



The Land Back Movement

Fast Facts

The nationwide efforts of tribes to regain native homelands have been making headlines for the past few years. Where did this resurgence come from, and what could it mean for public lands, the environment, and indigenous people if it succeeds?

What is the “Land Back” movement, and where did it come from? Why are scientists and conservation groups involved?

- The phrase “**Land Back**” was popularized in 2018 by Canadian [Arnell Tailfeathers](#), who used it as a hashtag in memes criticizing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s relationship with pipeline developers and lack of **land reparations**, or efforts to return land taken by illegal means.
- In 2019, Indigenous academics in Australia [produced research](#) that showed when tribes are given political agency over managing land, they use best practices for water and forest conservation. [Additional research shows](#) there is greater biodiversity on land managed or co-managed by **First Nations** than even federally managed national parks or protected lands.
- [Conservationist groups begin to partner with tribes](#) in order to help them purchase back ancestral homelands in exchange for various legal guarantees that the land will be preserved.
 - The way First Nations care for land often involves a different approach from that of the federal government. For example, using **controlled burns** rather than burn bans to [prevent wildfires](#), [restoring wildlife](#) to habitats on both tribal and public land, and bringing back endangered species such as bison and buffalo ([three tribes in Washington state](#) are involved in these efforts).
- On July 3, 2020, the Indigenous-led organization [NDN](#) organized a demonstration in which protestors blocked off the highway leading to Mt. Rushmore, where President Donald Trump was expected to visit. This marked the beginning of Land Back as an organized movement.
 - This was the latest in [decades of protests](#) at Mt. Rushmore. The Black Hills, sacred lands reserved for the **Lakota (Teton Sioux)** in the [1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie](#), were quickly reclaimed by the federal government using the [Indian Appropriations Act of 1876](#) after [General Custer](#) and his army confirmed the presence of gold. During the [Red Power Movement](#) in 1970, [Lehman Brightman](#) famously led a group of 30 in occupying Mt. Rushmore, demanding the Black Hills be returned. A Supreme Court case ruled [in favor of the Sioux in 1980](#), but the cash settlement was rejected by tribal leaders who feared it would undermine the return of the land.
 - During the July 2020 protest, 21 protestors were arrested. After a nationwide showing of support, [all charges were dropped](#) except those of organizer Nick Tilsen.
 - In response, the [Land Back Manifesto](#) was released by NDN and the current Land Back campaign officially began on Indigenous People’s Day, October 12, 2020.
- In 2021, [Deb Haaland](#) became the first Native woman to be appointed **Secretary of the Interior**, which oversees the [Bureau of Land Management](#) (BLM). She has introduced the [30 By 30 Resolution to Save Nature](#) to the House of Representatives (Senator Tom Udall introduced the same measure to the Senate), which would commit to conserving 30 percent of the United States’ land by the year 2030.

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- In August of 2021, [Charles F. Sams, III](#), a Navy veteran with more than 25 years of experience working in conservation management with both tribes and government agencies, was nominated as director of the [National Park Service](#). If appointed, he will be the first Indigenous person to hold the post.

Have any First Nations had their land returned? What about land in the state of Washington? What type of land reparations are there?

- In 2014, the [Nisqually Tribe purchased back](#) some of their land and signed an agreement with Washington State Parks to create Nisqually Park, which includes public access to those lands.
- After the Wiyot Tribe purchased part of Duluwat Island in Northern California, the city of Eureka agreed to return the rest of the island when it went up for sale. This marks the [first time a U.S. municipality](#) has returned land without strings attached.
- In 2020, the Esselen Tribe regained two miles of California land with the [assistance of Western Rivers Conservancy and a grant](#) for the \$4.5 million needed.
- In December 2020, the [Ojibwe Reservation Restoration Act](#) in Minnesota acknowledged that Ojibwe land was sold illegally. It required the transfer of 11,760 acres from the **U.S. Forest Service** to the United States of America **in trust** (when the secretary of the Department of the Interior [acquires title to property](#) and holds it for the benefit of a Native American tribe or individual tribal members) for the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.
- In March of 2021, 150 years after the title was changed when Maine became a state, the Passamaquoddy Tribe [purchased Pine Island](#) with the help of conservation charities.
- In October of 2021, a 9,243-acre ranch in Washington state was purchased by Conservation Northwest, who agreed to [return the land to Colville Tribes](#) provided that a **land covenant** guarantee that the land will be preserved rather than developed.
- The [planned removal of four dams](#) in Southern Oregon and California, the largest dam removal project in history, was also hailed as a “Land Back” victory, though removal plans are unlikely until at least 2024, and by then the damage to the salmon population may be permanent. A source of local controversy is the Yurok and Karuk tribes’ senior water rights, which they have used to divert water to salmon populations rather than farmers during drought season.
- Areas with dense population cannot be easily bought back. Efforts such as [Real Rent Duwamish](#) in Seattle encourage residents to pay “rent” as a donation to the Duwamish Tribe, who have not received compensation for their broken treaty and have no federal recognition.

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