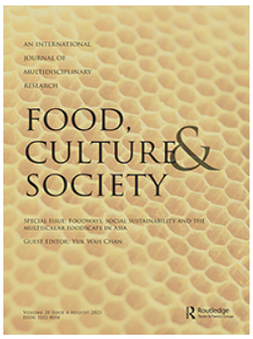

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Principles of care: Indigenous land stewards' motivations in protecting land and food systems in British Columbia

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous land stewards hold unique roles and responsibilities in relation to the land and employ traditional ecological knowledges to protect the land's health and longevity, supporting Indigenous self-determination and food sovereignty. This research explored Indigenous land stewards' motivations in caring for the land and how their work is an expression of love and care. Conversational interviews were held with twelve Indigenous land stewards residing in British Columbia, who discussed their roles and responsibilities through oral storytelling. The findings revealed six key themes: land, good relations, and reciprocity; learning, sharing, and healing; spirituality and ceremony; love and care; Indigenous food sovereignty; and resistance against colonial structures. Participants articulated a profound interconnectedness with the land, emphasizing reciprocal relationships, spiritual practices, and a commitment to food sovereignty as being central to their roles. Participants also highlighted the importance of advocating for the well-being of the land and Indigenous communities in the ongoing struggle against harmful colonial practices including resource extraction and industrial developments. These themes collectively highlight the collaborative and committed nature of their work, with a goal of protecting and nurturing the land for future generations.

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Introduction

Since time immemorial, the lands of so-called Canada have been cared for by Indigenous Peoples, who have fostered relational, reciprocal relationships with the land (McGregor 2013). Today, many Indigenous Peoples hold roles as land stewards, defined as Indigenous individuals who have specific responsibilities to care for the land and encompasses seed keepers, harvesters, healers, guardians, land defenders, and more (Coastal First Nations-Great Bear Initiative 2022; Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle n.d.). Land stewards are entrusted with employing conservation practices rooted in Indigenous ecological knowledges to maintain and advocate for the health of the land through actions such as sharing seeds and plant knowledge with people; assisting communities with food sovereignty initiatives; picking medicines; patrolling; working in

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protecting all our resources, land and water; taking care of the Elders; and trying to help care for the places where we live.

Many of these responsibilities support Indigenous food sovereignty, described by Morrison (2011) as "the present-day strategies that enable and support the ability of Indigenous communities to sustain traditional hunting, fishing, gathering, farming and distribution practices, the way we have done for thousands of years prior to contact with the first European settlers" (98). Many Indigenous land stewards engage in food-related actions at the individual, community, and regional levels to nurture relationships with the land and its non-human inhabitants to maintain accessible foodways for future generations (Morrison 2011).

Despite Indigenous land stewards peacefully advocating for food sovereignty, environmental justice and stewardship, climate action, and access to traditional lands for future generations, resource extraction industries and the media have often portrayed land stewards as violent, disruptive, and disorderly (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014; Sterritt 2021). Further, Indigenous land stewards have faced verbal and physical abuse from government authorities when conducting ceremonies and protests against unauthorized resource extraction on their lands (Dhillon and Parrish 2019; Hume and Walby 2021; McKay 2024). For example, Indigenous land stewards protesting logging in Fairy Creek faced arrest by RCMP officers, who used violence and excessive force: violence that was not mirrored in their arrests of non-Indigenous protestors (Baker, 2021; Davis 2023). Similar instances of police harassment and violence have been witnessed at protests across the country, notably the 2019 Wet'suwet'en blockade, where RCMP officers called land stewards degrading names, assaulted and arrested unarmed land stewards at gunpoint for holding a ceremony for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and were granted permission to use lethal force and illegal surveillance from their superiors (Hume and Walby 2021; McKay 2024; Rocks 2023). The RCMP, media, and other government bodies attempted to create a narrative of Indigenous Peoples as squatters, rebels, and criminals despite land defenders protesting peacefully, motivated by caring for the land (Budd 2024). This narrative further exacerbates the colonial violence Indigenous Peoples experience by painting them as resistance to economic development; colonial violence being the systemic, racialized violence faced by Indigenous Peoples as a means of protecting the power, systems, and interests of white settlers in so-called Canada (Starblanket and Hunt 2020).

In response to the colonial violence toward land stewards and the impacts this has on Indigenous communities' access to food, many Indigenous Peoples have developed food-related initiatives to feed their communities, including local gardens and public fridges and freezers (Corntassel et al. 2020; Taylor 2021). These acts are selfless and generational, rooted in care and born from a need to prevent hunger in their communities. Care for the land, water, and animals continues to guide the actions of many land stewards, and yet they are constantly vilified for demonstrations of love for the land (McKay 2024). This project was born from a need to correct the narrative from one of violence and disruption to one highlighting the love and care Indigenous land stewards have for the land. We aimed to explore what motivates Indigenous land stewards to advocate for the protection of the land despite a multitude of challenges (Lin 2024) and how their deep love and care for the land manifests in the actions they take to protect it from harm.

Indigenous conceptions of caring for the land

Little research has explored what it means to care for the land as an Indigenous land steward (Menzies et al. 2021; Woodward et al. 2020). In Woodward et al.'s (2020) exploration of Indigenous ways of caring for the land from an Australian perspective, the authors drew upon case studies from a variety of Indigenous communities to create a set of best practices for applying Indigenous knowledges to caring for the land and the sea. These practices highlighted the importance of being in relation with the land as kin and allowing Indigenous Peoples to freely care for the land as they have done since time immemorial (Woodward et al. 2020). Similarly, Menzies et al.'s (2021) primarily Eastern-Canadian study focused on First Nations and Métis ways of caring for the land, the values that guide their care, and how non-Indigenous Peoples can help care for the land and support research that aligns with Indigenous ways of knowing.

Indigenous views of the land as kin come with motivations to treat the land as you would any other relative; with gratitude, respect, and care (Kanngieser and Todd 2020; Tynan 2021). Kincentric relationships with the land are rooted in reciprocity, meaning care, respect, and support are provided and received by both parties invested in the relationship (Tynan 2021). As the land provides food, medicine, and more for Indigenous Peoples, care for the land is demonstrated through supporting healthy, balanced ecosystems and protecting them from exploitation (Woodward et al. 2020). Wolfstone (2020) added that offering gifts to the land and its Peoples upholds reciprocity, as "sharing and gifting are ways to reciprocate the Land's bounty, not out of obligation or self-interest, but as a way of living in harmony with the Land" (13). In many Indigenous communities, maintaining strong, reciprocal relationships with the land is seen as an obligation and a responsibility, both on individual and community levels (Tynan 2021; Watts 2013). Often, these responsibilities stem from ceremonies, stories, and natural laws which have provided teachings about the obligations Indigenous Peoples have to the land (Daigle 2016; N. J. Turner 2020; Wolfstone 2020). The roles and responsibilities Indigenous Peoples have for the land are not formalized, paid roles as stewards or caretakers in a Western sense; taking action to care for the land is inherently tied to Indigeneity (McGregor 2018). For example, Haudenosaunee Clan Mothers are given the responsibility of providing essential goods and services to their communities as well as providing ecological care (Wolfstone 2020). Other responsibilities community members may hold in relation to the land are making dip nets for fishing, sharing songs and stories, managing controlled burning for ecosystem protection, and maintaining sacred and spiritual sites (Whyte 2016; Woodward et al. 2020). Regardless of the specificities of one's role, Indigenous Peoples uphold their responsibilities to care for the land to maintain their reciprocal relations that allow them to thrive and continue to show care so that future generations may also have a chance to know the land (Simpson 2013; Tynan 2021; Whyte 2016).

Indigenous conceptions of love for the land

For many Indigenous cultures, love is a foundational principle that can inform a Nation's laws, governance systems, and ways of being (Borrows 2019; Watson 2014). This principle extends beyond a romantic notion of love, rather it is a powerful action one

can take to support connectivity between People, their communities, and the land (Sakakibara 2023). Embedding principles of love into values and belief systems has supported the health of Indigenous communities for millennia and drives actions to support environmental sustainability (McGregor 2013; Sakakibara 2023). Kimmerer (2013) explored Indigenous love for the land in her work and shared that "knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond" (124).

Having a strong relationship with the land allows Indigenous Peoples to connect to love, just as one would through a strong bond with a mother or grandmother (Moreno 2019). Indeed, the land can feel love from being in relationship with Indigenous Peoples, as demonstrated by the generosity land shows Peoples (Davies 2023). Being in loving relations with the land is essential in supporting healing processes that assist Indigenous Peoples, their non-human relatives, and the land in recovering from the contemporary and historical harms they have faced (McGregor 2013). The research studied the sacred bond between the land and its Indigenous land stewards by exploring love, care, and other key motivators in caring for the land.

Methods

This paper is derived from the first author's masters research project (Lin 2024) that investigated Indigenous land stewards' motivations and dedication to their work and how they express love and care for the land in British Columbia. The first author is a multiracial woman of Taiwanese and mixed-European ancestry, whose work was supported by the second author, a mixed-ancestry Cree, Metis, and settler woman and land steward. This research employed an Indigenous research paradigm created for non-Indigenous researchers (Carlson 2017) that prioritized four key principles that resonated with the work of land stewards: 1) reciprocity; 2) resistance to and subversion of settler colonialism; 3) land/place engagement and accountability; and 4) self-determination, autonomy, and accountability. This paradigm affirms Indigenous autonomy over their words, languages, and cultures. As Indigenous voices have long been silenced and suppressed by settler states (Khawaja 2021; Marsden, Star, and Smylie 2020; Zentner et al. 2019), this project prioritized the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP®) Principles of partaking in respectful, decolonial, and collaborative research with Indigenous Peoples (Schnarch 2004). For example, participants were given autonomy by controlling how their words were presented in this work at all stages, including analysis (Lin 2024).

Project participants

A total of 12 individuals participated in this project and met the following criteria: 1) were a resident of British Columbia; 2) self-identified as an Indigenous person; 3) were 18 years or older; and 4) agreed to participate in this project as someone who self-identified as a land steward (or a different term used to describe their role caring for the land). While there were no specific inclusion criteria for the role that participants must hold in relation to the land, some roles included gardeners, hunters,

seed stewards, educators, healers, land defenders, and Indigenous food sovereignty advocates. Purposive sampling (Kovach 2021) was used to recruit participants based on previously established working relationships they held with the second author (Robin 2019). Between June and September 2023, the conversational interview method (Kovach 2010) was employed to collect qualitative data virtually, via telephone, and in-person (at participants' preferred locations) (Corntassel and T'lakwadzi 2009). The conversational interview method is based in trust and relationality between the interviewee and the interviewer. This was upheld by the first author, who shared what brought them to this work and disclosed their positionality to all participants, practiced protocol and gifting, and conducting pre-meetings before the interview took place. The conversational interview method upholds an Indigenous research paradigm, as a large component of this method involves highlighting traditional oral storytelling as "data" (Kovach 2010). Interview questions (see Appendix) were referenced to guide conversations with participants, however unguided, natural conversations and storytelling often occurred. Transcription for all interviews was completed by the first author and transcripts were then returned to participants, who provided additional edits. Honoring participants' ownership and autonomy over this work, participants were given the option to be identified by name (first names or full names) and all participants consented to identification: Ben, Dani (Seesamia) Pigeau, Elder Jim, Fred Fortier, Jess Housty, Kasey Stirling, Nadia, Qwustenuxun, Tiffany, Tina, Tom, and Spencer Greening.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data due to its value as a decolonial method that recognizes and highlights diverse histories, geographies, and Indigenous knowledges (Silva and Wanderley 2022). Thematic analysis was completed using NVIVO (version 14.23.0). The completed analysis was sent to participants for an additional review period, which resulted in further additions and improvements to the results.

The University of British Columbia's (UBC's) Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) provided ethics approval (# H23–01157) for this project on May 29, 2023.

Use of the term "land steward"

In this project, the term "land stewards" was used as an encompassing term for the multitude of roles Indigenous Peoples hold as caretakers of the land, chosen due to 'stewardship's definition as the role of taking care of an entity, its ability to encompass multiple roles in relation to land (i.e., medicine people, harvesters, seed keepers), and its affiliation and use by groups such as the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle and the Coastal Stewardship Network (Coastal First Nations-Great Bear Initiative 2022; Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle, n.d.). However, not all participants identified with this term due to its associations with colonial hierarchies and connotations of ownership over land. Instead, some participants self-identified as seed keepers, hunters, healers, gardeners, and land defenders. Given that land stewards come from many different Nations and contexts, there may not be an all-encompassing term that articulates their roles and responsibilities, especially in English. While there may be some overlap in what terms like "land steward," "land defender," and "guardian" encompass, they require further articulation from Indigenous Peoples who identify with these terms to expand on their nuances and political meanings.

Above all other terms, many participants agreed that identifying themselves as members of their Nations most accurately describes their relationships with the land and what their inherent responsibilities to care for the land are as Indigenous Peoples.

Results

Six major themes were identified as being the primary motivations participants had in caring for the land: 1) Land, Good relations, and Reciprocity; 2) Learning, Sharing, and Healing; 3) Spirituality and Ceremony; 4) Love and Care; 5) Indigenous Food Sovereignty; and 6) Resistance Against Colonial Structures. The following paragraphs highlight how these six themes are vital in defining participants' roles and relationships with the land, expressed through oral storytelling and experiences of being a land steward (or similar terms).

Land, Good Relations, and Reciprocity

When asked to describe the land and what it meant to participants, many individuals discussed the expanse of what the term "land" encompasses. Participants expressed that it is more than the earth beneath their feet and includes the entire ecosystem. Jess explained that the land encompasses "the whole geographical and spiritual and emotional space where my ancestors thrived and lived." Approximately half of the participants stated that they were inseparable from the land; "they are one" with the land and are an extension of it. Dani shared that the land is

> something that I belong to, it doesn't belong to me. So if I can't find myself, it's because I'm so disconnected from land or energy at that point that I need to remind myself to get back to it. It's like the commonality of everything and all for me, and I think for most people.

Participants shared that their relationship with the land is the reason why they took on roles as land stewards (or similar roles); the interconnectedness between participants and the land guides every action they take in caring for the land. Elder Jim said that "almost everything we do, almost everything I do is connected with culture and connected with the world around me."

Almost all participants shared that their strong connections to land stem from the reciprocal relationships they hold with it: relationships that motivate participants to care for the land. Dani described it as a "life commitment, is to make sure that I'm always connected and that I'm always contributing to that relationship and it's reciprocal." Participants were thankful to the land for its offerings of food and medicine, as well as the teachings it has provided them and their communities. Several participants discussed how important it is to engage in reciprocal relations with the land to give back to it for all it has given them. Tiffany shared what reciprocal relationships with her animal relatives can look like:

> You know, my ancestors used to burn the sloughs every year before the birds nested so they would drive out all the pests like mice and bugs and things like that. Then the birds would have beautiful nesting areas, and then we would ethically harvest eggs. So it's like this constant symbiotic relationship with the land around us.

Most participants shared that they hold certain responsibilities to care for the land, with the most common responsibility being "fulfilling my reciprocal obligation to the land." Half of the participants discussed their responsibility to give back to the land for all the care the land has shown them, especially when "other human beings haven't been able to care for [them]." Kasey explained that "the land and the waters have cared for us, and it's our responsibility to pass that care back to them so that they can continue to care for us and those who come after us." These responsibilities also extend to plant and animal relatives; several participants discussed the importance of following protocols for hunting and harvesting from the land to support their health and well-being and maintain good relations. Elder Jim said

> We are provided for by. . . you know, whether it's the cedar trees or the deer or the buffalo or the elk or the moose, whatever. We've been provided for by those. And so our contract with the Creator is not that we own them, but that we care for them; that we're entrusted with their care and with the care of the Earth.

Over half of the participants added that they have differing responsibilities toward land that is not a part of their traditional territories. As guests on the land, these participants say that they have a responsibility to care for this land as they would for their own territory and create relationships with the local Nations. Kasey said that it has been important for her to "acknowledge always that I'm a guest, and maintaining that or being a guest means that I have to maintain that sort of increased respect for the places that are not my own where I've been living."

Learning, Sharing, Healing

Many participants mentioned that in caring for the land, they are protecting the greatest source of knowledge accessible to humankind. Half of the participants described the land as their forever educator that has provided their communities with sacred teachings and knowledges since time immemorial. Teachings from the land also included listening to and observing the actions of animal and plant relatives. Some participants explained that plants and animals are constantly sharing teachings on the land that have provided humans with the skills required to access new food and medicines. Elder Jim shared a story about bears who shared a teaching about balsamroot with his Elders:

> There's many things that we have understood as watchers. Not only as watchers of the Watchhouse, I mean as watchers of life. I'll give you an example: out by Lillooet, in that area, there is what they call balsam arrowhead. [. . .] So our Elders were watching the bears and they would dig this stuff up and they wouldn't eat it. They would put it on a rock, they'd go away, and then come back a week later and eat it. And the Elders said wow! You know, if you're watching what goes on around you, you start learning from those things around you. And so they started doing the same thing. And it turns out [. . .] what happens is the medicine is in the middle, it's stored in the middle of the plant. To get it out requires sunlight and that heats it up and makes it move towards the outer shell. And so that's what the bear was doing. The bear knew it and we'd watch the bears, so we started imitating the bear.

Half of the participants also talked about the land as a place where teachings can be shared between family and community members. These participants referred to themselves as lifelong learners who stressed the importance of spending time with Elders and

teachers on the land to absorb whatever wisdom they offer. Others added that there are many opportunities to nurture connections to their Indigeneity on the land that are not possible in restrictive urban environments.

Many participants shared that a significant aspect of their roles as land stewards is to pass on the teachings they have received from the land to Indigenous Peoples looking to connect with their cultures or to allies hoping to support Indigenous efforts to care for the land. Over half of the participants engaged in knowledge-sharing activities that were focused on land-based education for Indigenous youth to support their connections to Indigenous cultures. Jess' organization supports youth engagement with the land through various programs:

> We're bringing 20 young people a week or more on the land for four days at a time and I feel like my role gets to be a facilitator you know, helping to facilitate relationships between other people and the land and to help people develop a sense of safety and identity out of the territory that makes them feel strong and self-sufficient. That's really beautiful, really joyful work to be the bridge or be the connector. And yeah, it's good work to do.

A few participants added that cultural (re)connection stemming from land-based education for Indigenous youth is vital to counter some of the Western teachings that could isolate youth from their land and food systems. Many participants shared that engaging in land-based activities has been essential to healing from past and present traumas, both on personal and community-wide levels. Spencer said that spending time on the land is "the most beautiful feeling I have in my life, and I feel like more people need to connect with that and understand it." A few participants mentioned being grateful to the land in terms of the medicine that has been provided to them from their plant and animal relatives; medicine is "such a powerful gift from the original environment that we come from" (Dani).

Several participants also discussed the land in itself as medicine, meaning healing from the land comes from more than just harvesting physical medicines from it. These participants shared that their time spent "out on the land" has supported their spiritual, emotional, and mental health in addition to their physical wellness. Tiffany said that being on the land "definitely helps with the healing process and just really losing yourself in those, you know, the cycles of life, like the cycle of a seed, from seed all the way back to a seed and how that cycle just keeps going." Jess also recalled their Elders' teachings about the land as an antidote to the traumas experienced at residential schools:

> The Elders of the day communicated really clearly that the antidote was the land and land connection that was going to make our community strong again and support our healing process. If we could get out on the land and remember ourselves in the way that the land remembers us.

Spirituality and Ceremony

Many participants expressed that spirituality plays a large role in their work on the land. Participants explained that taking part in ceremonies has supported the strengthening of their connection to the land. They added that all work with land is connected to spiritual relationships: a person's spiritual connection to land is the first relationship and the last relationship they have while on Earth. Dani shared:

> I believe in a spiritual aspect of we aren't just our bodies or the land or anything else, but that is our experience to be had here. So we need to fully understand that and have that relationship in a really healthy, balanced way.

Spencer added that he "believe[s] in spiritual ceremony and the necessity of connecting with the land in a spiritual way in order to have a sustainable society, to have a healthy society."

Some participants added that partaking in ceremonies and other spiritual activities has helped them to determine what their obligations to the land are and what work needs to be done to ensure its longevity. Elder Jim shared that

> They're part of our teachings and part of our walk as Sundancers, that they say every year you dance and you get a different gift from the Creator to help you walk the path of supporting and helping the people. So for the most part, I can barely see them, I have dreams and I have to check on them afterwards and see what they can do. [. . .] Only the spirits give you these dreams, so that you can do something about it. And also in times when I didn't do anything, the spirits stopped coming to me for about six months. So that's characteristic I guess of them.

Tom added that responsibilities for the land can be passed on to you through gifts in a ceremony:

> You could pass on through ceremony the mask that you have from your grandmother, but that mask might be tied to a trap line, or maybe it's a root garden, a plot down at [the garden] or at the mouth of some river there's some lily garden that is part of that ceremony. Or it could be fishing grounds out in the straights, like halibut fishing grounds where you're bottom fishing or an old stone fish trap. Now, as you inherit that ceremony and that mask, you're also responsible for maintaining that old fish trap, right? And using it responsibly to feed your family. And so there's a lot of like contingent responsibility built into the old foodways and just the lifeways, I guess.

Love and Care

All participants expressed that every aspect of their work is rooted in care. Participants explained that "all [they] do is care," and that they were "put here [on Earth] as a way to look after everything else." Participants shared that their principles of care are rooted in sacred teachings that came from the land and their Elders. They expressed that these sacred laws are embedded with care and shape how they integrate care into their work. Elder Jim added that caring is "our sacred duty, to care for people, to care for each other. You know, like we say, we're all family, that there are no strangers, only family members you haven't met yet. And that's important as well." Qwustenuxun shared how his Elder's teachings about care influenced how he prepares food:

> The Elders are always asking you to have happiness in your heart. Oh you know son, if you've gotta make all this like food, you gotta have happiness in there. Don't be in there being mad or else it's in the food and then everybody will have it on them and that's not what you want. You have to put happiness in that food so that everyone will be happy when they eat it, right. And for years that's what you hear, all these things, right.

Similarly, all participants expressed that their love for the land and their communities motivated them to become stewards. Several participants agreed that "there's nothing

without [love]. There's nothing without the love of it. [. . .] we can't exist without it." Kasey said that "you can't be part of people who have been here for thousands of years and not love the land that kept you alive, and that supported you, and allowed you to thrive." Many participants agreed that they often do not see their actions as work because they "love what they do."

Several participants explained that the love and care they feel for the land often manifests in the actions they take to protect it from harm. These participants agreed that sometimes, fighting to protect the land is necessary to uphold their reciprocal relationships with the land, as "what do you do for the things you love and the people you love? You protect them, you help them thrive" (Jess). Tom shared that

> the care comes in just defending the last of what we know to be true, right? Like the old trees are 1000s of years old and they don't exist anymore except for these small pockets. And so we have to care for that because they are the last elephant and white rhino and it doesn't make any sense to cut them down.

These participants agreed that expressing love and care are ways they can uphold their "commitment to [the land] that we rely on."

Most participants expressed that they are strongly motivated to care for the land so that their children can feel the joy of spending time out on the land and experience the care it provides. Participants added that this is not just about their children; they are doing this work for all the future generations of children that will live in so-called Canada. Their motivation to care for future generations is highly intertwined with the love and care participants feel for their own children and the land. Spencer expressed that

> we want [the land] to be there for the ones we love as well. We want it for Elders. We want it for our future children. And so it's an active love for these humans, our fellow humans and their offspring, and the next generations of us. Why we're doing this. And so it's kind of twofold. There's like this thing in my mind where it's like "I see you" to the landscape. I see you, and all that you give us, and so I have to do this. Then also it's like I love my Elders. I love my family, and when I have children, you know, I want to ensure that they'll experience this, and it's out of love for them.

Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Most participants mentioned that supporting food sovereignty in their communities was a primary motivator in their work to care for the land. Jess said that "food sovereignty is just such a core part of who we are and how we relate to the world around us. And it benefits all of us and the land and the climate when we are food sovereign." Fred said that food sovereignty is not something that can be achieved through purchasing food items in a grocery store; "as an Indigenous person, I get my food from the land. I cannot and will not keep buying food from the market, you know, the food store. I think it's important for us to understand that." Tiffany added that "we are food and food is us. I mean, like we have to eat. So for me, it really is food. I'm helping to grow food and helping to adapt food and seeds. And that's my driving force behind this, is we all need to eat."

Many participants explained that due to "tremendous challenges" including climate change, industrial resource extraction, a lack of food sovereignty project funding, and the declining health of traditional foods on the land, food sovereignty is still not a reality in

their communities. These challenges motivate them to care for the land because they believe that their communities deserve to be food sovereign. Qwustenuxun had his Elder's wishes in mind when thinking about food sovereignty:

> I think what keeps me [going] is those Elders inside my head and the reality that when I'm an Elder and I have to go into the Elder's home, that I can eat Indigenous foods and not that crap they serve in there now. Like I said, I have been working with Elders for years and they're always asking me "Oh son, you gotta hurry up with that, I have to go into a home soon. I don't want to eat that food, you've got to go help." So wanting to ensure that when I leave this world, we can eat traditional foods in the hospital and we can eat everywhere we want because that's the way it really should be, absolutely.

Half of the participants stated that a key piece of Indigenous food sovereignty is being able to share harvested traditional foods with their community members. Several participants mentioned that there are people in their community who cannot access traditional foods for a variety of reasons, so participants have incorporated food-sharing practices into their roles to support community food sovereignty. Participants expressed that the feelings of love and care they hold for their families and communities drives them to make sure that everyone can access traditional foods. Ben said that one of the most important things you must do with traditional foods is

> spread [them]: I got fish yesterday; I came home and I gave a bunch of Elders some fish. Like my aunties, all of my older aunties. You know, that's gonna provide them a little bit of supply for the winter. You've got to try and share, right? If you don't share, then. . .

Qwustenuxun also discussed how he shares his catch with his Elders:

> Nobody hires me to go harvesting, nobody, buys anything off of me, I hand everything away. Last year, I think I processed- I think I dried maybe 200, 300 fish and I probably gave away 100, maybe 120, right? And now it's just like, oh, you know, two Elders, they're like "oh, gee I really wish I had some fish," and I go hey, you know, here's the fish auntie. Oh, here here- it's like, no, I don't want your money, just have a fish. And you know, that's the love, the love of looking after. [them]

Resistance Against Colonial Structures

Most participants expressed that the past "wins" their communities achieved motivated them to fight for the land in a similar way. These wins included successes in holding industry accountable for cleaning up pollution events and fighting for Indigenous rights to be acknowledged in the Canadian court of law so that "Canada can never challenge us again." Some participants shared stories of how their community's oral histories became "valid" pieces of evidence for use in the Canadian court. Tom shared that "it was remarkable to see how [his grandma's stories] became science, and then also became law," as his grandmother's story was successfully used as an affidavit to win a case to prevent a logging operation on Kwakiutl territory. The wins that their Elders achieved inspired participants to persist and work to secure more wins for the land. Tina explained how her team was able to hold a polluter accountable for an oil spill:

> I mean, it was making sure that that polluter, no matter how small the drop of oil that was dropped and attached to a rock or was on the beach, everything we found, we made them accountable. And then it had to all be cleaned up. So now we're going to make sure they pay

> every dollar and then some, right? So again, it's about protecting, and making people accountable for destroying our food sources, right? And our sustenance.

Participants also made efforts to hold polluters accountable and mitigate climate change through protests, educational seminars and events, through roles in organizations focused on climate disaster emergency prevention (i.e., British Columbia Wildfire Service, First Nations Emergency Services Society, International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity), and through numerous interviews with the media, academic institutions, and more. These participants were especially happy that their wins were setting precedents across the country that hold colonial institutions responsible for honoring and respecting Indigenous rights.

Most participants expressed that caring for the land and achieving these "wins" is not something that can be achieved independently; participants highlighted that their work has been a collaborative effort with family, friends, other land stewards, and like-minded allies. These participants shared that teamwork and consultation with community members is also an essential piece of the work that they do on the land to meet community needs. Others added that one of the greatest strengths of teamwork is having a strong, dependable support system to lean on when facing various challenges in caring for the land. These participants said that support from their allies has been "the best they've ever had in their lives" (Tina) and was vital in times when they needed it most to avoid burnout. Kasey expressed that it was necessary to

> talk about [our challenges] frankly, and supporting each other when we need time, someone picking up the slack for someone because they couldn't deal with it that week or that month. That has been a critical element to the work that we do because I honestly would not have finished my master's degree if I didn't have that.

Half of the participants mentioned that teamwork was also essential for meaningful reconciliation: participants' hopes for reconciliation motivated them to educate and collaborate with others to care for the land. Reconciliation was a topic that divided many participants. While some participants believed that colonial institutions were motivated to take part in meaningful acts of reconciliation, others insisted that institutions were "not there yet." Some participants agreed that institutions viewed work with Indigenous communities as "trendy" and are not approaching partnerships with sincerity. Regardless of their motivations, many institutions have produced official reconciliation plans that are meant to guide their actions over the next few years. Elder Jim believed that "we've gone a long way toward reconciliation. I just hope as I do this work right now that the people will stand up one more time on mass with us to say 'no, we haven't gone anywhere, we're still here and we're still on the land."

Discussion

Love and Relationality Between the Land and the Peoples

For many Indigenous Peoples, land is a relationship based in love and care (Menzies et al. 2021; Ross 2019). Participants shared that they love the land because of what it provides for them. However, this love stems from more than just what the land can provide. Participants viewed the land as a relative whom they strive to maintain a strong,

respectful relationship with. These notions describe the Indigenous principle of relational accountability, defined as "the 'kincentric' beliefs among many Indigenous Peoples, which holds that people are dependent on and related to everything and everyone around them, including air, water, rocks, plants, animals, and so-called 'supernatural' beings" (Reo 2019, 66). Graveline (1998) added: "that which the trees exhale, I inhale. That which I exhale, the tree inhales. We live in a world of many circles; these circles go out into the universe and constitute our identity, our kinship, our relations" (57). Contrary to Western hierarchies that place humans above all else in the ecosystem (Hodson, Dhont, and Earle 2019), relational accountability states that all beings in the ecosystem are interconnected equals. Participants' stories support this principle in saying that they are not separate from nature and their connection to the land, who is their kin, guides their actions to care for the land out of love.

Since the land and People are interconnected kin, they face the same threats to their health from environmental degradation. Participants expressed that when the land is hurting, they are also hurting, and so any efforts to protect the land also protect their communities. Participants explained that taking action to mitigate climate change and ecosystem exploitation supports Indigenous wellness by preventing fires and floods that could threaten their homes and sacred spaces and also supports food sovereignty. For example, Tiffany shared that actions to burn the sloughs to clear pests from bird's nests support a healthy bird population from which they may harvest traditional foods later in the year. These controlled fires are known in the literature as Indigenous fire stewardship, which relies on the responsible use of fire to support ecosystem conservation and the health of traditional foods relied upon for Indigenous well-being (Hoffman et al. 2021). Once again, this concept of ecosystem interconnectivity counters Western myths that crises like climate change are not real or do not impact individuals on a personal level, therefore it is not something worth caring about (Wang et al. 2018). The disconnect from land that is pervasive in Western society also extends to food systems, where Canadians are failing to remember that it is the land that provides the food that allows them to thrive, not the grocery store (B. Turner 2011). Participants hoped that cultural programming for allies coupled with collaborative projects between Indigenous Peoples and colonial organizations to address calls for reconciliation can re-ignite connectedness between people and the land and spark action to support the longevity of the land.

The Land as a Teacher

Not only is the land a cherished relative inherently worthy of care and protection, but the land (and the non-human animals it encompasses) is also a knowledge keeper who has been offering guidance and wisdom to Indigenous Peoples to support their well-being and food sovereignty for millennia. "Land as teacher" is a concept well presented in the literature. Simpson (2014) shared a Nishnaabeg story about a young girl named Kwezens, who was out on the land collecting firewood when she spotted Ajidamoo (a red squirrel) up in a tree. Kwezens observed that Ajidamoo was not collecting nuts, but rather was nibbling and sucking on the tree, enjoying its sweet sap. Kwezens then shared Ajidamoo's generous teaching with her community, who still enjoy the gift of maple syrup to this day (Simpson 2014). Simpson's (2014) story is similar to the story Elder Jim shared about a teaching gifted from bears. Elder Jim explained that his Elders learned about

balsamroot and how to access its medicinal qualities from watching bears out on the land who knew that the balsamroot needed to be dried for a few days to allow the medicine to migrate from the core to the surface of the plant.

These stories demonstrate the roles that animals play in Indigenous food sovereignty. Animal relatives are often associated with food sovereignty through their physical sacrifices as offerings to People for food, shelter, medicine, and livelihood, yet little attention is paid to their roles as educators that support Indigenous Peoples' physical and spiritual well-being, self-determination, and connection to land: elements intertwined with achieving food sovereignty in Indigenous communities (McGinnis et al. 2019; Morrison 2011; Simpson 2013). Animals have led Indigenous Peoples to discover foods and medicines through hunting practices and spiritual guidance, by providing tools, and by keeping other food sources alive to nourish humans (McGinnis et al. 2019). Animals have also provided teachings about environmental stewardship, kinship, values of reciprocity, respect, and humility, and how to care for the land to maintain strong, interconnected relations between land and Peoples (Asch, Tully, and Borrows 2018; McGinnis et al. 2019). Such teachings from animal relatives have equipped Indigenous communities with the knowledges required to maintain their food systems through effective land stewardship and harvesting techniques for traditional foods and medicines that remain central to Indigenous cultures to this day (i.e., sage and maple syrup) (McGinnis et al. 2019; Simpson 2014). This knowledge is critical for the future and potential of Indigenous food sovereignty.

The future of Indigenous food sovereignty is also intertwined with Indigenous youth, their connections to their Indigeneity, and the teachings they receive from their Elders and the land: stressing the importance of land-based education for youth. Many participants are involved with land-based teaching initiatives that immerse Indigenous youth in harvesting practices, ceremony, and other cultural land-based activities to strengthen their connections to the land and their identity. Similar land-based initiatives are being created for Indigenous youth across the country. In Ontario, the Moose Cree First Nation created Project George, a program that supports the well-being of Indigenous youth through engagement with Cree land-based skills like food preparation, hunting, and camping (Gaudet 2021). What began as a small request for a fishing trip by an Elder and a youth is now a thriving organization which supports 10 land-based excursions each year for Indigenous youth (Gaudet 2021). The White Bear First Nation's land-based education program in Saskatchewan has similar goals of connecting youth to the land and their Indigeneity through activities including trapping, berry picking, and tanning hides (Piapot 2022). One participant from White Bear First Nation shared that through this program, Indigenous youth "are bringing the way of our life back" (Piapot 2022, para. 5). There are many more similar initiatives across the country (Bushkids 2020; Learning the Land 2020; Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation n.d.) Raincoast Education Society n.d.) that all share a similar goal with the participants in this research: to support intergenerational knowledge transfer between Elders and youth so that future generations can learn how to care for the land.

The land holds foundational roles as a teacher and as an antidote to violence: it is inherently worthy of protection. Without Indigenous Peoples who are dedicated to caring for the land, Indigenous youth will not have the chance to heal intergenerational traumas with the Elders out on the land, (re)connecting with what it

means to be Indigenous. Forming loving, reciprocal relationships with the land is necessary for Indigenous youth to understand their roles and responsibilities in life (Tynan 2021). Indigenous youth need the chance to learn how to hunt or fish, or where to harvest the best berries from. Most importantly, youth need a chance to listen to the needs of the land and take on roles as land stewards in the future so that the children who come after them may have a chance to know the land.

Conclusion

Indigenous land stewards' work is rooted in love and care; care for the spiritual, physical and emotional relationship they hold with the land, for all their non-human relations, and for their communities. It is a care fueled by a need to ensure Indigenous communities are self-determining, food sovereign, and have a voice in decision making practices involving their territories. Land stewards work tirelessly to mitigate climate change, perform ecological and food systems restoration, and hold polluters accountable for the destruction of the land.

This study highlights that contrary to Western views of land stewards as violent and disruptive, land stewards protect the land in a peaceful manner despite the ways that they are mistreated by law enforcement and other government bodies (Dhillon and Parrish 2019; McKay 2024). Harassment toward Indigenous Peoples stewarding their lands is addressed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)(Articles 2, 7, 8, 10, 18, 25, 26, 29, 31, 32) which states that Indigenous Peoples have the right to be present on and govern their own lands, be free of violence, discrimination and forced assimilation, and "right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals" (United Nations 2007, 18). As the Government of British Columbia has committed to implementing these Articles through the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, land stewards should be respected, supported, and recognized as individuals that uphold healthy environments across the province (and beyond). The work of land stewards benefits all who live and will live in so-Called Canada. Caring for the land is not something that can be done alone: land stewards' efforts must be strengthened by respectful partnerships with like-minded allies who support meaningful reconciliation and view the land as a relative worthy of care.

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Appendix. Interview guide

1. How do you define the land?
   (a) What does the land mean to you?
2. What do you consider your role to be in relation to the land?
3. How do you describe the work you do on the land?
   (a) Has your work changed overtime?
4. Do you see the work that you do as an expression of care?
   (a) Does love play a role in your work?
5. Do you feel that your work is appreciated and valued?
6. Who else is involved in your work on the land?
7. What obstacles or challenges do you face in your role?
   (a) What keeps you going in the face of these challenges?