Caden McDermott

Professor Luedtke

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Haudenosaunee Land Stewardship and the Crisis of Public Understanding

Haudenosaunee land stewardship stands as one of the world's most enduring and sophisticated systems of environmental governance. Its core values are rooted in the Haudenosaunee Creation Story and further defined by the Great Law of Peace. These pillars of Haudenosaunee culture emphasize responsibility, reciprocity, and a careful balance between people and the natural world. Although this stewardship has proven its effectiveness over thousands of years, it is often misunderstood by the wider public and too often overlooked by western policymakers and scientific institutions. As environmental crises intensify worldwide, this lack of understanding has serious consequences, not just for Indigenous sovereignty, but also for the future of truly sustainable environmental protection.

This paper explores the disconnect between Haudenosaunee environmental practices and the public's understanding of them, arguing that this gap undermines both Indigenous governance and modern environmental policy. The challenge today isn't that Haudenosaunee land stewardship is fading within the communities themselves, far from it, as shown later. Instead, it's a lack of awareness, recognition, and integration of these practices beyond those communities. While Haudenosaunee nations continue to practice sophisticated land management rooted in centuries of ecological observation, public narratives too often present Indigenous stewardship as something purely historical, symbolic, or incompatible with modern governance.

In reality, these practices are active and adaptive and can offer a real improvement to the current "status quo" practices, but they are not even in the conversation right now.

As I researched this topic, I drew from in-class discussions, Haudenosaunee oral traditions, academic scholarship, and contemporary Indigenous accounts of land stewardship. My own commitment to environmental protection has been shaped by my journalism studies and by my short time with the Environmental Protection Agency in Ohio. Through that work, I saw firsthand how often environmental policy overlooks Indigenous knowledge systems, even as agencies struggle to address climate change, biodiversity loss, and water contamination. I believe that ethical storytelling, grounded in collaboration rather than extraction, can help close the gap between Haudenosaunee land stewardship and public understanding.

I chose this topic because it sits at this crossroads of environmental responsibility and the power of narrative, two sentiments that connect deeply with my own personal values. Journalism and public education play a huge role in shaping whose knowledge is valued. When Indigenous stewardship is presented truthfully and respectfully, it challenges mainstream ideas about land use, progress, and environmental authority. By looking at both the philosophical foundations and current real-world applications of Haudenosaunee land stewardship, this paper proposes a three-part action plan to build public awareness, institutional engagement, and grassroots policy efforts.

Haudenosaunee land stewardship is best understood as a relationship-based system of environmental responsibility, where humans are seen as part of the natural world, not separate from it. Stewardship isn't about owning or controlling land, but about a reciprocal obligation to care for land, water, plants, animals, and future generations. This worldview stands in stark contrast to many Western land management systems, which often prioritize extraction,

privatization, and short-term economic gain. As Oren Lyons put it, “we have no word for wild,” (Central Current). In Haudenosaunee philosophy, land isn’t a commodity. It’s a living entity, part of a larger network of responsibility.

The ethical and political roots of this worldview are laid out in the Great Law of Peace. More than just a governing document, the Great Law provides a moral framework connecting governance, diplomacy, and care for the environment. At its core is the principle that leaders must consider the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation yet to come. This is a directive that weaves long-term ecological thinking into political choices (Robertson & Shannon). Environmental stewardship, then, is inseparable from governance. When decisions harm the land, they are seen as failures of leadership and balance, not just technical mistakes.

The Haudenosaunee Creation Story brings these ethics to life. In the story, Sky Woman falls from the Sky World and is only saved from certain doom by the turtle which she lands on. In being supported by animals that work together to create land on the turtle’s back, it illustrates a sense of teamwork and camaraderie between humans and the natural world. The earth is formed through collective action, sacrifice, and care, especially the muskrat’s willingness to risk everything to bring up soil from beneath the water (Bonaparte). Humans arrive in the world not as conquerors, but as dependents who owe their existence to the generosity of animals and other beings, this starkly contrasts the western outlook. This story creates a moral obligation to live with gratitude, restraint, and respect.

Taken together, the Great Law of Peace and the Creation Story form a unified system of values rather than separate teachings. The Creation Story establishes the ethical relationship between humans and the natural world, while the Great Law translates that relationship into systems of governance and collective responsibility (Tehanetorens 15). Equality between humans

and other forms of life is not symbolic but operational. It shapes how land is farmed, how resources are shared, and how decisions are made. These teachings demand accountability not only to other people, but to animals, waters, and future generations, creating a stewardship ethic that is both spiritual and practical.

In the modern era, Haudenosaunee nations continue to live out these teachings through land-based practices that directly reflect their philosophical foundations. Sustainable agriculture rooted in the Three Sisters method exemplifies relational balance by fostering mutual support between corn, beans, and squash while maintaining soil health. Controlled burns are used not as destructive tools, but as regenerative practices that mirror the Creation Story's emphasis on renewal and balance. Seed preservation initiatives reinforce responsibility to future generations by protecting biodiversity and food sovereignty. Opposition to environmentally destructive development projects reflects the Great Law's insistence that leadership must prioritize collective and long-term well-being over short-term gain.

Unlike many non-Native environmental approaches, Haudenosaunee stewardship does not divide science from spirituality or policy from ethics. Western environmental management often operates reactively, responding to damage after it has occurred. Haudenosaunee practices emphasize prevention, balance, and relational accountability. As Robin Wall Kimmerer explains, "We can ask the land what it needs, and listen for the answer" (Kimmerer 18). This approach treats land as a teacher rather than an object, aligning closely with both the Creation Story and the Great Law of Peace.

Indigenous land stewardship has been empirically linked to improved environmental outcomes, including higher biodiversity, reduced deforestation, and increased ecosystem resilience. A global analysis published in Nature Sustainability found that Indigenous-managed

lands support biodiversity levels equal to or greater than protected areas managed by non-Indigenous institutions (Garnett et al. 369). Similarly, research from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services confirms that regions stewarded by Indigenous peoples often experience lower rates of environmental degradation (IPBES 2023).

Despite this evidence, Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous stewardship practices are rarely integrated into regional or national environmental planning. Even when Indigenous knowledge is acknowledged, it is often treated as supplementary rather than authoritative, reinforcing existing power imbalances within environmental governance structures.

One example of modern Haudenosaunee stewardship can be seen in the Onondaga Nation's long-term environmental work surrounding Onondaga Lake. For decades, the lake was treated as an industrial waste site, resulting in severe ecological damage. The Onondaga Nation consistently framed restoration as a moral obligation rooted in Haudenosaunee teachings, emphasizing healing relationships with the land rather than simply meeting regulatory standards. It also separates itself from traditional conservation becasue the Haudenosaunee have a deep spiritual connection to the lake. Their advocacy influenced cleanup efforts while maintaining sovereignty-based environmental values (Onondaga Nation). This ethic of restoration also extends to species relations, as demonstrated by the Nation's role in the return of buffalo to Haudenosaunee lands, an effort rooted in cultural responsibility and long-term ecological balance rather than symbolic gesture (Central Current).

A second example is the Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force, which coordinates environmental monitoring, legal advocacy, and inter-nation collaboration across the Confederacy. The task force addresses issues such as water protection, pipeline resistance, and

climate change while grounding its work in traditional knowledge systems. Its structure reflects the Great Law of Peace by emphasizing consensus, shared responsibility, and long-term thinking. Rather than opposing modern science, the task force strategically engages with regulatory frameworks while maintaining Haudenosaunee authority over land and water.

A third example can be found in Haudenosaunee seed sovereignty initiatives, particularly among the Mohawk and Oneida Nations. These programs preserve ancestral seeds, agricultural practices, and ceremonial knowledge while resisting dependence on industrial food systems. Seed sovereignty reflects the Creation Story's emphasis on gratitude and responsibility, ensuring that future generations inherit both biological diversity and cultural knowledge. These initiatives parallel land protection efforts such as the collaboration between the Six Nations Iroquois Cultural Center and the Adirondack Land Trust, which emphasizes long-term stewardship rather than short-term development (Adirondack Land Trust).

Despite these active and successful practices, public knowledge of Haudenosaunee land stewardship remains limited. In educational systems, Indigenous environmental knowledge is often confined to brief historical units, disconnected from present-day practice. This framing reinforces the misconception that Indigenous stewardship belongs to the past rather than to contemporary environmental problem-solving.

Within governmental institutions, consultation with Haudenosaunee nations frequently occurs only after major decisions have already been made. This procedural inclusion fails to recognize Indigenous nations as sovereign environmental authorities and instead treats them as stakeholders rather than decision-makers. Such practices directly contradict the principles of shared responsibility articulated in the Great Law of Peace.

In scientific research, Indigenous knowledge is often extracted without proper context, credit, or authority. This practice reduces complex knowledge systems to data points, reinforcing colonial power dynamics while stripping stewardship practices of their ethical and relational foundations.

This gap persists because colonial narratives continue to frame Indigenous peoples as impediments to progress rather than as leaders in sustainability. Media coverage often reinforces this framing by focusing on conflict without historical or cultural context. As Kimmerer notes, "The dismissal of Indigenous knowledge is not accidental, it is a consequence of a worldview that refuses to see land as a living relative" (Kimmerer 46). Without intentional efforts to challenge these narratives, public misunderstanding will persist.

To address this disconnect, this paper proposes a three-pronged campaign focused on media storytelling, educational integration, and community-based policy mobilization.

The first prong centers on collaborative journalism. This would involve partnerships between journalists and Haudenosaunee nations to produce long-form reporting, short documentaries, and multimedia projects that foreground Indigenous voices and authority. Implementation would include community editorial review processes, consent-based storytelling agreements, and compensation for knowledge holders. Local outlets, nonprofit newsrooms, and public media organizations would serve as distribution platforms, ensuring accessibility without sensationalism.

The second prong focuses on educational curriculum development in collaboration with Haudenosaunee educators, scholars, and knowledge keepers. Figures such as Robin Wall Kimmerer, as well as Haudenosaunee educators working through cultural centers and nation-based education departments, could help shape curriculum that integrates stewardship into

science, history, and civics education. These materials would align with state standards while centering Indigenous epistemologies rather than relegating them to supplementary content.

The third prong involves community-based policy mobilization. This includes organizing public forums, workshops, and policy literacy sessions that equip community members with tools to engage local and state governments. By translating Haudenosaunee environmental priorities into accessible policy language, communities can advocate for consultation processes that recognize Indigenous authority. Mobilization would occur through partnerships with environmental organizations, tribal governments, and local advocacy networks.

Haudenosaunee land stewardship offers a powerful model for addressing contemporary environmental crises, not because it is new, but because it has endured. By learning from the past, society gains access to systems of responsibility and balance that challenge extractive norms. Looking toward the future, meaningful collaboration with Haudenosaunee communities requires more than acknowledgment. It requires listening, accountability, and sustained action.

Bridging the gap between Haudenosaunee land stewardship and public understanding is not simply an educational task. It is an ethical one. Through responsible storytelling, collaborative education, and community-driven policy engagement, it is possible to support Indigenous sovereignty while advancing environmental protection for generations to come.

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