenous Peoples live will grant rights to the Indigenous Peoples; that means, land rights, titles to their lands, and in the Amazon that means sub-surface rights as well. But, looking back, I think I made a mistake, because there was a strategy at the UN meeting in Thailand, with the SE Asia folks who were trying to make REDD+ work, along with other Indigenous delegates from the Amazon, COICA, and we strategized a protest at that UN meeting using the slogan 'No Rights, No REDD'. It received some attention. To this day, there are some debates around that strategy. Was that a good strategy? It raised the question: is there a possibility in Peru or even Colombia or even in Brazil of granting rights to Indigenous Peoples? Land rights in forest areas? I do not think so. And that strategy has been behind the 'Indigenous REDD+' approach.

I have talked with some Indigenous People on the question: how can you reconcile with your Indigenous ways, your cosmovision, your spirituality, how can you reconcile, to participate in a whiteman capitalist market system? Even if you gain the ability to implement an Indigenous-based REDD+ initiative, you still have to participate in the commodification and privatization of your forests and the carbon in your trees. It is not the government who is doing that, not outside entities, you are

doing that now as Indigenous Peoples. It seems so contradicting when our Indigenous brothers and sisters in the Amazon are fighting oil concessions and in any Indigenous REDD+ project, they find out the REDD+ funding is coming from Chevron and other polluters. And does one reconcile that? I still ask that question. I don't know how they can reconcile that. It means that they put aside that Indigenous spiritual knowledge in order to participate in climate capitalism.

When I follow up on this issue with people from the grassroots of the Amazon, right in the remote villages, they get it; it is not complicated. They often don't support it. And in recent years, they started to question Indigenous alliances of the Amazon acting as intermediaries and brokers for REDD+ projects. It is very political in the Amazon, as it is where I come from in the north. For IEN I always treasure real mechanisms that insure meaningful participation and for such complicated issues of carbon markets and [offset](#) regimes, the principles of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) must be truly implemented. The full information on all aspects of these REDD+ schemes, and now so-called 'Nature-Based Solutions', is critical in these complex political relationships in the Amazon. It is a complex political structure. Chief Ninawa HuniKui from Acre, Brazil, has his perspective and his position and there are groups trying to divide his people about this issue. The same with Marlon Santi, from the Sarayako in Ecuador, when he started to speak out on this. Even Gloria Ushigua from the Sápara of the Amazon in Ecuador has differences with her relatives from her village that support bringing a REDD+ project into the area. Having information is very important. The principle of implementing FPIC is very important. Indigenous Peoples and forest dependent communities must have thorough and complete understanding of the complexities of REDD+ projects and how they involve polluting industries actually owning the carbon in the forests. I really am concerned and pray there is no bloodshed within the villages over these issues.

WRM: What are the main challenges for IPs with the renewed push for REDD+ under the good sounding name: 'Nature-Based Solutions'?

I have been thinking about this and we have been speaking about it as false solutions. Our challenge is, **how do we convey that this is a kind of final frontier of colonization that is systematically taking over Mother Earth through privatization and commodification?** This global process is doing this through mechanisms that separates and quantifies the Mother Earth's cycles and functions, such as carbon and biodiversity and turning them into 'units' to be sold in financial and speculative markets.

How can we convey this and develop popular education materials to connect the dots of the structures of a fossil economy and the financialization of nature that has no respect of human rights and the rights of Indigenous Peoples. How do we build our movement of resistance so that our pipeline organizers, our oil fighters and earth defenders on the frontlines understand?

The instruments of governments of colonized countries are around property rights. So 'Nature-Based Solutions' is about [offsets](#). Polluting corporations provide the money to put land as [offsets](#), as conservation [offsets](#), and at the end of the day, it is the corporations who own these lands that have been put aside. This is the plan behind the 30x30 plan [cover 30% of the world's territory under Protected Areas by 2030]. So the re-branding of 'Nature Based Solutions' from REDD+ is dangerous right now.

We are seeing a huge push for this around the world, living here in the United States, the belly of the beast, there is a bill, a legislation right now, called the 'growing climate solutions act', that gives the U.S. Department of Agriculture the authority to create an on-line [carbon offset](#) registry system, that is going to help the farmers getting into the [carbon offset](#) voluntary market. So that is where REDD+ is also found here. But it is also still found in other places inside carbon pricing systems, like in

Colombia. The major issue now is how are we going to stop this matrix system that allows for these pipelines? These programmes like carbon pricing are getting more and more complex. Taxes with REDD+, carbon banking, green bonds, it goes on and on.

All of these land-based [offsets](#) are being considered nature-friendly. How can you argue with something that is protecting nature? That is what the people ask me. We are concerned because we are losing the battle, we are losing the battle here in Washington D.C., the false solutions that Biden is pushing for, because he is neoliberal. And this is all about capitalism and colonialism. And some of the environmental groups they say, “well, don’t push it here, we got to work with Biden”. But we can’t, we continue to campaign, with many educational campaigns.

On top of this, there are the ‘[net-zero emissions](#)’ pledges of many corporations. And it is important to link the issues and talk about this as well. Underneath the umbrella of ‘[net-zero emissions](#)’ they are using two approaches. They will either buy land-based [offsets](#) which are called ‘Nature-Based Solutions’ or using carbon capture and storage. Both of these approaches prolongate and support the fossil fuel industry. This does not allow the politics of U.S. and Canada, of Europe and other fossil fuel countries, to move away from fossil fuels. It does not allow them to keep them in the ground, but to keep business as usual. So we will continue to have pipelines, we will continue to have tanker traffic, we will continue to have the transportation of dirty energy, fossil fuels, until we hit the core of the matrix, the issues, and that is the ‘Nature-Based Solutions,’ which is the ultimate privatization of the Mother Earth of Nature.

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