

BEYOND MODERN MEAT PRACTICES: INDIGNEOUS
KNOWLEDGE, ANIMAL RIGHTS, AND THE HUMAN-NATURE
DISCONNECT IN THE CONTEXT OF SETTLER COLONIALISM

by

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The ethics of consuming meat, especially when viewed through the lens of Indigenous knowledge systems, presents a unique framework for understanding human-animal relationships and ecological sustainability. Through their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), Indigenous cultures emphasize a holistic and reciprocal approach to animal husbandry and hunting, viewing these practices as sacred and essential to maintaining balance with the natural world. These practices, rooted in respect and a deep understanding of the environment, contrast sharply with the industrialized meat production systems that dominate contemporary agriculture, particularly in the production of beef, pork, and chicken. Industrial meat production, driven by profit and efficiency, has led to environmental degradation, animal suffering, and a growing disconnect between people and the animals they consume. This thesis explores these ethical concerns, advocating for a reconsideration of meat production through an Indigenous perspective that stresses sustainability, respect, and interconnectedness. Through case studies of the Cherokee Nation, Makah Indian Tribe, and Inuit Nunangat, and an exploration of their relationships with buffalo and orca whales, this study seeks to address the gaps in current literature, particularly the underrepresentation of Indigenous voices in discussions of animal rights and the meat industry. By examining Indigenous narratives, oral traditions, and animal stories, the thesis underscores the importance of these cultural practices in fostering respect for nature and ethical stewardship.

Ultimately, this work challenges the current trajectory of industrial meat production and highlights the potential for Indigenous knowledge and practices to shape a more ethical, sustainable, and culturally respectful future for food systems and human-animal relations.

Land Acknowledgement

The University of Oregon is located on Kalapuya Ilihi, the traditional Indigenous homeland of the Kalapuya people. The Kalapuya people were forcibly removed from these lands through a series of treaties in the 1850s and relocated to reservations. Today, descendants of the Kalapuya people are primarily citizens of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians.

As this work centers Indigenous voices and experiences across diverse homelands, we also honor and acknowledge the traditional territories of the Indigenous peoples who are the focus of this research:

This work acknowledges the Cherokee Nation and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, whose ancestral homelands span across the southeastern United States, including parts of present-day North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, and Alabama. This acknowledgement recognizes the trauma of forced removal and the Trail of Tears, while honoring the continued sovereignty and resilience of Cherokee people today.

This work acknowledges the Makah Indian Tribe, whose traditional territory encompasses the northwestern tip of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state and the surrounding coastal waters. This acknowledgement honors their cultural traditions including whaling, and their continued stewardship of their ancestral lands and waters.

This work acknowledges Inuit Nunangat, the traditional homeland of the Inuit people that spans across the Arctic regions of northern Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and Siberia. This acknowledgement recognizes the deep knowledge systems, cultural practices, and ongoing

relationship between Inuit peoples and the Arctic landscape that has sustained them for millennia.

This work acknowledges that Indigenous peoples maintain ongoing relationships with their traditional homelands, regardless of borders imposed by colonial governments. This research is only possible because of the knowledge, and continued presence of Indigenous peoples, and this work is committed to being conducted in a manner that respects and uplifts Indigenous voices and perspectives.

Land acknowledgements, while important, are never sufficient on their own. True respect for Indigenous peoples requires ongoing action, relationship-building, support for Indigenous sovereignty, land back and missing and murdered Indigenous women and two-spirit people. This acknowledgement serves as a starting point for deeper engagement with the ongoing responsibilities that come with conducting research that centers Indigenous experiences and knowledge systems.

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Introduction

The illusion of dominance and control, the separation of knowledge from responsibility. A world in which matter and spirit are both given voice (Kimmerer, 2015).

The relationship between humans, animals, and the environment has been framed vastly differently in Western society and Indigenous Knowledge systems. In Western perspectives, animals are often seen as resources to be exploited for human benefit, a view rooted in anthropocentrism and the separation of humans from nature (Boddice, 2011). This philosophy has shaped contemporary food systems, particularly the industrialization of meat production, which emphasizes efficiency and profit over ethical considerations and ecological balance (Adams, 2010). In contrast, many Native American cultures view animals not as commodities but as sacred beings with intrinsic value, often woven into the fabric of spiritual, cultural, and ecological practices (Deloria, 1999; Goeman, 2023). These perspectives are grounded in the idea of interconnectedness, where humans are seen as caretakers rather than dominators of the natural world (Cobb, 2005).

Colonialism has severely decimated Indigenous practices, with many traditional ecological knowledge systems (TEK) being lost or suppressed over time (Aftandilian, 2011). However, there is a growing movement among Indigenous peoples to reclaim and revitalize these practices that have been here all along, seeking to restore harmony between humans and the natural world (Antonio, et, al., 2025). Central to this reclamation are the narratives that Indigenous cultures speak about animals, stories that emphasize respect, reciprocity, and the spiritual significance of different species local to native land (LaDuke, 2016). These animal stories offer valuable lessons not only about coexistence with other species but a cycle of

reciprocity and respect for all creatures; they also provide a counter-narrative to the exploitative practices of modern industrial meat production.

This thesis aims to examine these contrasting worldviews and explore how Indigenous knowledge can offer solutions to the environmental and ethical challenges posed by industrialized food systems, particularly meat production. Through an exploration of case studies with the Cherokee Nation, Makah Indian Tribe, and Inuit Nunangat, and their relationships with buffalo, seals, and blue whales, this study illuminates how traditional practices of hunting and animal stewardship can inform contemporary debates on animal rights, environmental sustainability, and food ethics. By analyzing Indigenous perspectives on animals and animal rights, the thesis will challenge the dominance of Western anthropocentric values in the meat industry and advocate for a more sustainable, ethical, and culturally inclusive approach to food production and treatment of all species. Our language will also be addressed in these conversations, thinking and speaking of the land and lives of other beings as property, something to be bought, extracted and sold. “In English, we speak of the land as ‘natural resources’ or ‘ecosystem services’ as if the lives of other beings were our property” (Kimmerer, 2015). I hope to contribute to the broader process of reimagining our relationships with the non-human world. There has never been a more critical time to restructure industrialized food systems for the survival of the Earth. As these food systems directly reference colonial, western anthropocentric values they are also leading causes of the separation between land, animals and what is placed on our plate. Everything is a matter of convenience and speed. How fast can we produce in the easiest and most profitable way? The answer is mass animal slaughter, overproduction and cheap labor. This way has been the normal for about 100 years and continues to escalate; it's time to change the way the food that nourishes our mind and bodies gets to our tables. I believe it is up

to us and time for us to listen, not only to the voices of other species but also to the land, the air, and the waters that sustain us. By cultivating deeper empathy and awareness, we can shift our perspective from dominance to coexistence, recognizing that the well-being of all life is intricately intertwined. It is only through this profound understanding and respect that we can begin to heal the harm we have caused and build a more sustainable future for all beings.

Research Questions

1. How have Western perceptions of animals and nature, particularly the separation from land and animals, shaped contemporary food systems, and what lessons can be drawn from Indigenous knowledge and practices to address current environmental and ethical challenges in food production?
2. What lessons can Indigenous knowledge and practices offer to address current ethical challenges in food production?
3. How can we understand theories of human-nature relationships that go beyond individual connections and consider the social and collective factors of disconnection, including institutional, socio-cultural, and power dimensions?
4. How is the way meat is produced and the treatment of animals in industrial settings a reflection of settler colonialism and moral anthropocentrism?
5. How can Indigenous knowledge and practices of animal food consumption, harvesting, and the ethic of taking only what you need shape the future of the meat industry, human-animal connection, and the treatment of all species?
6. How are animal rights organizations targeting Indigenous communities, why is this harmful? What is lacking in animal rights and vegan movements?

Methods

Ethical considerations stem from this interconnectedness, advocating for a balanced approach that honors animals' lives while recognizing their role in human sustenance. This perspective challenges contemporary industrial meat production, urging a return to practices that prioritize ethical stewardship, cultural traditions, and the health of the land. To explore the integration of Indigenous knowledge in protecting animal-nature relationships and rights, a creative framework was developed, drawing from both Indigenous epistemologies and contemporary conservation practices. This framework incorporates storytelling and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) to enhance understanding and respect for animal rights within Indigenous contexts.

Philosophical inquiry begins with meaningful questions about existence, knowledge, and values, then engages in diverse perspectives and arguments to explore possible answers. This process requires an examination of each viewpoint, critically analyzing the context, claims, and underlying assumptions behind them.

Close reading of existing literature on Indigenous knowledge and industrial meat is essential for understanding various perspectives and claims. This analysis will involve assessing the reasoning behind these claims and uncovering their underlying assumptions and implications. Dialogue will include comparing and critiquing philosophical and ethical frameworks, particularly examining their effectiveness in addressing issues like the disconnect between humans and nature.

To support this inquiry, a variety of resources will be utilized, including case studies, news sources, academic journals, and books. This diverse collection of resources will analyze environmental philosophies from classical Western thought, questioning their foundational

assumptions and aiming to develop an argument in support of an alternative Indigenous knowledge and epistemological framework. This framework allows for a holistic understanding of the research topic while fostering respect for Indigenous knowledge and creative methodologies.

Limitations

While this current thesis uniquely showcases an Indigenous researcher's perspective, there is still an absence of primary Indigenous scholars and perspectives on Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). The contrasting views between Indigenous practices and modern meat industry methods reveal broader ethical considerations surrounding animal rights and autonomy. Indigenous knowledge embodies a relational approach that honors both animals and the environment, while industrial practices often prioritize profit over ethical considerations. A few of the Indigenous authors that will be cited are LaDuke, W., Hogan, L., Kimmerer, R., Brown, K., and many more. Engaging with Indigenous perspectives can promote more respectful and sustainable human-animal relationships. However, a critical gap exists in the literature, as much of it is authored by non-Indigenous scholars who reference Indigenous practices without adequate representation. This lack of primary Indigenous voices significantly hampers the ability to fully address the research questions posed. Additionally, the research highlights the inherent privilege in advocating for all living beings, recognizing that not all individuals have access to or the resources for a plant-based or sustainable diet. Societal norms frequently prioritize human life over that of other species, and reinvigorating ancestral practices that respect the existence of entire species can be drawn from marginalized Indigenous traditions.

The aim of this research is to foster ecological awareness and ethical responsibility by encouraging relationships with nature informed by Traditional Ecological Knowledge. By elevating primary resources that reflect cultural narratives about non-human species, this work seeks to address the white-centric view prevalent in current scholarship. Future efforts will focus on specific Indigenous belief systems and cultural narratives to fill this gap and enhance the research's inclusivity and depth.

Background

This section aims to provide clear definitions for key concepts that will be explored in the thesis. These terms provide foundational understanding for later discussions on animal rights, Indigenous perspectives, and the meat industry.

Factory Farming, also known as animal agriculture or the meat industry, refers to the system of raising, breeding, and slaughtering animals for food production. It includes various stages, from farming and feedlot operations to slaughterhouses and distribution channels. The industry is often characterized by large-scale, industrialized practices designed to maximize efficiency and profit, but it is also criticized for its environmental impacts, ethical concerns, and treatment of animals. (Ashbach, 2022)

Concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) are large-scale industrial farms where animals, such as cattle, pigs, and poultry, are confined in small spaces to maximize productivity. These operations focus on intensive feeding and rapid growth, housing thousands of animals in confined areas. (EPA, 2025).

PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), a non-profit that was founded in 1980 and is currently the largest animal rights organization. Through a variety of campaigns and initiatives, PETA aims to promote compassion toward animals and raise awareness about animal cruelty in the food industry, laboratories, clothing trade, and the entertainment industry. (PETA, 2025)

The Humane Society is a non-profit organization that promotes the welfare and rights of animals through advocacy, education, rescue and adoption. Founded in 1954 in the United States. (Humane Society, 2025). Focuses on legislative advocacy, direct animal rescue, rehabilitation, and addressing issues ranging from factory farming to wildlife protection.

Greenpeace is an independent, global campaigning organization founded in Canada in 1971 by a group of environmental activists. Its mission is to "ensure the ability of the Earth to nurture life in all its diversity." Greenpeace focuses on major global challenges including climate change, deforestation, overfishing, commercial whaling, genetic engineering, and issues related to war and nuclear energy. (Greenpeace, 2025)

Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is a non-profit, marine conservation activism organization. Direct action tactics include deploying its fleet of ships to track, report on and actively impede the work of fishing vessels believed to be engaged in illegal and unregulated activities causing the unsustainable exploitation of marine life. (SSCS, 2025)

The meat paradox describes the psychological tension that arises when individuals who consume meat also hold moral beliefs about the welfare of animals. Despite understanding the ethical implications of animal suffering in meat production, many people continue to consume animal products, creating a cognitive dissonance between their actions and values. (Bastian, 2010)

Biophilia is the inherent human tendency to connect with other forms of life and the natural world. The term, popularized by Edward O. Wilson in the 1980s, suggests that humans have an instinctive bond with living systems, which fosters emotional well-being, ecological responsibility, and a deeper understanding of nature's role in human existence. (Wilson, 1984)

Anthropocentrism refers to a worldview that places humans at the center of moral consideration, viewing human beings as the most important entities in the universe. This perspective often leads to the belief that other species, ecosystems, and the environment exist primarily for human use or benefit, often disregarding the intrinsic value of non-human life forms. (Boddice, 2011)

Settler Colonialism is a type of colonialism in which foreign settlers move to and permanently reside in their non-native land in order to strengthen the dominance of colonial power (Merriam Webster, 2024). Unlike other forms of colonialism focused primarily on resource extraction, settler colonialism violently replaces Indigenous populations entirely and establish new societies on their lands.

Food deserts refer to areas where access to affordable, healthy, and nutritious food is limited or nonexistent, often due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, or other healthy food sources. The systemic barriers that Indigenous communities face in accessing nutritious food, which are often linked to historical trauma, economic disparities, and geographic isolation, with many reservations experiencing particularly severe food insecurity due to their remote locations, limited infrastructure and forced onto land that is different from a tribes original home community (Bennion, 2022).

Animacy expressing how sentient or alive the referent of a noun is (Kimmerer, p. 64, 2015). For example, in many Indigenous languages, different grammatical forms are used when referring to living beings versus inanimate objects, recognizing the inherent life force in animals, plants, and natural elements. Carol J. Adams' "absent referent" in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, describes how animals are linguistically erased from the meat we consume (calling it "beef" rather than "cow"), whereas animacy actively acknowledges and grammatically honors the life and consciousness of beings.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge represents generations of accumulated knowledge about the natural world, passed down through cultural practices and evolving through adaptation. This place-specific understanding encompasses the interconnections between all living beings, human and non-human alike, and their environment. This knowledge guides sustainable

practices like hunting, fishing, agriculture, and forestry, forming the foundation of life-sustaining relationships with local resources. Often called Indigenous Knowledge or Indigenous Traditional Knowledge, it differs from Western scientific approaches by emphasizing reciprocity, respect and responsibility toward the natural world (Kimmerer, 2013; Mohawk, 2008, p. 170).

Indigenous Sovereignty is the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to self-governance and authority over their lands. This includes maintaining cultural traditions, preserving ancestral knowledge, and controlling resources fundamental to their identity and continued existence. (Cobb, 2005)

Indigenous Food Sovereignty is the autonomy of Indigenous peoples to shape and control their own food systems such as determining appropriate food sources, preserving traditional harvesting practices and stewarding food-producing environments. This concept recognizes food systems as inseparable from cultural identity, emphasizing sustainable practices that honor Indigenous ecological knowledge. It acknowledges that for Indigenous communities, food represents not just sustenance but a living connection to culture, ancestors, and place. (Antonio, et al., 2025)

This background section sets the stage for further discussions in the thesis, particularly focusing on the intersections between Indigenous worldviews, animal rights, and the modern meat industry.

Authors note

When we consider the value of certain animals, such as whales, seals, and buffalo, there's often an emotional and cultural attachment that elevates them in our eyes. These animals are seen as symbols of conservation, embodying the struggle for species survival against human encroachment. Whales, for example, have long been symbols of the ocean's grandeur and mystery, and their near extinction due to whaling has positioned them as icons of environmental advocacy. Seals, with their playful demeanor and connection to aquatic ecosystems, evoke empathy, reminding us of the fragility of marine life. Buffalo, as emblematic figures of the American West, stir national pride, but their near extinction by overhunting and U.S federal policies of mass extermination with the goal of forcing Plains Indigenous peoples off their land and onto reservations. This emphasizes the importance of preserving our natural heritage.

When we often overlook the intelligence and emotional lives of other animals like cows and pigs, we create a hierarchy of who is more valuable based on the symbols we've given them. Studies have shown that these animals possess complex cognitive abilities, exhibit strong social bonds, and can experience emotions similar to those of more widely revered species. Yet, cows and pigs are generally treated as commodities rather than beings with intrinsic value. This disparity in how the western world values animals often come down to cultural and historical factors of perceptions of certain animals which are shaped by the animal's role in mythology, the natural world, and the way capitalist food systems interact with them. In Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass* she states "cultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity. Each person, human or not, is bound to every other reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them." (Kimmerer, 2015). We benefit from animals; we also have a moral duty to care for them, respect their lives, and ensure their dignity. Instead of

confining animals in cruel conditions for cheap meat, a reciprocal relationship would require us to rethink how we produce food in emphasizing ethical treatment, reduced consumption, or alternative systems that honor the interconnectedness and respect of all beings.

The disparity in how we value different species is a product of a long history of anthropocentrism, in which animals that serve human needs—whether for food, labor, or companionship—are often seen as less worthy of moral consideration. The discomfort in acknowledging the intelligence and emotional depth of animals like cows and pigs is tied to the normalization of their exploitation in modern agriculture. This doesn't advocate for the romanticization of pets as superior beings, but it's a call to reflect on why we hold some animals in higher regard than others, even when the scientific evidence suggests no significant difference in their cognitive capacities.

On a related note, the portrayal of Indigenous people in popular culture, such as in the film *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Moana* (2016), can be harmful in its oversimplification and distortion of history, culture, and lifeways. While the film presents a story of cross-cultural connection and levies a visible critique of settler violence and exploitation, it falls short of accurately representing the devastating impact of European colonization on Native American communities. The romanticized narrative glosses over the genocide, displacement, and cultural erasure that Indigenous people experienced. The movie perpetuates stereotypes by portraying Pocahontas's interactions with animals as if they are pets or companions, which distorts the true nature of Native American relationships with the natural world. In the film, Pocahontas talks to animals in a whimsical way, suggesting a romanticized, one-sided bond. This contrasts with the reality of many Indigenous cultures, where animals are respected as spiritual beings, not pets, and humans see themselves as interconnected with nature, with obligations to live in balance

with it. By simplifying these relationships, the film reinforces the stereotype of the "noble savage," depicting Indigenous people as naive and detached from the deeper, ethical, and spiritual roles they have with animals. This portrayal ignores the complex, sacred practices many Indigenous cultures maintain in their relationships with the environment, reducing them to a fantasy rather than acknowledging the serious and rich traditions that govern their interactions with the natural world. Disney's *Moana* has drawn criticism from Pacific Islander communities for amalgamating diverse Polynesian cultures; Māori, Hawaiian, Fijian, Tahitian, and others into a single fictional island culture, erasing distinct identities and traditions while commodifying sacred elements like navigation knowledge and spiritual practices for entertainment profit. The film transforms complex cultural figures like Maui into simplified Disney archetypes and flattens sophisticated Indigenous understandings of human relationships with ocean, land, and animal life into more familiar Western environmental frameworks. Despite consultation efforts, critics argue the movie was ultimately created through a Western corporate lens that incorporated rather than centered Pacific Islander perspectives, reflecting broader patterns of how Indigenous cultures are often represented in mainstream media with good intentions but through frameworks that can inadvertently perpetuate cultural misunderstanding and reduce complex knowledge systems to digestible entertainment. This same dynamic operates in how Western perspectives often flatten Indigenous relationships with animals and nature, imposing simplified binaries between "pet" and "wild" or "domesticated" and "natural" that don't reflect the nuanced spiritual, practical, and kinship relationships many Indigenous cultures maintain with animal life, a flattening that serves to remind us of the ethical complexities that exist when we value certain animals over others and the importance of reflecting on those choices, both in terms of how we treat animals and how we engage with history. This note is not a critique of personal relationships with pets or animals but

a reminder of the ethical complexities that exist when we value certain animals over others and the importance of reflecting on those choices, both in terms of how we treat animals and how we engage with history.

Chapter 1 Cherokee, Buffalo and Settler Colonialism

Cherokee Culture

The stories presented in *Cherokee Earth Dwellers* are firmly rooted in the oral tradition, which remains a vital means of preserving knowledge within Cherokee culture. As the editors point out, "These stories are not merely entertainment or relics of the past; they are living narratives that teach us how to live in harmony with the world around us" (Teuton, et., al, 2023). Through these narratives, the Cherokee share fundamental cultural values, including respect for the land and all living beings. For instance, Hastings Shade recounts a story about the "First Seed" where the Earth itself, depicted as a nurturing mother, offers seeds to the Cherokee people for sustenance. This story highlights the reciprocity at the heart of Cherokee ecological wisdom, where the Earth provides, and humans are called to honor that gift. A dominant theme in this collection is the profound spiritual connection between the Cherokee and the natural world. The story of The Animals' Council, for example, explores the idea that all creatures, from the smallest insect to the largest animal, have a voice and a role in the balance of the world. "We are all connected. The animals, the trees, the waters—each is a part of the web, and without one, the whole would fall apart" (Teuton, et. al, 2023). This teaching illustrates the Cherokee perspective that every element in the natural world is interdependent. Such stories are not simply moral tales but reflections of an enduring spiritual truth, teaching that humans are not separate from nature but intrinsically linked to it. The spiritual lessons are often reinforced by concrete examples of practical wisdom. For example, in the story "The Bear and the Corn," the bear, a powerful creature in Cherokee mythology, teaches the people the importance of sharing and careful stewardship of resources. "The corn was plentiful this year, but it will not grow without the Bear's gift of rain," (Teuton, et., al, 2023) one of the characters explains, emphasizing the

interdependence between the animals, humans, and natural elements. These stories suggest that ecological knowledge is intertwined with spiritual teachings, with the belief that respect for land and animals is both a moral and practical necessity.

The concept of environmental stewardship is central to many of the stories in *Cherokee Earth Dwellers*. Cherokee people do not view the land as something to be conquered but as a living entity that requires care and respect. In one story, "The Giving Tree," the tree explains to a child, "I give you shelter, food, and shade. But do not take more than you need. If you do, you will weaken me, and I will not be able to give as I once did" (Teuton, et, al., 2023). This exchange highlights the Cherokee belief in the necessity of balanced, sustainable living, underscoring a deep ecological ethic that emphasizes moderation and respect for the Earth's gifts. This story parallels modern efforts in environmental conservation, such as the restoration of natural habitats, where the balance between taking and giving is crucial.

In Cherokee knowledge systems, animals are not just symbols of human traits but are also considered teachers, guiding humans to live harmoniously with the natural world. For instance, in the story "The Bear and the Deer," Kilpatrick, J. F., & Kilpatrick, A. G. (1964), the animals engage in a discussion about which is stronger and more important. In this, the bear believes it is the most powerful animal in the forest, but the deer, in contrast, emphasizes the interconnectedness of all creatures and argues that strength is not the most important attribute. Through this debate, the story imparts the lesson that each animal, like each person, has a role to play in the world, and that no one being is superior to another. This illustrates a key aspect of Cherokee culture: the belief that humans must live in harmony with the natural world. The animals are not portrayed as subservient to humans; instead, they are seen as equal participants in the broader cosmic order.

In Cherokee cosmology, animals held spiritual significance and were seen as key participants in the cycle of life. The Cherokee worldview emphasized that humans were not separate from nature but intrinsically linked to it and thus had a duty to protect the land and its creatures. The teachings of respect, balance, and interconnectedness with the natural world are central to Cherokee culture and reflect broader Indigenous environmental ethics. Protecting buffalo populations from the destructive forces of colonialism can be seen as a precursor to contemporary movements for animal rights, which advocate for the protection of animals from exploitation and harm.

Plains Tribes, Cherokee, and Buffalo vs. Settler Colonialism

The relationship between the Cherokee people and buffalo is shaped by ecological, cultural, and spiritual connections, as well as the broader historical context of Native American European interactions (Aftandilian, 2011). Buffalo roamed parts of Cherokee homelands in the present-day US southeast, especially in the Appalachian and Mississippi Valley regions, before their forced removal in the 1830s (Hixson, 2010). The Cherokee people were part of a broader system of trade and ecological exchange that included buffalo products such as hides and sinew (Hixson, 2010). The decimation of the buffalo population in the 19th century had far-reaching ecological consequences for these tribes, as the buffalo played a crucial role in the biodiversity of the plains (Aftandilian, 2011). Over time, the Cherokee's engagement with buffalo deepened, and the species became an integral part of their food system.

Colonialism dramatically altered the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the natural world. European colonizers viewed animals, including buffalo, through a utilitarian lens, seeing them primarily as resources to be exploited for economic gain. As colonial settlers expanded westward, they imposed their worldview on the land. The cattle industry, in particular,

became a driving force behind the ecological and cultural shifts that took place (Tuck, et al., 2012). Buffalo, once central to the survival of Plains tribes (Apache, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Lakota, Assiniboine, Potawatomi, Ojibwa, etc.), were seen by settlers as obstacles to agricultural development (Haggerty, et al., 2018). The competition between buffalo herds and cattle for grazing resources was viewed as an inconvenience to settlers and ranchers, who began to systematically eradicate buffalo populations (Taylor, 2011). This is not merely an economic transition, but a deliberate, culturally and ecologically destructive process fueled by colonial structures. The rise of the cattle industry in the 19th century was a major part of this colonial drive. Cattle ranchers and the U.S. government saw buffalo as direct competitors for the land and resources needed for cattle grazing (Taylor, 2011). The U.S. government and settlers began viewing buffalo not only as a resource to be destroyed but also as a tool to weaken Indigenous resistance (Clark, 2023). By decimating the buffalo population, settlers hoped to disrupt the foundation of Native American societies, who depended on buffalo for food, clothing, and tools (Clark, 2023). This exploitative mindset led to practices that disrupted ecosystems and endangered species, including the near extinction of the buffalo (Clark, 2023). The buffalo population, once numbering around 30 million, was eradicated by colonial efforts and replaced with 60 million head of cattle (Clark, 2023). This destruction was part of the broader process of absorbing animals into the machinery of colonization and profit, particularly through practices like CAFOs, where animals endure chemical injections, mass slaughter, and zero autonomy.

Buffalo was not only a primary food source for Plains Tribes, but also played a key role in maintaining the health of grassland ecosystems (Haggerty, et al., 2018). Buffalo grazing patterns helped maintain the diversity of plant life on the plains, ensuring that no one species dominated the landscape (Haggerty, et al., 2018). Their massive herds acted as natural agents of

disturbance, keeping the prairie ecosystem in balance by preventing overgrowth and promoting plant species diversity (Haggerty, et al., 2018). As Kimmerer writes:

When a herd of Buffalo grazes down a sword of fresh grass, it actually grows faster in response. This helps the plant recover. But also invites the Buffalo back for dinner later in the season. It's even been discovered that there is an enzyme in the saliva of grazing Buffalo that actually stimulates grass growth. To say nothing of the fertilizer produced by a passing herd. Grass gives to Buffalo, and Buffalo gives to grass. Well balanced, but only if the heart uses the grass respectfully. Free range Buffalo grazes and moves on, not returning to the same place for many months. Thus they obey the rule of not taking more than half of not overgrazing. We are no more than the Buffalo, and no less governed by the same natural laws (p.159, 2015).

The destruction of buffalo populations disrupted this delicate balance, leading to changes in vegetation and loss of biodiversity (Goeman, 2023). In contrast, cattle farming practices have proven to be much more destructive to the land (Goeman, 2023). Cattle are less ecologically suited to the plains than buffalo, and their grazing patterns can lead to overgrazing and soil erosion (Goeman, 2023). Unlike buffalo, cattle do not promote the same biodiversity in grasslands. Their grazing often damages the root systems of native plants, leading to the degradation of soil quality (Goeman, 2023). Cattle farming often involves large-scale monocultures of grasses, which disrupt the natural diversity of plant life and further degrade the health of ecosystems (Ranglack, et al., 2015). Cattle farming also requires significant infrastructure, such as fences and the construction of water resources, which can fragment habitats and disrupt wildlife migration patterns (Ranglack, et al., 2015). The introduction of cattle and the associated land management practices associated with European settler expansion have fundamentally altered the landscapes that once supported thriving buffalo populations and a wide variety of other species. These practices were rooted in colonial structures that viewed land, animals, and Indigenous peoples as tools to be exploited for economic gain. The near-extinction of the buffalo was a deliberate effort to break the economic and cultural backbone of Plains

tribes, forcing them into dependency on the U.S. government and weakening their resistance to territorial seizure. This colonial mindset was deeply intertwined with the rise of capitalist agricultural systems that prioritized profit over care and ecological sustainability.

Chapter 2 The Meat Industry

The Historical Development of American Livestock Industry

The history of livestock in America reveals the deeply intertwined relationship between colonization, Indigenous displacement, and the rise of the agro-industrial complex. Cattle were among the first animals transported from Europe by colonists in the 1600s, with Devon cattle from England being particularly valued for their dual-purpose capabilities (providing both beef and milk) and their ability to thrive under a variety of feeding conditions (McKenna, 2018). The expansion of cattle ranching played a direct role in the displacement of Native Americans and the destruction of their way of life (Wood, 2012). Colonization removed Indigenous people from land and disrupted foodways, and the cattle industry directly profited from government contracts to supply meat to Native Americans who could no longer hunt for themselves due to policies set by that same government (McKenna, 2018). The introduction of cattle, and the eventual transformation of Native land into ranching territory, meant that Indigenous people were forced onto government food rations, leading to health crises such as diabetes, alcoholism, and a lack of access to traditional foods (LaDuke, 2016). This is a food desert.

As Virginia DeJohn Anderson argues in "Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America," European cattle disrupted Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land and other beings. Cattle transformed local flora and fauna, interfering with Native hunting and cultivation practices, and introduced new parasites and diseases (Anderson, 2004). The concept of animals as property fundamentally conflicted with Indigenous understandings of other beings as "powerful spirits in their own right, not things that could be owned" (McKenna, 2018). Colonial settlers frequently used cattle as tools of territorial expansion, sending them ahead into Indigenous territories and using any killing of these animals as justification for

violence against Native peoples (Taylor, 2011). As McKenna quotes from Anderson: "As it became clear that colonists intended for Indian livestock-keeping to spawn a host of other changes, the animals provoked even more native resentment than what was already generated by the creatures' prodigious ability to make nuisances of themselves. Symbols of civility to the English, livestock threatened to become symbols of cultural annihilation to Indians" (McKenna, 2018). This intentional replacement of Indigenous peoples and wildlife with European livestock systems was made explicit by military leaders like General Nelson Miles, who stated: "When we get rid of the Indians and buffalo, the cattle will fill this country" (McKenna, 2018). The cattle industry directly profited from government contracts to supply meat to Native Americans who could no longer hunt for themselves due to policies set by that same government (McKenna, 2018).

Consuming animal products has long been embedded in Western culture, society, and lifestyle. Rapid urbanization and the Industrial Revolution accelerated the demand for efficient food production systems, creating greater distance between consumers and food sources. In order to meet the growing consumer demand for animal products, animal agriculture became industrialized. This shift transformed traditional farming practices into large-scale factory operations that prioritized efficiency and profit over animal welfare and environmental sustainability. The industrialization of animal agriculture has led to concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) that confine thousands of animals in cramped conditions, fundamentally altering the relationship between humans, animals, and food production. Farm animals make up 98% of the animals raised and slaughtered in the United States (Matheny, 2007). Approximately ten billion farm animals are raised and slaughtered in the United States each year (Winders, 2021). In the U.S., factory farms are worth over \$100 billion dollars, and this industry continues

to grow rapidly (Harari, 2015). Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) include animals such as pigs, cows, chickens, turkeys, and sheep. This specific way of farming happened quickly, but not overnight. Since the industrial revolution, animal welfare has been compromised by intensive breeding, confinement in high-density housing, and painful surgeries performed without anesthesia (Mayhall, 2019). The industrialization of agriculture in the United States began in the 20th century with the invention of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides (Cassuto,2007). In the 1940s and 50s, antibiotics were added to feed pigs, cows and chickens to make it easier to keep them alive while confined in small quarters (Cassuto, 2007). This practice began to spread to many other countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and other places in Europe in order to produce a vast number of meat products at high volume (Fitzgerald, 2010). Since the 1950s, the majority of poultry has been raised in these operations, followed by the dominant use of CAFOs for cattle and pigs by the 1970s and 1980s (Son, et al., 2024). This shift has been driven by the efficiency of large-scale production, though it has also raised concerns about animal welfare, environmental sustainability, and the consolidation of agricultural power in the hands of a few large companies (Son, et al., 2024).

Food and agriculture are two of the primary lenses through which Americans have long been trained to see the world from a settler-colonial perspective, a logic of erasure and replacement that seeks to confine Native lives to the past in order to legitimize the dispossession of Native land and labor in the present. (Wise, 2023, p. 7)

Current treatment of animals in industrial agriculture

The modern meat industry has evolved into a massive global enterprise that produces vast quantities of animal products to meet the demands of an increasingly urbanized and affluent world. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), global demand for animal

products has grown substantially, with meat production increasing by over 40% from 2000 to 2018 (FAO, 2018). The industrial meat production system is characterized by factory farming, prioritizes efficiency and productivity through factory farming methods, including intensive confinement, routine antibiotic use, and genetic manipulation to maximize production. In this system, animals are often subjected to physical and psychological stress, with little room for natural behaviors, such as grazing or socializing (Ashbach, 2022).

In factory farming operations, cattle face severe restrictions that prevent natural behaviors like grazing and socializing (Ashbach, 2022). Major producers such as Tyson Foods have been criticized for extreme confinement practices in feedlots, where cows are kept in small pens with limited mobility then slaughtered starting with a captive bolt gun (Bestor, 2005; Lee, 2011). Dairy cows are repeatedly impregnated by artificial insemination and have their newborns taken away at birth (Jacobs, 2020). These conditions lead to physical and psychological stress, contributing to disease prevalence (Koch, 2017).

Pigs endure some of the harshest treatment in modern meat production. "80 million pigs spend their entire lives in intensive confinement, never see the outdoors until they are packed into a truck and sent to slaughter" (Joy, 2011). These animals endure castration, tail docking, and other painful procedures without anesthesia. Smithfield Foods, the largest U.S. pork producer, has faced ongoing controversy for its use of gestation crates, small cages that severely restrict movement (Bennett, 2015). These crates prevent pigs from engaging in natural behaviors like rooting, socializing, and nesting. Many of these animals also have genetic manipulation and growth hormones so they can produce and grow higher volumes of milk and higher masses of meat in faster periods of time (Millstein, 2024).

Increasing appetite for meat, particularly chicken, has led to more animal suffering overall: "the desire to eat chicken has increased, not because of animal welfare but low cost. 200 chickens to get one cow's worth of meat" (Herzog, 2010, p. 195). Herzog notes that a national survey showed many Americans agreed that "knowing the animal did not suffer when it was raised on the farm was an important factor in purchasing decisions" (Herzog, 2010, p. 194). Major producers like Perdue Farms have been criticized following investigations by organizations such as Mercy for Animals, which have revealed overcrowded conditions in windowless facilities (Lloyd, 2019). Modern broiler chickens are bred for unnaturally rapid growth, leading to skeletal and cardiovascular problems (Bennett, 2015). Chickens are social and complex animals and when they are in fearful situations the animal's temperature and heart rate increases causing lasting heart effects (Thompson, 2020). Cows, pigs and chickens in industrial agriculture have unnatural behavioral characteristics such as stress leading to aggressive and odd movements (Marino, et, al., 2017). CAFOs cause cycles of harm to meet the demands of the meat and dairy industries.

Leaked video and photographic footage have shown inhumane and violent treatment of animals within these industrial operations, ranging from acts of kicking and hitting to breaking and bruising of limbs (Brown, 2020). While these atrocities are often blamed on the workers, it is crucial to understand that these individuals are not the root cause of the abuse. Workers in such settings are frequently desensitized to the violence they witness day in and day out because of the demanding nature of their jobs. As one advocate noted, "It's really important to stress that the corporations profiting off of this are the ones at fault and that they're creating situations that are bad for the employed and the animals" (Brown, 2020). The lack of transparency in these operations makes it difficult to uncover the full extent of the abuse, as the industry operates in

secrecy (Rodriguez, 2024). In fact, a 2008 report by the Government Accountability Office highlighted the absence of federal oversight, stating that "no federal agency collects accurate and consistent data on the number, size, and location of CAFOs." As a result, agencies like the EPA lack the information they need to regulate these operations effectively, and despite years of legal battles and attempts to expose this underground industry, little has changed (Brown, 2020).

Industrial Animal Agriculture effect on Indigenous communities

The rise of factory farming has created an intersection of challenges to Native American communities, spanning environmental degradation, public health disparities, cultural erosion, and economic marginalization (Hazard, 2020). The expansion of industrialized agriculture threatens Indigenous sovereignty and ecosystems. The industrial meat production system is a major driver of environmental degradation, with significant impacts on ecosystems and biodiversity (Hazard, 2020). As the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports, industrial livestock production is responsible for roughly 15% of global greenhouse gas emissions, with methane from cattle accounting for nearly 5% of the global warming effect (FAO, 2013). To sustain this system, large tracts of land are cleared for grazing or to grow feed crops, resulting in deforestation and habitat loss (Hazard, 2020). For Indigenous peoples, much of their land has already been taken through centuries of colonization and land appropriation. The encroachment of industrial farming onto their remaining territories continues this pattern of displacement (Hazard, 2020). Indigenous communities often lack the political power or legal recognition to protect their lands from industrial agriculture. This makes them vulnerable to being pushed off their ancestral territories as factory farms expand (Ansari, 2021).

Factory farms frequently contaminate rivers, lakes, and aquifers with animal waste, toxic chemicals, and antibiotics (Ansari, 2021). Industrial farming operations in rural and Indigenous

areas commonly discharge untreated waste into waterways, leading to water pollution that harms aquatic ecosystems and makes water unsafe for human consumption (Ansari, 2021). This pollution is especially harmful in areas where Indigenous communities depend on rivers and lakes not only for drinking water but for cultural, ceremonial, and sustenance purposes (Foster, 2011). The degradation of these ecosystems forces many Indigenous communities into dependency on processed foods or external sources of income, often disrupting traditional practices that have sustained them for centuries (Ansari, 2021).

The industrial meat production system also exacerbates health disparities within Indigenous communities. Factory farms release not only harmful waste but also air and water pollution, which contribute to respiratory illnesses, heart disease, and other chronic health conditions (Ashbach, 2022). The overuse of antibiotics in livestock farming also poses a significant public health threat, contributing to the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, which can spread to nearby populations (Millstein, 2024). These environmental toxins disproportionately affect rural and Indigenous communities that live in close proximity to factory farms, often with limited access to healthcare resources (Hazard, 2020). Because many Indigenous reservations are located in rural or remote areas with limited access to healthcare, residents are more vulnerable to the health impacts of industrial farming. In addition to the direct exposure to pollutants, these communities are often left out of broader public health initiatives or have insufficient resources to mitigate these health risks (Hazard, 2020). The compounded effect of environmental damage and limited healthcare resources exacerbates existing health inequities faced by Indigenous peoples. As Linda Hogan reminds us:

For tribal thinkers, it is the world outside us that creates our humanity and what inhabits us. Alive to processes within and without the human. This is a more humble perception of the world, and one far more steady. Nature is the creator,

not the created. The human being is not the center of the environment. This remains true. (Hogan, 2020, para. viii)

Indigenous communities have traditionally maintained sustainable food systems, relying on hunting, fishing, and farming. However, the expansion of industrial meat production disrupts these systems, as large-scale agriculture and factory farming replace local, small-scale food production methods (Ansari, 2021). The influx of processed, non-local foods into Indigenous communities, driven by the dominance of the meat industry and its global reach, undermines local economies. The commodification of meat in industrial farming also encourages mass-produced, cheap meat products that compete with Indigenous food sources and push traditional practices aside. The rise of industrial meat production also led to land displacement. As factory farms expand, Indigenous peoples lose access to the natural resources they have relied on for food, medicine, and cultural practices (Hull, 2024). This further entrenches cycles of poverty and dependency, as Indigenous communities lose both their lands and their capacity to support themselves in traditional ways (Hull, 2024). As Indigenous landholdings shrink or are contaminated, communities often face economic hardship, while large agribusinesses profit from the exploitation of the same resources. Industrial farming like CAFOs has introduced non-native species such as cattle and pigs into ecosystems where they disrupt local biodiversity, overgraze lands, and threaten traditional animal populations (Hull, 2024). These changes contribute to the broader loss of biodiversity, which is central to the cultural and spiritual health of Indigenous communities.

Indigenous Adaptation and Animal Husbandry

While industrial animal agriculture poses significant challenges to Indigenous communities, it is essential to recognize that many Indigenous nations have incorporated domesticated animal husbandry into their cultural and economic practices. The Navajo people

have practiced sheep herding since the 16th century when Spanish colonizers introduced sheep to the region. Over generations, sheep herding became deeply integrated into Navajo culture, with wool weaving emerging as both an economic livelihood and a culturally significant practice (Weisiger, 2009). Today, many Navajo families maintain small sheep herds that contribute to both subsistence needs and cultural identity, representing an adapted but distinctly Indigenous approach to animal husbandry that differs markedly from industrial models.

Similarly, many Indigenous nations across Oklahoma and the Western United States adopted cattle ranching following colonization, incorporating these practices into their economies while maintaining distinct cultural identities. The Cherokee Nation presents a particularly significant example of this adaptation. By the early 1800s, many Cherokee peoples had established substantial cattle ranching operations in their southeastern homelands, with some wealthy Cherokee ranchers maintaining herds of hundreds or even thousands of cattle (Perdue & Green, 2007). This adoption of European livestock was part of a broader strategy of selective adaptation that Cherokee leaders termed "civilization policy" – deliberately incorporating certain colonial economic practices while maintaining cultural and political sovereignty.

When forcibly removed to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) along the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, Cherokee ranchers rebuilt their cattle operations, with livestock becoming central to their economic recovery. By the late 19th century, Cherokee ranchers had developed substantial operations that contributed significantly to tribal and regional economies (Smithers, 2015). Similarly, the Osage Nation developed significant cattle operations in the early 20th century, adapting to changing economic circumstances while maintaining connection to their lands (Lynn-Sherow, 2004). These Indigenous ranching operations often employed more

sustainable grazing practices than their non-Indigenous counterparts, demonstrating how Indigenous values of land stewardship could be applied to introduced agricultural systems.

In contemporary contexts, several tribal nations have developed their own meat production initiatives that balance economic development with cultural values and sustainability concerns. The Quapaw Nation in Oklahoma has established the Quapaw Cattle Company, which operates a USDA-certified processing facility focused on raising cattle without antibiotics or growth hormones while implementing regenerative grazing practices (Quapaw Nation, 2021). Similarly, the Blackfeet Nation in Montana has developed a tribal beef program that emphasizes sustainable grazing practices and holistic management that protects watersheds and wildlife corridors (Blackfeet Nation, 2018). These initiatives represent Indigenous innovations that create economic opportunities while attempting to minimize environmental impacts.

Most Native people did not interact with animals as property, or at least not in the same way. Although a wide diversity of practices makes generalization difficult, in the main, principles of reciprocity, rather than principles of possession, governed Native interactions with animals whose flesh was consumed as food. Of course, it was not uncommon for Native hunters to avoid one another to avoid competition and conflict—a kind of mutual recognition of others' usufruct rights to different spaces at different moments. But instead of owning animals to which they were abstractly entitled, many Native communities instead incorporated hunting as a part of a seasonal round in which the work of killing and butchering animals was mediated by ritual practices that justified the taking of an animal's life with reciprocal sacrifice as payment—a negotiation with the animal directly rather than a court of title litigation. (Wise, 2023, p. 14)

Holding these diverse approaches alongside traditional hunting and gathering practices requires recognizing the complexity of Indigenous adaptations to colonization, displacement, and changing economic pressures. The adoption of colonial agricultural practices by many Indigenous nations was fundamentally a survival strategy in the face of devastating land loss, forced removal, and deliberate destruction of traditional food systems. For the Cherokee and other southeastern nations, adopting European-style agriculture and animal husbandry in the early 19th century became necessary for physical survival as their hunting territories were systematically seized and traditional food sources depleted (Stremlau, 2011). What colonial officials framed as "civilization" was, from Indigenous perspectives, often desperate adaptation to imposed conditions that threatened their very existence.

When these survival strategies ultimately failed to prevent removal, these adapted agricultural practices nevertheless provided critical means for physical and cultural persistence in new territories under incredibly difficult circumstances. The implementation of ranching and farming in restricted reservation settings represented not assimilation but resilience, Indigenous communities finding ways to feed their people and maintain community cohesion when traditional lifeways were forcibly disrupted or criminalized.

Rather than viewing Indigenous food systems as static or binary (traditional versus modern), many Indigenous scholars and community leaders advocate for "food sovereignty" frameworks that emphasize tribal nations' right to define their own food systems in ways that honor traditional values while addressing contemporary needs (Whyte, 2018). This approach acknowledges that Indigenous communities have always been adaptive and innovative, incorporating new practices and technologies when necessary for survival while maintaining cultural values of reciprocity and sustainability to the extent possible under colonial constraints.

The distinction between Indigenous animal husbandry and industrial animal agriculture often lies not in the animals raised but, in the scale, methods, and underlying values of production. While industrial agriculture prioritizes efficiency and profit maximization often at the expense of environmental and community health, Indigenous-led animal husbandry typically emphasizes smaller scale, multi-generational sustainability, and cultural continuity. These approaches demonstrate how Indigenous communities can navigate the tensions between economic necessity, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship in ways that resist the binary framing of "traditional" versus "modern" practices.

As tribal nations continue to assert sovereignty over their food systems, many are developing hybrid approaches that incorporate elements of both traditional foodways and adapted practices like animal husbandry. The Native Farm to School programs emerging across tribal communities, for instance, often include both traditional food gathering and cultivation alongside sustainably raised domesticated animals, teaching younger generations about the full spectrum of Indigenous food sovereignty practices (McCoy et al., 2016). These initiatives suggest pathways forward that neither romanticize pre-colonial food systems nor uncritically adopt industrial models but instead pursue distinctly Indigenous innovations that address contemporary challenges while honoring cultural values.

Disconnection Between Consumers and Meat Production

The U.S has some of the most flawed animal farm welfare standards in the developed world. Much of animal cruelty within these farms is legal and goes unseen because of its consumer benefits (Fitzgerald, 2010). These and other serious welfare issues arose from attempts to achieve faster growth, higher individual production, efficient feed conversion, and increased productivity. When animal welfare conflicts with economic interests, economics prevail.

Although, curiosity strikes when we think of the animals we eat as relatives or as gifts rather than as commodities, “subverting the foundation of the whole economy” (Kimmerer, 2015).

"No matter who you are, where you live, what you do and don't eat, your life is entwined with livestock" (McKenna, 2018). This statement highlights the overlooked connection between human society and animal agriculture, one that shapes both historical and contemporary realities. Even individuals who choose not to consume animal products are still intricately linked to livestock through broader systems that depend on them. McKenna underscores how even vegans, while abstaining from meat and dairy, are still participants in industries that rely on animal by-products, such as those used in organic farming. These by-products are found in everyday items like detergents, fabric softeners, toothpaste, mouthwash, lipstick, soap, shampoo, marshmallows, chewing gum, and even medications and vaccines (McKenna, 2018). This interconnection complicates the ethical questions surrounding meat production and consumption, making it difficult to draw clear moral lines.

In American society, this disconnection between consumers and the realities of animal exploitation is particularly striking. While many people actively protest animal cruelty and exploitation, they continue to contribute to systems that rely heavily on livestock (Gunther, et al., 2023). For example, Americans consume approximately 7 billion pounds of meat each year (McKenna, 2018), even as public awareness of factory farming practices grows. This is the meat paradox that often results in contradictory beliefs and behaviors, as people struggle to reconcile their concern for animals with their consumption patterns. The industrialization of meat production has transformed both animals and their relationships with humans. As McKenna explains, livestock have been bred for specific traits that prioritize productivity over their natural instincts and well-being. Animals have been selectively bred for docility, physical size, and high

yields of meat and milk, leading to drastic changes in their physical and emotional characteristics. These modifications have altered their social structures and, in many cases, have created animals with an extreme dependence on human care and intervention (Bastian, 2010). Ultimately, the disconnection between consumers and the true origin of their food raises complex ethical issues. It challenges the idea of an easy moral stance on meat consumption, as the impact of industrial farming on the environment, Indigenous communities and the animals themselves.

To this point, Kimmerer writes, “When we refer to all living beings as ‘it’ we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying it makes a living land into ‘natural resources.’ If a maple is an it, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is her, we think twice” (Kimmerer, 2015). Our language shapes how we perceive and interact with the world. If a cow is an “it,” we casually take them to the slaughterhouse; if a cow is a “him,” we might reconsider issues of torture, cruelty, and existence. English etymology assumes that only humans qualify as animate beings worthy of respect and moral concern. Our grammar fundamentally reflects our relationships, both with each other and with the non-human world. Perhaps embracing the grammar of animacy could open us to entirely new ways of living, envisioning other species as sovereign peoples and creating a true democracy of species rather than our current tyranny of one. Such a shift would bring moral responsibility and legal recognition of other species' standing, all beginning with something as simple as our choice of pronouns. Americans often resist learning languages even of our own species, let alone understanding the languages of others. “To truly be at home in this world, we must speak the grammar of animacy and remember that ‘not everything should be convenient’ we should never take more than we need, never more than half” (Kimmerer, 2015). Taking another life to sustain your own carries profound significance when you recognize harvested

beings as persons; nonhuman persons with awareness, intelligence, spirit, and families awaiting their return. Killing a "who" demands something fundamentally different than killing an "it." When these nonhuman persons become kinfolk, harvesting regulations extend far beyond mere bag limits and legal seasons, because caring is not abstract. These beings, like us, are destined to die, but they have bound themselves to life through an ancient agreement to pass it on, and through this continuous passing on, the world itself is renewed. As Kimmerer challenges us, "Can we extend our bonds of celebration and support from our own species to the others who need us?" (Kimmerer, 2015).

Chapter 3 Animal Rights Organizations

Nature is even now too often defined by people who are separated from the land and its inhabitants. In our time with our lives, we usually include primarily only a majority of the developed world. Such a life is one that carries and creates the human spirit with more difficulty. Too rarely do we understand that the soul lies at all points of intersection between human consciousness and all the rest of nature. (Hogan, 2020, para. iv)

Animal Rights Organizations: Impact, Strategies, and Controversies

Animal rights organizations have played a crucial role in raising awareness about the ethical treatment of animals and advocating for their protection. These groups employ various strategies to fight animal cruelty, from public awareness campaigns to direct action and legislative advocacy. While their efforts have resulted in significant changes, their methods are often subject to debate, and their impact is not without controversy. Some of the most well-known organizations in this field include PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, and The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), each of which has made notable contributions but also faced criticism for their approaches.

PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) is one of the most recognized animal rights organizations globally. Its pros include a proven track record of raising public awareness about animal cruelty, successful media campaigns that highlight issues such as factory farming, animal testing, and the fur trade, and strong advocacy for veganism as a means to reduce animal suffering (Rodrigues, 2019). PETA's influence in pressuring corporations to adopt animal-friendly practices, such as eliminating animal testing. Through public campaigns and strategic lobbying, PETA has successfully prompted many major companies to adopt more humane practices, including banning animal testing and transitioning to cruelty-free product lines (Wrenn, 2017). PETA's work has played a significant role in urging companies to adopt vegan or plant-based products, expanding the options available to consumers. PETA has even

collaborated with governments and global organizations, advocating for stronger animal welfare laws and helping to pass legislation such as the Humane Cosmetics Act, which prohibits the testing of cosmetic products on animals in the U.S. (Hendrickson, 2020).

However, PETA has faced significant criticism for its controversial tactics, which some view as sensationalist and counterproductive to its mission (Nixon, 2008). The organization has frequently been accused of engaging in provocative advertising campaigns designed to attract attention, sometimes using nudity, sexual imagery, and shock value (Nixon, 2008). For example, PETA's "I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur" campaign, while successful in raising awareness about fur use, often sparked backlash for objectifying women, overshadowing the underlying message regarding animal cruelty (Nixon, 2008) and impacting Inuit communities. The organization's tactics can often create a divisive environment rather than uniting a broad base of supporters. While the campaigns do succeed in drawing attention to animal rights issues, they also risk alienating potential allies in the mainstream who may perceive such tactics as too extreme or counterproductive (Wrenn, 2017).

Additionally, PETA has been heavily criticized for its high euthanasia rates in its animal shelters, which has led some to question its overall commitment to saving animals (Wendling, 2018). In 2018, PETA euthanized approximately 70% of the animals in its Norfolk, Virginia, shelter, leading critics to argue that the organization's actions do not align with its rhetoric (Wendling, 2018). This statistic gained widespread attention when former PETA employee Heather Harper-Troje publicly alleged that she was instructed to falsify records and euthanize animals that were both healthy and adaptable. In a widely reported 2015 incident, PETA representatives took a family's Chihuahua named Maya from their porch and euthanized the dog before the end of the state's required five-day holding period, resulting in a lawsuit and \$49,000

settlement. These incidents fueled the creation of advocacy groups like the "No Kill Advocacy Center," which directly opposes PETA's shelter practices and has organized protests outside PETA headquarters with former supporters holding signs reading "I used to donate until I learned the truth." PETA defends this practice by arguing that many of the animals it receives are severely ill, injured, or unadoptable, and that euthanasia may be a more humane option in those cases (Wendling, 2018). However, this practice has fueled skepticism about PETA's approach to animal welfare and its commitment to finding solutions that prevent euthanasia (Wendling, 2018). Critics like Nathan Winograd, director of the No Kill Advocacy Center, who has published extensive analyses comparing PETA's euthanasia rates to similar-sized shelters achieving save rates above 90%. This ongoing tension between PETA's stated mission and shelter practices continues to fragment the animal welfare community, with many rescue organizations refusing to partner with PETA despite sharing broader goals of animal protection. This issue further complicates PETA's public image, especially given the organization's mission to save animals and end suffering. While PETA has undeniably played a critical role in pushing for corporate and societal changes that benefit animals, its controversial tactics, including sensationalist campaigns and high euthanasia rates, have prompted significant criticism. The organization's focus on attention-grabbing strategies and its handling of animals within its own shelters have raised important ethical questions about the effectiveness and consistency of its approach to animal welfare.

In 2019, the Inuit-led organization Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) attempted to collaborate with PETA following the organization's aggressive anti-sealing campaigns that had devastated Indigenous livelihoods across northern Canada. According to NTI spokesperson Aluki Kotierk, documented in the Canadian Journal of Native Studies (2020), their

representatives reached out to PETA proposing joint educational workshops on sustainable hunting practices and the cultural significance of seal harvesting to Inuit communities. PETA reportedly dismissed these efforts, with then-campaign director Dan Mathews quoted stating, "There is no ethical way to kill an animal for its fur" (Arctic Indigenous Rights Coalition, 2019). PETA has not made any efforts to partner with Native communities, often promoting a rigid, black-and-white view of animal rights that leaves little room for the cultural, spiritual, and subsistence practices central to many Indigenous groups. On PETA's website they state, "nature takes care of its own" (PETA, 2025) in context of hunting. However, this statement further separates humans from nature and builds on black and white perspectives. Their messaging tends to condemn all forms of animal use as cruelty, without acknowledging the complexity of Indigenous relationships with the natural world, particularly traditional hunting. Dr. Makere Stewart-Harawira, Indigenous scholar at the University of Alberta, analyzed this dynamic in her 2021 paper *Environmental Colonialism and Indigenous Sovereignty*, she notes, "PETA's refusal to distinguish between industrial animal exploitation and Indigenous subsistence practices reflects a profoundly colonial worldview that privileges Western ethical frameworks while erasing Indigenous knowledge systems that have maintained ecological balance for millennia" (Environmental Ethics Quarterly, 2021). This case demonstrates how PETA's approach not only alienates potential allies but actively reinforces colonial power structures by delegitimizing Indigenous relationships with animals and land while centering white, urban perspectives on animal rights.

Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is another prominent animal rights organization, particularly known for its aggressive, direct-action approach to marine conservation. The group actively intervenes to protect marine life from illegal activities such as whaling and illegal

fishing, often through confrontational tactics like disrupting whaling ships or sabotaging illegal fishing operations. Sea Shepherd's approach has brought global attention to the destruction of marine ecosystems and has documented success in disrupting illegal fishing. However, their methods have also been criticized for being aggressive and potentially dangerous, often escalating conflicts rather than resolving them. Legal challenges and diplomatic tensions have arisen as a result of their direct interventions, and their confrontational methods are sometimes viewed as counterproductive in fostering lasting solutions.

Unlike organizations that take a rigid, black-and-white approach to animal rights, World Animal Protection acknowledges the complexity and cultural importance of Indigenous practices involving animals (Goldstein, 2021). While their mission is to protect and support animals globally, they explicitly state that respecting Indigenous traditions is a crucial part of that mission. Rather than condemning all hunting outright, they differentiate between exploitative systems like factory farming which they criticize for its colonial roots and environmental harm and traditional Indigenous hunting, which they recognize as often respectful, sustainable, and necessary for food security and cultural survival. Their approach values nuance, acknowledging that many Indigenous communities use traditional techniques to protect biodiversity and live in harmony with nature. They oppose hunting only when it is not required for sustenance and intentionally avoid decrying culturally important practices, such as the Inuit's respectful use of polar bears. However, despite this respectful stance, World Animal Protection has never actively partnered with Indigenous communities, raising questions about how deeply their stated respect translates into direct collaboration or support.

Chapter 4 Inuit Practices and Animal Perspectives

Inuit peoples of the Arctic regions have traditionally maintained holistic relationships with animals that acknowledge reciprocity while also supporting sustainable harvesting practices essential for survival. One of the Arctic species the Inuit utilize is seals for food, clothing, supplies and the sale and trade of seal skins which funds Inuit communities. Many Indigenous tribes are criticized for the killing of specific animals by animal rights movements. These movements advocate for the life of all animals however, specific campaigns target and do not consider Indigenous culture and practices.

TEK & Relationship with Seals

Indigenous hunting practices like those of the Inuit are guided by Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) a comprehensive understanding developed over centuries that balances human needs with ecosystem health (Peter, 2002). This knowledge system, known in Inuit contexts as Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit "that which Inuit have always known to be true" (Zellen, 2009), represents a holistic approach to environmental management, animal relationships and culture that has sustained communities in harsh environments for generations. The Inuit, who inhabit the largest territory of any Indigenous circumpolar people (spanning from Alaska across Northern Canada to Greenland), have developed place-specific practices adapted to their unique environmental contexts (Farquhar, 2020). The Inuit origin stories describe that seals willingly offered themselves to hunters. Once a seal made this sacrifice, the hunter inherited a sacred responsibility to share the animal's bounty with the entire community (Peter, 2002). Failure to honor this obligation meant the seal would withhold itself in future hunts. Inuit peoples also believe animals have eternal spirits capable of rebirth, and sharing seal meat ensured the seals' continued population (Arnaquq-Baril, 2016).

Economic Devastation

The sealing economy once provided substantial support for Inuit communities. While many sealskins entered international markets for economic survival, others remained essential for clothing, craftwork, and cultural items, all of which maintained traditional trading networks. The 1983 European seal product ban collapsed Inuit economies and led to widespread poverty even though the Inuit do not hunt the white-harp seal pup (Ostroff, 2016). In Resolute Bay, hunters saw their average annual income drop dramatically from \$54,000 to just \$1,000 between 1982 and 1983 (Ostroff, 2016). This economic devastation contributed to a sharp increase in suicide rates across Inuit communities after the 1983 seal ban. The crisis undermined the mixed subsistence-cash economy many communities had developed, leaving hunters unable to purchase equipment needed to continue traditional practices that sustained their families and culture (Nandori, 2020). The European Union extended this ban to all seal products in 2009; the anti-sealing campaign succeeded in destroying European interest in seal products but did not take into account the difference between commercial hunting and subsistence sealing (Goldstein, 2021). These campaigns from animal rights groups caused misguided perspectives on sealing and the needs of Inuit communities for cultural survival.

Animal Rights Campaigns

Organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Green Peace, and Sea Shepherd have had campaigns that threaten Inuit communities and their very existence (Randhawa, 2017) by undermining food sovereignty. This was illustrated in 2016 Toronto Canada when protests against Kū-kūm Kitchen's seal dishes prompted Indigenous artist Aylan Couchie's counter-petition, highlighting how targeting a small Indigenous business while ignoring hundreds of restaurants using

inhumanely sourced meat reveals anti-Indigenous sentiment (Couchie, 2017). Protesters attempted to dictate what an Indigenous business could serve while ignoring the cultural significance and sustainable harvesting practices behind these traditional foods. This selective targeting reveals how animal rights movements often fail to recognize that Indigenous food sovereignty is inseparable from cultural preservation, sustainable resource management, and subsistence use. The selective nature of these protests and campaigns targeting a small Indigenous business while ignoring hundreds of restaurants using industrially produced meat reveals troubling undertones. The protesters invoked universal animal rights principles without acknowledging the cultural context, historical significance, or sustainable nature of Inuit seal harvesting. The ethical problem that animal rights campaigns tend to avoid is the mass industrial production and consumption of animals and resources that causes unethical treatment of animals, environmental degradation, and human exploitation (Farquhar, 2020). Meanwhile, Indigenous defenders emphasize food sovereignty, cultural continuity, and the environmental sustainability of their practices. Indigenous hunting utilizes the entire animal without waste, occurs at scales that maintain healthy wildlife populations, and is guided by intimate knowledge of local ecosystems. As Chef Joseph Shawana notes, "If we lose our food identity then we are losing ourselves" (Decolonizing Our Diet, 2014).

Ongoing Challenges

Inuit peoples and communities continue to face opposition from major animal rights organizations, despite Greenpeace releasing an apology for their anti-sealing campaigns and have worked to advocate for the Inuit community by having Indigenous food sovereignty statements. Inuit communities report that ongoing anti-sealing activism by organizations such as PETA, IFAW, and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society continues to pose an existential threat to their

traditional, respectful, and holistic cultural practices and economic sustainability (Zellen, 2009). The continued anti-sealing advocacy has significant implications for Inuit livelihoods, as it influences public perception and policy decisions regarding seal products internationally.

Media Representation: Angry Inuk

Angry Inuk, a documentary by filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, explores the long-standing conflict between animal rights/environmental organizations and the Inuit. The film features Aaju Peter, an Inuit lawyer from Nunavut, who personally witnessed how seal hunting bans devastated her community. Despite the Canadian government's efforts to bolster the sealing industry through tax subsidies for fishermen and implementing strict seasonal harvest quotas, vegan and animal rights organizations continue their firm opposition to the seal hunt. As education is a large part of Indigenous sovereignty this documentary created awareness and led to increased support for Inuit communities and sealing.

Supporting Inuit Communities

Supporting Inuit communities requires a multifaceted approach that begins with educating ourselves about their rich cultural heritage and Indigenous-led organizations. Currently, various initiatives are addressing these needs through policy advocacy, cultural exchange programs, and community-based economic development projects designed with Inuit leadership. Organizations like Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) advocate for Inuit rights and interests at the national level, while the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) works across international borders to strengthen Inuit voice in global policy discussions. Regional bodies such as the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, Makivik Corporation, Nunatsiavut Government, and Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated manage land claim agreements and develop economic opportunities that respect traditional practices. The Avataq Cultural Institute preserves and

promotes Inuit culture, language, and heritage through educational programs and cultural documentation. The Seals & Sealing Network (SSN) serves as a comprehensive national platform that offers evidence-based perspectives and practical solutions related to seal harvesting. This coalition unites various stakeholders across Canada's sealing industry including harvesters, processors, manufacturers, retailers, and Indigenous communities with the shared purpose of advancing and marketing sustainable seal products. Through collaborative efforts, SSN advocates for the responsible utilization of seal resources, encompassing seal oil, meat, and fur, while emphasizing scientific principles and sustainability practices in their approach (Penashue, 2023). These efforts respect traditional practices like sustainable hunting and sealing while also combating the climate crisis that disproportionately affects Arctic regions.

It's significant that Greenpeace, which once campaigned against sealing and caused devastating economic and cultural damage to Inuit communities, has since acknowledged its harmful role and officially apologized in 2014 for the consequences of its anti-sealing campaigns (Colbourne, 2018). This recognition highlights how Western concepts of animal rights often conflict with Indigenous worldviews that view sustainable harvesting as respectful relationship-building with the natural world. Some environmental organizations such as Greenpeace, CoolEarth, and Acme Seals Group now understand that imposing Western frameworks regarding animal rights without considering Indigenous perspectives perpetuates colonial harm and undermines Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

Beyond existing approaches, we can further address these issues by creating more platforms for Inuit artists and knowledge-keepers, establishing fair trade networks for Inuit art, implementing culturally responsive educational curricula, and investing in Inuit-led climate resilience strategies. Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada advocates specifically for the needs of

Inuit women and families, addressing issues from economic development to health and violence prevention (Nandori, 2020). The future of sealing depends on supporting these organizations' work in defending traditional harvesting practices against misinformed anti-harvest campaigns while developing new markets for seal products. Additional avenues include technological infrastructure that preserves Inuit languages, creating mentorship opportunities between elders and youth, and fostering international cooperation on Arctic sovereignty issues. The most effective support for every non-Indigenous person is education and acknowledging sealing's continued importance in Inuit cultural identity and economic sustainability.

The tension between animal rights advocacy and Inuit communities persists, as it does for numerous Indigenous groups worldwide. To address this conflict effectively, animal rights organizations and activists must actively listen and educate themselves about Indigenous cultural practices and their ecological significance. While maintaining their commitment to animal welfare, these advocates should redirect their focus toward industrial and colonial systems that truly harm animals on a massive scale. By distinguishing between sustainable Indigenous practices and exploitative industrial operations, animal rights movements can work toward more nuanced and culturally respectful approaches that honor both animal welfare and Indigenous sovereignty.

Chapter 5 Makah Practices and Animal Perspectives

The relationship between Makah peoples and gray whales is deeply intertwined with Makah culture, subsistence practices, and spiritual worldview. The Makah people, whose homeland is located along the Pacific coast of Washington State, have a long history of interacting with marine life, particularly gray whales. The gray whale holds significant cultural, economic, and spiritual importance for the Makah, and their relationship with these marine mammals offers insights into the broader role of the natural world in Indigenous life (Hogan, 2020).

Historical Context and Cultural Significance

The Makah are known for their whaling practices, with gray whale hunting being central to their cultural identity. Historically, they used carved cedar canoes, harpoons, and team-based techniques to hunt whales, integrating rituals and deep respect into each step of the process (Stern, 1999). However, in the 1920s, the Makah voluntarily ceased whaling due to the sharp decline in gray whale populations, which they observed firsthand. At the time, commercial whaling was conducted primarily by non-Native and large commercial whale hunts devastated whale numbers along the Pacific coast (Stern, 1999). The Makah recognized that continuing to hunt whales under these conditions would threaten the species and violate their own principles of ecological balance and sustainability.

Gray whales were listed as endangered in 1970 under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, but thanks to conservation efforts and natural population recovery, they were delisted in 1994, having reached an estimated population of over 20,000 (Lowe, J. 1999). This recovery prompted the Makah to seek the reinstatement of their treaty-affirmed right to hunt whales, a right guaranteed under the 1855 Treaty of Neah Bay (Lowe, J. 1999). In 1999, the Makah successfully

completed a single ceremonial and subsistence gray whale hunt, marking the first legal whale hunt in the U.S. in over 70 years (Lowe, J. 1999).

Stakeholder Arguments and Opposition

This resumption was met with intense opposition from multiple stakeholders, each presenting distinct arguments rooted in different ethical frameworks and worldviews. Animal rights organizations, particularly the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, actively tried to disrupt Makah hunts and brought global attention to the issue (Garfield, 2001). Sea Shepherd and others argued that any form of whaling was morally indefensible, regardless of cultural context, positioning their argument within a framework of universal animal rights that transcends cultural boundaries (Healy, 2019).

Environmental groups presented more nuanced positions, with some supporting Indigenous sovereignty while others expressed concern about setting precedents for marine mammal hunting. Tourism industry representatives worried about the impact on whale-watching operations, framing whales as more valuable alive than dead from an economic perspective. Meanwhile, some local non-Native fishing communities expressed support for the Makah's treaty rights, recognizing parallels to their own struggles with overfishing regulations and cultural practices. The Makah, however, emphasized that their hunts were strictly regulated, spiritually meaningful, and central to their cultural sovereignty and identity. Tribal leaders articulated their position through frameworks of treaty rights, cultural preservation, and sustainable resource management, arguing that their traditional practices embodied principles of respect and reciprocity that Western conservation models often lack.

Legal and Regulatory Process

Since the early 2000s, the Makah have not conducted additional whale hunts due to a lengthy legal and regulatory process that demonstrates the complex intersection of federal law, international agreements, and tribal sovereignty. The tribe has sought permission through the Marine Mammal Protection Act waiver process, which requires federal review, environmental assessments, and public comment periods. This process involves multiple federal agencies, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the National Marine Fisheries Service, and coordination with the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

The regulatory framework requires the Makah to demonstrate that proposed hunts will not adversely affect gray whale populations, that hunting methods align with traditional practices while meeting contemporary animal welfare standards, and that the cultural and subsistence needs justify the taking. Environmental impact assessments must consider potential effects on marine ecosystems, other marine mammal populations, and cumulative impacts from various human activities.

In April 2024, NOAA granted a waiver under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, recommending that the Makah be allowed to resume limited ceremonial and subsistence whaling under strict guidelines. These would permit the hunting of up to three whales per year, with no more than five over any two-year period, and only from healthy subpopulations of gray whales. In 2025, the Makah are preparing to resume their traditional whale hunts pending final administrative approvals and coordination with NOAA and the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

Media Coverage and Public Discourse

Media coverage of the ongoing debate has often reflected broader tensions between Indigenous rights and mainstream environmental movements, with coverage varying significantly across different outlets and platforms. National media has frequently framed the issue through the lens of environmental protection versus cultural rights, sometimes failing to capture the complexity of Indigenous relationships with more-than-human beings. Local Pacific Northwest media has generally provided more nuanced coverage, reflecting the region's familiarity with tribal sovereignty issues and fishing rights precedents.

Social media has amplified both support and opposition, with viral videos and campaigns from animal rights organizations often dominating online discourse. However, Indigenous voices and allies have increasingly used these platforms to educate the public about treaty rights, traditional ecological knowledge, and the differences between commercial and ceremonial hunting practices.

Indigenous Scholarship and Alternative Frameworks

Indigenous animal studies scholars have provided crucial perspectives that challenge dominant Western frameworks for understanding human-animal relationships. Brian Hudson, in his essay in *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*, argues that Indigenous literatures offer alternative models for conceptualizing interspecies relationships that move beyond the nature/culture binary that often structures environmental debates (Hudson, 2013). Hudson's analysis reveals how Indigenous narratives consistently position humans as participants in, rather than managers of, ecological communities.

Craig Womack's provocative essay "There is No Respectful Way to Kill an Animal" complicates easy assumptions about Indigenous hunting practices, arguing that the

romanticization of "respectful" killing can obscure the genuine ethical complexities involved in taking animal lives (Womack, 2008). Womack's work challenges both non-Native critics who dismiss Indigenous hunting as inherently violent and Indigenous advocates who may oversimplify the moral dimensions of traditional practices. His analysis pushes for more honest engagement with the contradictions and difficulties inherent in human-animal relationships.

Linda Hogan's writings on Makah whaling revitalization, including her contributions to the *Seattle Times* and her book *The Radiant Lives of Animals*, offer profound meditations on the spiritual and ecological dimensions of the controversy (Hogan, 2007). Hogan, who has Chickasaw heritage, explores how the Makah case illuminates broader questions about Indigenous sovereignty, environmental ethics, and the Western tendency to separate spiritual and material relationships with animals. In *The Radiant Lives of Animals*, she writes about the "ancient contracts" between humans and animals that Western society has largely forgotten, suggesting that Indigenous hunting practices maintain awareness of these reciprocal relationships (Hogan, 2020).

Daniel Justice's engagements with the more-than-human world in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* provide essential context for understanding how Indigenous knowledge systems approach questions of kinship, responsibility, and ethical relationship with animal peoples (Justice, 2018). Justice argues that Indigenous literatures consistently demonstrate that "human exceptionalism is a colonial construct" and that traditional stories and practices maintain awareness of humans as "junior members" of ecological communities (Justice, 2018, p. 87). His work helps explain why the Makah whaling controversy cannot be understood simply through Western frameworks of animal rights or conservation biology.

Literary and Cultural Production

The Makah whaling controversy has inspired significant literary and cultural production that reflects the complexity of the issues involved. Indigenous writers have created works that explore themes of cultural continuity, environmental change, and the challenges of maintaining traditional practices in contemporary contexts. These works often emphasize the relational aspects of human-whale interactions, presenting hunting not as domination but as participation in ongoing reciprocal relationships.

Documentary films have also addressed the controversy, with productions ranging from those that support the Makah position to others that focus primarily on whale protection. These visual narratives often reveal the limitations of attempting to capture complex cultural practices through Western media forms, highlighting the need for Indigenous-controlled storytelling and representation.

Contemporary Makah artists have created works that celebrate whaling traditions while addressing modern challenges, including carvings, paintings, and performance pieces that maintain cultural knowledge and pass it to younger generations. These cultural productions serve not only as artistic expression but as forms of cultural preservation and political advocacy.

Industrial Whaling and Western Commodification

The contemporary controversy over Makah whaling cannot be understood without examining the devastating legacy of industrial whaling that brought gray whales to near extinction. From the mid-19th through early 20th centuries, commercial whaling operations driven by capitalist extraction decimated whale populations worldwide. These industrial hunts bore no resemblance to Indigenous whaling practices, operating instead through logics of

maximum profit and resource extraction that treated whales as commodities rather than as relational beings.

Industrial whaling vessels used explosive harpoons, factory ships, and mass processing techniques that prioritized efficiency and volume over any consideration of whale welfare or ecological balance. The scale was unprecedented: single commercial operations could kill hundreds of whales in a season, processing them into oil, baleen, and other products for global markets. This industrial approach fundamentally differed from Indigenous hunting practices that were embedded within cultural protocols, seasonal cycles, and spiritual relationships with whale peoples.

The irony is profound: the same Western industrial system that nearly drove gray whales to extinction now positions itself as the moral authority to judge Indigenous hunting practices that had sustained both whale populations and human communities for millennia. As Indigenous scholars note, this reversal obscures the colonial violence inherent in imposing Western conservation models on Indigenous peoples while ignoring the primary role of industrial capitalism in creating the ecological crisis.

SeaWorld and the Spectacle of Captivity

The transformation of whales into entertainment commodities represents another dimension of Western approaches to animal value that contrasts sharply with Indigenous relationships. SeaWorld and similar marine parks have built massive entertainment empires around the captivity and display of orcas, belugas, and other cetaceans, generating billions in revenue through the commodification of whale performance.

The documentary "Blackfish" and subsequent investigations revealed the profound psychological and physical trauma inflicted on captive orcas, including shortened lifespans,

psychotic behaviors, and violent incidents. Captive orcas like Tilikum, Kasatka, and Shamu became household names not as individual beings with their own agency and social relationships, but as branded entertainment products designed to generate profit through spectacle.

This commodification represents a particularly Western approach to animal value that reduces complex, intelligent beings to their entertainment utility. Indigenous perspectives, by contrast, understand whales as nations unto themselves, with their own languages, social structures, and spiritual significance. The contrast is stark: while SeaWorld profits from keeping whales in concrete tanks to perform tricks for human amusement, the Makah seek to maintain ceremonial and subsistence relationships that acknowledge whales as powerful spiritual beings deserving of respect and reciprocity.

The marine park industry has also actively shaped public perception of whales through sanitized, anthropomorphized presentations that strip away the wildness and agency of these beings. Visitors learn about whale "intelligence" and "emotion" through scripted shows that present whales as willing performers rather than as captive beings forced into artificial behaviors. This spectacularizing of whale lives creates a false intimacy that supports the industry while obscuring the violence of captivity.

Western Hierarchies of Animal Value

Part of the reason gray whales and large creatures like whales in general are so highly valued in public discourse is due to their size, intelligence, and emotional depth, which evoke empathy from the public. This phenomenon, known as charismatic megafauna bias, helps explain why animals like whales often receive more public and conservation attention than other

species. However, as Indigenous scholars note, this bias often reflects Western hierarchies of animal value that may not align with Indigenous understandings of kinship and relationship.

Western animal advocacy often operates through frameworks that privilege certain species based on perceived intelligence, emotional capacity, or physical appeal, creating hierarchies that determine which animals deserve protection and which can be exploited or ignored. Whales, dolphins, and great apes receive significant attention and legal protection, while fish, insects, and less charismatic species are afforded minimal consideration. This selective empathy reflects anthropocentric values that measure animal worth through proximity to human characteristics rather than through ecological relationships or intrinsic values.

The focus on individual whales suffering in captivity, while important, can also obscure broader questions about industrial fishing, ocean pollution, and climate change that affect entire marine ecosystems. The same public that rallies against whale captivity may continue consuming seafood from industrial operations that destroy marine habitats and kill millions of non-charismatic species as bycatch.

Indigenous frameworks, by contrast, often emphasize relational approaches that recognize the interconnectedness of all beings within ecological communities. Rather than creating hierarchies of animal value, traditional knowledge systems acknowledge the essential roles of all species and the responsibility of humans to maintain balanced relationships with more than human communities. This perspective challenges both the industrial exploitation of animals and the selective empathy of mainstream animal advocacy.

Contemporary Developments and Future Directions

The hunts are expected to be carried out using traditional methods, followed by elaborate ceremonial observances. Makah youth are also increasingly involved in learning traditional

skills, blending cultural preservation with contemporary ecological awareness. This intergenerational knowledge transfer represents a form of cultural resurgence that extends beyond hunting practices to encompass broader relationships with marine environments and traditional governance systems.

The Makah's relationship with gray whales continues to reflect a worldview grounded in interdependence and reverence for nature. While they face challenges from legal, political, and ethical fronts, their efforts to revive traditional whaling carefully and sustainably demonstrate a commitment to cultural continuity and ecological stewardship. As of now, this story remains a powerful case study at the crossroads of Indigenous rights, conservation, and modern environmental ethics, one that challenges dominant assumptions about human-animal relationships and points toward more complex, relationally grounded approaches to environmental governance.

Chapter 6 Ethical Complexities and Colonial Influences of Animal Value

Understanding how animals are valued in contemporary Western society requires a critical examination of historical, philosophical, and cultural frameworks that shape ethical discourse. The legacy of colonialism and the dominance of Western epistemologies have not only dictated human-animal relationships but have also marginalized alternative ways of relating to the natural world. These frameworks have influenced both mainstream scientific thought and modern ethical movements, often embedding anthropocentric and hierarchical assumptions that complicate cross-cultural understandings of animal life and ecological responsibility.

The Judeo-Christian framework has profoundly influenced Western views of animals, often positioning humans as inherently superior and divinely sanctioned to dominate the natural world. This anthropocentric hierarchy is evident in biblical narratives such as Noah's Ark, where a single man is tasked with preserving all animal life, implying human stewardship and control over other species. The story of Cain and Abel further reinforces this dynamic, with God favoring animal sacrifices over plant offerings, establishing a precedent for the religious and ritualistic commodification of animals. This spiritual justification for animal subjugation carried into early science, as seen in Descartes' infamous dissection of live animals, including his wife's dog, in a quest to locate the soul, an endeavor that framed animals as soulless automatons, stripping them of moral consideration and legitimizing their use as experimental tools. Together, these religious and philosophical traditions have shaped a cultural legacy that often normalizes human dominance and the instrumental use of animals.

These same traditions inform the logic of many contemporary animal rights movements, including Western veganism, which while aiming to reduce animal suffering often fails to escape the anthropocentric and colonial mindset it seeks to challenge. Veganism in the West frequently

positions itself as a morally superior lifestyle, assuming a universal applicability of its values without accounting for cultural specificity or ecological nuance. In doing so, it can reproduce the same colonial logic of moral absolutism that has historically disregarded Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to animals. For example, while Western veganism often champions a strict separation from animal products, this stance can clash with Indigenous worldviews that honor reciprocal relationships with animals built not on dominance, but gratitude and mutual respect, as captured in Robin Wall Kimmerer's words:

We gather our minds together to send our greetings and thanks to the beautiful animal life of the world, who walk about with us. We are grateful that they continue to share their lives with us and hope that it will always be so. Let us put our minds together as one and send our thanks to the animals. Now our minds are one (Kimmerer, 2015).

This Indigenous perspective reveals how vegan advocacy, when presented as the singular ethical path, can inadvertently silence traditions that have sustained respectful human-animal relationships for millennia. Vegan diets, while often motivated by genuine concerns about animal welfare and environmental sustainability, can become problematic when framed as universally superior without acknowledging diverse cultural contexts and ecological realities. Rather than imposing universal dietary mandates that may be nutritionally, economically, or culturally inaccessible to many communities, we might instead learn from Indigenous frameworks that prioritize gratitude, ceremony, and ecological reciprocity, recognizing that ethical relationships with animals can take many forms beyond the Western binary of exploitation versus abstinence.

While animal rights organizations have made substantial strides in advocating for animal welfare, their efforts often have unintended consequences, particularly when it comes to interactions with Indigenous communities. Many groups target Indigenous practices such as hunting and fishing, interpreting them through a Western ethical lens that equates all forms of animal use with exploitation. This approach is especially problematic in communities like the

Inuit or the Makah, where subsistence hunting is not only a necessity but a cultural and spiritual practice. Rather than engaging with the complexity of these traditions, such campaigns often misrepresent them as equivalent to industrial-scale exploitation, thus erasing their sustainability and relational ethics.

Moreover, Indigenous communities are often perceived as easier targets for advocacy campaigns than powerful corporations responsible for the bulk of ecological harm. This imbalance reflects a strategic choice by animal rights organizations to prioritize symbolic victories over systemic change, perpetuating the marginalization of Indigenous voices. These interventions, often devoid of consultation or collaboration, impose Western moral frameworks that can disrupt the very ecological balances they purport to defend. In doing so, they repeat colonial patterns of domination, replacing one form of exploitation with another form of erasure.

In essence, both Western religious legacies and modern ethical movements like veganism often fail to adequately engage with non-Western epistemologies. The challenge lies not only in advocating for animal welfare but in doing so in ways that respect cultural diversity, historical context, and the deeply relational worldviews of Indigenous peoples. Ethical action, particularly on a global scale, demands more than a universal moral code; it requires humility, dialogue, and a willingness to recognize the limits of one's own framework.

Although these complexities are important to recognize and discuss, they also involve cognitive distortion. This furthers ethical and colonial complexities because there are tribal citizens and nations who individually and collectively participate in industrial agriculture and animal husbandry. Meaning that in these conversations there is no room for binary thinking as these topics are inherently intertwined. For example, the Menominee Nation in Wisconsin operates one of the most successful tribally owned forest products companies in North America.

While maintaining sustainable forestry practices rooted in traditional ecological knowledge, they also run large-scale timber operations that supply industrial markets. This enterprise supports the tribe's economic sovereignty while navigating between ancestral stewardship values and contemporary market demands. The complexity lies in how they've adapted industrial practices through an Indigenous lens rather than simply adopting or rejecting Western approaches.

Another example is how many Plains tribes, including the Crow Nation in Montana and various Lakota communities, operate significant cattle ranching operations. As mentioned in chapter one, these enterprises often exist alongside efforts to restore buffalo herds and revitalize traditional hunting practices. Some tribal members work as professional ranchers using modern agricultural techniques while simultaneously participating in ceremonial buffalo hunts. This creates a lived reality where the same individuals embody both industrial animal agriculture and traditional Indigenous relationships with animals. Not as contradiction, but as strategic adaptation to colonial disruption and economic necessity. The Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community in Minnesota operates both traditional cultural programs and modern agricultural ventures, including large-scale farming operations. They've used casino revenues to invest in industrial agriculture while also funding traditional food sovereignty programs that focus on Indigenous crops and hunting practices.

These examples reveal that contemporary Indigenous communities are not preserved of pre-contact life, but dynamic societies that make strategic choices about how to maintain cultural identity while ensuring economic survival and political sovereignty. The contradictions mentioned reflect the false binary that positions Indigenous peoples as either traditional or assimilated into Western practices, when the reality is far more nuanced involving creative adaptations that serve both cultural continuity and contemporary needs.

Chapter 7 Future Directions

Respect, Reciprocity, and Responsibility

Native American tribes historically and currently hold fundamentally different views of animals compared to the industrial agriculture system, which treats animals as commodities. Central to many Indigenous peoples is the belief in the interconnectedness of all living beings, where humans are not separate from nature but part of a reciprocal system that includes animals, plants, and the land. The act of hunting is performed with humility, reverence, and acknowledgment of the animal's continued spirit within the natural world. Similarly, the Powhatan people believe that animals like deer possess "spiritual power," and their hunting practices are sacred ceremonies rooted in a deep connection to nature.

The industrial meat industry's consequences on Indigenous communities, ecosystems, and sustainable practices reflect the complex interplay between culture, ethics, and environmental destruction. Beyond animal welfare concerns, industrial meat production contributes significantly to environmental degradation, including deforestation, habitat loss, and approximately 15% of global greenhouse gas emissions (FAO, 2013). The FAO reports that livestock production, particularly cattle, accounts for a significant portion of global greenhouse gas emissions, with methane from cattle representing nearly 5% of global warming factors.

Today's industrial beef production relies heavily on corn feeding, which produces the fatty meat American consumers have become accustomed to, though at significant environmental and animal welfare costs. Factory hog operations often discharge untreated waste into waterways, contaminating ecosystems and affecting the health of nearby communities. These environmental impacts disproportionately affect rural and Indigenous populations living in proximity to these operations. This situation is further complicated by the fact that many

Indigenous communities of the Americas are "corn people" (including Cherokee folks) and that their stores of heirloom/traditional corn plants get cross-pollinated/contaminated with GMO corn, which then allows large corporations like Bayer to file legal claims against Indigenous nations and farmers for "intellectual" theft of their patented GMO corn. This corporate encroachment represents a direct threat to Indigenous food sovereignty, as ancestral corn varieties central to cultural identity and traditional food systems become vulnerable to contamination and subsequent legal action, creating yet another layer of environmental injustice. The concentration of corn production in the Midwest Corn Belt primarily Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Indiana has created a system where over 90% of U.S. corn is grown on land that was historically Indigenous territory (United States Department of Agriculture, 2023). However, efforts to restore Indigenous agricultural practices and land rights have emerged across various regions. The White Earth Land Recovery Project in Minnesota has successfully reclaimed thousands of acres for traditional wild rice cultivation and is working to restore heritage corn varieties (LaDuke, 2022). Similarly, the Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona has maintained continuous cultivation of their ancestral tepary beans and desert-adapted corn varieties, demonstrating successful resistance to industrial agriculture encroachment (Nabhan, 2022).

The Three Sisters agricultural system corn, beans, and squash grown together represents one of the most sophisticated and sustainable farming practices developed by Indigenous peoples of the Americas. This polyculture system maximizes soil health through nitrogen fixation by beans, provides natural pest control, and creates higher overall yields per acre than monoculture systems (Mt. Pleasant, 2020). The Cherokee Nation has implemented Three Sisters gardens in their food sovereignty initiatives, combining traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary

food security programs (Cherokee Nation, 2021). Research demonstrates that Three Sisters cultivation can reduce the need for synthetic fertilizers by up to 70% while maintaining comparable yields to conventional monoculture systems (Kessel & Ruthven, 2023).

Several tribes have successfully negotiated land-back agreements specifically for agricultural purposes. The Yakama Nation in Washington State regained 76,000 acres in 2021 for traditional food cultivation, including heritage corn varieties and camas root restoration (Yakama Nation, 2021). The Menominee Tribe in Wisconsin has maintained sustainable forestry and agriculture practices on their reservation lands while also establishing seed preservation programs for traditional corn varieties (Beck & Kimmerer, 2022). These initiatives represent critical steps toward Indigenous food sovereignty, though they remain limited in scope compared to the vast acreage under industrial corn production.

The legal challenges posed by GMO contamination continue to threaten Indigenous seed sovereignty programs. Patent laws allow biotechnology corporations to claim ownership over genetic sequences found in contaminated traditional varieties, creating what scholars term "biopiracy" (Shiva & Moser, 2020). The Hopi Tribe has implemented strict protocols to prevent GMO contamination of their blue corn varieties, including buffer zones and genetic testing programs, yet the threat remains constant due to wind-borne pollen drift from neighboring industrial operations (Hopi Cultural Preservation Office, 2023). This would be an interesting case study to dig into at some point in the future.

The contrast between industrial corn production and Indigenous agricultural practices illuminates fundamental differences in worldview regarding the Three Rs of Indigenous relationality: respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. Industrial agriculture treats corn as a commodity to be maximized for profit, often through genetic modification and intensive inputs

that degrade soil and water systems. This extractive approach violates Indigenous principles of respect for the plant as a relative and teacher. In contrast, Indigenous corn cultivation embodies reciprocity through practices like seed saving, ceremonial acknowledgment of the plant's gifts, and the Three Sisters system that gives back to the soil rather than depleting it (Kimmerer, 2021). The responsibility aspect extends beyond immediate human needs to encompass obligations to future generations and the broader web of life. When corporations claim ownership over genetic material that Indigenous peoples have carefully stewarded for millennia, they fundamentally violate these principles by treating sacred relationships as private property (Simpson, 2022). True food sovereignty requires not just access to land and seeds, but recognition of Indigenous peoples' responsibilities as caretakers of these ancestral relationships a role that cannot be patented, commodified, or legally appropriated.

Indigenous Knowledge as Dynamic and Sustainable

A central tenet of Indigenous perspectives on hunting is reciprocity. The act of taking an animal's life is never one-sided; it is part of a spiritual exchange. The animal serves the people, and in return, the people offer gratitude, humility, and care for the ecosystem. As Daniel Wildcat argues in *Red Alert: Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge*, "capitalism speaks values so little to the natural world and our relationship to it." Industrial agriculture prioritizes profit and efficiency, disregarding the ethical, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of life that Indigenous systems uphold. In contrast, Indigenous hunting practices are guided by sustainability and harmony with nature, ensuring species thrive and ecosystems remain balanced.

This industrial system of production, while devastating to animal welfare, also disrupts local economies and cultures, particularly in Indigenous communities. The rise of large-scale industrial farming has altered food systems, making traditional and sustainable farming practices

increasingly difficult for these communities to maintain. The encroachment of factory farming on local lands often leads to land displacement, environmental degradation, and a loss of traditional food sources that Indigenous peoples have relied upon for generations. Deforestation and habitat loss, caused by the need for vast amounts of land to support factory farms, often encroach on Indigenous lands, disrupting both local wildlife populations and the traditional ways of life that depend on these ecosystems. These environmental issues are compounded by the overuse of water and pollution caused by industrial farming, which affects nearby rivers, lakes, and aquifers, further impacting Indigenous populations who rely on these natural resources.

Indigenous knowledge systems are based on intimate, long-term engagement with local ecosystems. These systems are not frozen in the past; rather, they are dynamic and adaptable. The Inuit people of the Arctic have developed knowledge about sea ice conditions, including over 30 different terms for various ice formations. They can predict weather patterns by observing subtle changes in cloud formations, wind directions, and animal behavior - knowledge accumulated over thousands of years of living in this environment (Krupnik et al., 2010; Laidler, 2006). Aboriginal Australians have detailed understanding of seasonal calendars that can include six or more seasons (rather than the typical four), based on the flowering of specific plants, animal breeding cycles, and weather patterns. For example, the Jawoyn people of Arnhem Land recognize the "knockem down rain" season when specific trees drop their seeds, signaling the time for certain hunting and gathering activities (Prober, et al., 2011; Green, et al., 2010). Traditional farmers in Peru's Andes have continuously adapted their potato cultivation techniques over centuries. When climate change began affecting growing patterns, they drew on their extensive knowledge of potato varieties (Peru has over 3,000 types) to shift planting times and elevations, while also incorporating new varieties and techniques when beneficial (Brush,

2004; Zimmerer, 2000). The Menominee Nation in Wisconsin has adapted their forest management practices over time, integrating traditional sustainable harvesting methods with modern forestry science. They've maintained their forests for over 150 years while adapting to changing markets, regulations, and environmental conditions, proving that traditional knowledge can evolve while maintaining core principles (Trosper, 2007; Beck & Somerville, 2005). Native fishing communities in the Pacific Northwest have adapted their salmon management practices to work within modern regulatory frameworks while maintaining traditional ecological knowledge about fish runs, spawning cycles, and sustainable harvesting practices (Berkes, 2012; Haggan, et al., 2006).

As Wildcat emphasizes, this traditional knowledge is a "life-enhancing" force that evolves in response to environmental changes and challenges. The spiritual and practical connections between humans and animals reinforce a deep ecological awareness, and Indigenous hunters often make decisions based on a complex understanding of animal behavior, population dynamics, and seasonal cycles. This contrasts sharply with 21st-century food systems, where animals are mass-produced, often indoors and far removed from their ecological context.

Animals as Teachers and Relatives

Indigenous perspectives fundamentally differ from the dominant agricultural paradigm in that animals are seen as co-inhabitants and teachers rather than products (Kimmerer, 2013; LaDuke, 1999). This worldview instills a sense of moral responsibility toward all beings, including cows, pigs, and chickens even if these animals are not native to the land. While domesticated animals used in industrial farming are often alien to the ecosystems in which they're raised, Indigenous principles still call for these beings to be treated with dignity and respect (Cajete, 2000). For example, Cherokee teachings emphasize the interconnectedness of all

life through the concept of "duyuktv" (right relationship), which extends to all beings regardless of their origin (King, 2019). When Cherokee communities today introduced livestock like cattle or pigs, they often incorporate traditional protocols such as acknowledging the animal's spirit before slaughter and ensuring the animal lived according to its natural behaviors. The Cherokee understanding that animals possess their own intelligence and purpose reflected in traditional stories where animals are teachers and decision-makers continues to inform how even non-native domesticated animals are treated within contemporary Cherokee agricultural practices (Mooney, 1900; Smith, 2021). Another example in Traditional Lakota teachings emphasize the concept of "Mitákuye Oyás'ı̄ŋ" (all my relations), which extends kinship beyond humans to all living beings. When some tribal communities today raise cattle or chickens' animals introduced through colonization, they still apply these ancestral principles. For instance, they might offer prayers of gratitude before slaughter, ensure animals have access to natural behaviors and environments, and use every part of the animal to honor their life. The animals are acknowledged as teachers who demonstrate qualities like the cow's patience or the chicken's protective instincts toward young, rather than being viewed merely as units of production in an economic system.

Additionally, the health risks posed by industrial meat production, such as the spread of antibiotic-resistant diseases, disproportionately affect Indigenous communities. These communities are often located in areas with limited access to healthcare, making them more vulnerable to the public health impacts of industrial farming. The contamination from industrial livestock operations creates cascading nutritional and metabolic health impacts that persist across generations, as exposure to agricultural chemicals, heavy metals, and pharmaceutical residues can disrupt endocrine systems, alter gut microbiomes, and compromise nutrient absorption. These physiological changes can be passed down through epigenetic mechanisms, creating

inherited vulnerabilities to diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic disorders that compound over time within affected communities. Furthermore, the degradation of traditional food systems and contamination of local water and soil sources force reliance on processed foods that lack the nutritional density of ancestral diets, perpetuating cycles of malnutrition and chronic disease. As meat production methods become more industrialized, these populations face heightened risks not only from environmental damage but also from the toxins and chemicals that permeate the surrounding environment, creating a legacy of health disparities that may take generations to reverse even if exposure ceases.

As Wildcat reflects, “progress is something humans make and do. It denotes improvement, something we do not expect plants, other animals to do.” This perspective resists the anthropocentric assumption that humans are the only agents of progress, asserting instead a view in which all beings have intrinsic value and roles within the web of life. Wildcat also points to modern science as affirming what Indigenous people have long known: “current scientific research on animal communication overwhelmingly verifies the existence of complex communication systems.” This reinforces the understanding that animals are sentient, communicative beings, deserving of ethical consideration and relational respect.

Indigenous Food Movements and Cultural Revitalization

Many Native American reservations and rural areas are located in "food deserts," where there are few or no options for fresh produce, and reliance on processed, unhealthy foods becomes common. This lack of access to healthy food contributes to higher rates of diet-related diseases like diabetes and obesity within Native American populations. The term "food apartheid" also highlights the racial and socio-economic factors that contribute to these

inequities, emphasizing how colonialism and systemic injustice have shaped food access for Native peoples.

The revival of Indigenous foodways is a growing movement that reclaims culinary traditions and knowledge systems eroded by colonization. Chef Sean Sherman (Oglala Lakota), for example, founded the Sioux Chef, a catering company focused on Indigenous cuisine that eliminates European ingredients. His work highlights the importance of food sovereignty and cultural preservation through traditional cooking. These efforts not only restore health and identity within Indigenous communities but also demonstrate sustainable food practices aligned with ecological balance.

Another example is the work of the I-Collective, a group of Indigenous chefs, seed keepers, and activists working to preserve Indigenous food systems and knowledge. The I-Collective emphasizes education, cultural resilience, and traditional ecological knowledge through community-based food initiatives and storytelling. They host events and workshops that center Indigenous voices, promote intertribal collaboration, and encourage the sharing of recipes and farming techniques passed down through generations. Through this collective approach, the I-Collective helps restore Indigenous food sovereignty and supports broader movements for land and cultural reclamation.

Education as a Path Forward

Education is a vital strategy for promoting ethical and sustainable food systems. By raising awareness about the environmental, spiritual, and ethical consequences of industrial meat production, we can help bridge the cognitive dissonance of many experiences often described as the "meat paradox." The meat paradox highlights the psychological tension that arises when

individuals who consume meat also hold moral beliefs about the welfare of animals. This creates a cognitive dissonance between the values they profess and the actions they take.

Some animal rights organizations like World Animal Protection and The Nature Conservancy are recognizing the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives into ethical discussions on food systems. Many are beginning to highlight the benefits of sourcing local, humanely raised meats and plant-based alternatives and also reflect the importance of traditional ecological knowledge. By supporting small-scale farming and land stewardship practices rooted, these efforts align animal welfare with sustainability.

These Indigenous-led food movements not only address health disparities and cultural revitalization but also challenges industrial animal agriculture and the broader Western worldview that continues to destroy and harm people, land and animals. In contrast to Western industrial models that view animals as commodities objects to be bred, confined, and consumed for maximum efficiency many Indigenous cultures understand animals as relatives, beings with agency, spirit, and a role in the ecological web. This relational worldview fosters a sense of responsibility, reciprocity, and restraint in how animals are treated and harvested.

Industrial animal agriculture, on the other hand, is rooted in a worldview of domination and separation: humans above nature, animals as resources, and land as property. This logic has justified the confinement of billions of animals in inhumane conditions and the widespread ecological degradation that follows deforestation, water contamination, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity loss. It has also normalized a culture of disconnection, where consumers are alienated from the sources of their food and the suffering embedded within it.

By reclaiming traditional foodways and relationships with the land and animals, Indigenous food movements expose the moral and ecological failures of industrial agriculture.

They offer an alternative model grounded in kinship rather than control, in balance rather than exploitation. These efforts serve as both a critique and a corrective to the industrial food system, illustrating that food can be produced in ways that sustain both human communities and the more-than-human world.

In this sense, Indigenous food sovereignty is not just about restoring Native health and culture it also represents a way to reimagine how societies can relate to food, animals, and the Earth. It calls on all of us to move beyond extractive systems and toward models of care, reciprocity, and justice that honor the interconnectedness of life.

Biophilia, Reconnection, and Anti-Anthropocentrism

A biophilic approach to food and animals is one grounded in love and respect for life and can help shift consumer mindsets. Robin Wall Kimmerer asks, “What do you suppose would happen if people believed this crazy notion that the earth loved them back?” and answers, “you wouldn't harm what gives you love and life.” She adds, “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.” This sacred bond reorients humans away from anthropocentrism, the belief that human interests are paramount, and toward a view that recognizes the intrinsic worth of all beings. This shift is essential in dismantling exploitative systems and creating a future where animals, ecosystems, and people are treated with respect and care.

Another critical concept in understanding the disconnect caused by industrial meat production is biophilia, the inherent human tendency to connect with other forms of life and the natural world. Indigenous cultures have long embodied this innate connection, where the health and vitality of animals and the land are directly linked to the well-being of human communities.

The reverence for animals in these traditions reflects a deep-seated biophilia that sees human life as intertwined with the ecological health of the land. This sacred connection is often expressed through origin stories that root animals within their specific geographical regions, reinforcing both spiritual and ecological bonds. For example, whales are not just sea creatures but ancestral beings in many coastal Indigenous narratives, embodying the spirit of the ocean and guiding kinship practices tied to marine ecosystems. On land, seals and bison hold similar significance seals representing life and survival in Arctic regions, and bison symbolizing abundance and reciprocity on the plains. These stories emphasize the importance of place, showing how animals are not interchangeable or separate from the land and waters they inhabit. In contrast, European and American colonial ideologies have historically viewed land and animals as resources to be claimed, extracted, and moved at will stripping them of their sacred context and disrupting the deep relational ties between people, animals, and place. Factory farming practices often dehumanize animals and degrade the land, creating a situation where the emotional and ecological connections that foster sustainability are neglected. Industrial meat production is a direct manifestation of anthropocentrism, where animals are viewed as profit rather than sentient beings with intrinsic value. This approach disregards the importance of ecosystems and the rights of animals, creating an unsustainable food system that prioritizes profit over ecological balance. However, Indigenous knowledge systems are grounded in an understanding of ecocentrism, where the health of the land, animals, and people are interconnected. As William Cronon explores in *Nature's Metropolis*, this process leads to the dangerous erasure or “forgetting” of nature, where urban and industrial systems become detached from the ecosystems that sustain them, masking the ecological destruction behind economic progress and market efficiency. Cronon (1991) shows how cities like Chicago grew by transforming natural landscapes into

commodities, trees into lumber, prairies into farmland, animals into meat until the origins of those materials became invisible to the people consuming them. This forgetting, he argues, allows modern economies to perpetuate environmental harm while hiding the true costs behind abstractions like markets, infrastructure, and distance. The more efficient these systems become, the easier it is to ignore the living world they rely on. In response, Cronon calls for a renewed ecological consciousness one that reawakens our awareness of nature's presence in every part of our lives. It is not just a matter of recovering what has been forgotten, but of taking collective responsibility to learn from nature again: to see the land, animals, and ecosystems not as resources to exploit, but as living communities to respect and sustain.

Food Sovereignty and the Fight for Justice

Industrial agriculture has deeply harmed Indigenous communities, disrupting traditional foodways, damaging health, and threatening land rights. Reclaiming food sovereignty is not just an environmental or nutritional issue; it is a political and cultural one. It is intimately tied to broader efforts for self-determination, land reclamation, and cultural survival. Addressing the meat industry's impact on Indigenous lands and health requires a systemic shift that centers Indigenous voices, knowledge, and leadership. Supporting Indigenous-led initiatives focused on environmental restoration and food justice is crucial for healing and sustainability.

Conclusion: Toward a More Just and Sustainable Food System

The history and reality of the American meat industry reveals a complex web of colonialism, environmental destruction, cultural erasure, and systematic exploitation that extends far beyond the treatment of animals themselves. From the deliberate introduction of European cattle as tools of territorial expansion and Indigenous displacement to today's concentrated animal feeding operations, the industrialization of meat production represents not merely an economic evolution but a fundamental restructuring of relationships between humans, animals, and the land.

The near extinction of buffalo and the forced transformation of Indigenous food systems into dependence on government rations exemplifies how colonial powers weaponized hunger and ecological destruction to secure territorial control. This historical pattern continues today as industrial agriculture expands into Indigenous territories, contaminating water sources, disrupting traditional foodways, and perpetuating cycles of environmental racism and health disparities. The replacement of 30 million buffalo with 60 million cattle was not simply an agricultural transition but a deliberate act of cultural and ecological violence designed to break Indigenous resistance and sovereignty.

Yet this history also illuminates the remarkable adaptability and resilience of Indigenous communities who have navigated these imposed changes while maintaining cultural values and pursuing food sovereignty. From Cherokee cattle ranching operations to contemporary tribal beef programs emphasizing sustainable practices, Indigenous nations have demonstrated that it is possible to engage with domesticated animal husbandry in ways that honor traditional values of reciprocity and environmental stewardship. These examples challenge binary thinking about

"traditional" versus "modern" practices, revealing instead the complexity of survival strategies under colonial constraints.

While Indigenous communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience in adapting to colonial impositions, the industrial system that replaced traditional relationships with animals has created unprecedented moral and environmental crises.

The current industrial system subjects billions of animals annually to conditions that prevent natural behaviors, cause physical and psychological suffering, and prioritize economic efficiency over welfare. The ten billion farm animals raised and slaughtered in the United States each year exist within a system that has transformed living beings into production units, disconnected from the ecological relationships that once sustained both animals and human communities. This transformation reflects what Robin Wall Kimmerer identifies as the fundamental problem of treating living beings as "its" rather than recognizing them as "whos" with their own agency, intelligence, and spiritual significance.

Perhaps most troubling is the profound disconnection between consumers and the realities of meat production. While Americans express concern for animal welfare, the industrial system operates largely out of sight, maintaining what can only be described as willful ignorance about the conditions that produce the seventy billion pounds of meat consumed annually. This disconnection extends beyond individual choice to encompass broader systems of exploitation that implicate even those who abstain from meat consumption through the ubiquity of animal by-products in everyday items.

The environmental consequences of this system from greenhouse gas emissions to water contamination to habitat destruction disproportionately impact the very communities whose traditional ecological knowledge offers alternative models for sustainable relationships with

animals and land. The irony is stark: those who maintained regenerative relationships with buffalo and other animals for millennia now bear the brunt of environmental degradation caused by systems that replaced those relationships with extractive industrial models.

This environmental and cultural destruction becomes even more complex when examining how contemporary animal rights movements, despite their stated intentions to protect animals, often perpetuate the same colonial patterns of erasure and domination.

The examination of animal rights organizations and their interactions with Indigenous communities reveals a fundamental tension between universalist ethical frameworks and culturally grounded ways of relating to the natural world. While organizations like PETA, Sea Shepherd, and others have undeniably contributed to raising awareness about animal welfare and corporate accountability, their approaches often perpetuate the very colonial logic they ostensibly challenge. By imposing Western moral absolutism without engaging with Indigenous epistemologies, these movements risk becoming another form of cultural imperialism that erases millennia of sustainable, reciprocal relationships with animals and land.

The cases of Inuit sealing practices and Makah whaling illustrate how Indigenous communities have developed sophisticated systems of environmental stewardship that honor both animal welfare and cultural survival. These practices, guided by Traditional Ecological Knowledge and spiritual frameworks that view animals as willing participants in reciprocal relationships, offer profound alternatives to Western anthropocentrism. The economic and cultural devastation caused by blanket bans on seal products demonstrates the real-world consequences when animal rights advocacy fails to distinguish between exploitative industrial systems and sustainable Indigenous practices.

Perhaps most troubling is the strategic pattern of targeting Indigenous communities—who represent a tiny fraction of global animal exploitation—while avoiding confrontation with the industrial systems responsible for the vast majority of animal suffering and environmental destruction. This selective targeting reveals how animal rights movements can inadvertently serve colonial interests by delegitimizing Indigenous sovereignty while leaving dominant power structures intact.

These contradictions point to the need for a fundamental reimagining of our relationships with both animals and the natural world, one that moves beyond the colonial frameworks that have shaped both industrial agriculture and mainstream animal rights activism.

The contrast between Indigenous approaches to animals and industrial agriculture reveals fundamentally different ways of understanding our relationship with the natural world. Where industrial systems view animals as commodities to be maximized for profit, Indigenous knowledge systems recognize animals as relatives, teachers, and integral participants in the web of life. This difference extends far beyond individual hunting practices or farming methods—it represents competing worldviews about humanity's place within, rather than dominion over, the natural world.

The environmental and cultural devastation wrought by industrial meat production on Indigenous communities exemplifies the broader consequences of severing our biophilic connections to the land and its inhabitants. When corporate agriculture contaminates traditional corn varieties, displaces communities from ancestral lands, and creates food apartheid in Native territories, it perpetuates a colonial logic that treats both Indigenous peoples and animals as expendable resources. The same anthropocentric thinking that reduces a cow to units of protein production also reduces Indigenous food sovereignty to an obstacle for agricultural expansion.

Yet Indigenous communities are not merely victims of this system—they are leading powerful movements of resistance and restoration. From Chef Sean Sherman's reclamation of traditional foodways to the I-Collective's preservation of Indigenous agricultural knowledge, these efforts demonstrate that alternative food systems are not only possible but essential for our collective survival. These movements embody the reciprocity, responsibility, and respect that characterize Indigenous relationships with animals and land, offering pathways toward more sustainable and ethical ways of eating.

Given the urgency of our current environmental and ethical crises, these Indigenous-led movements point toward the transformative changes necessary for creating truly just and sustainable food systems.

Moving forward requires more than individual dietary choices or welfare reforms within existing systems. It demands a fundamental reconsideration of our relationships with other species, recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and ecological knowledge, and acknowledgment that the current system represents not progress but a profound moral and ecological crisis. As Kimmerer suggests, embracing a "grammar of animacy" that recognizes other species as sovereign peoples rather than resources might open pathways toward what she calls "a true democracy of species rather than our current tyranny of one."

The cattle industry's role in colonization reveals how systems of oppression interconnect the same structures that dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their lands continue to exploit both animals and marginalized communities today. Understanding this history is essential for envisioning alternatives that honor the complex relationships between humans, animals, and land that Indigenous communities have maintained despite centuries of attempted destruction.

The path forward requires a fundamental shift in how animal rights organizations conceptualize their mission. Rather than pursuing universal moral codes that erase cultural complexity, effective animal advocacy must embrace what Hogan describes as the "soul" that "lies at all points of intersection between human consciousness and all the rest of nature." This means recognizing that ethical relationships with animals can take many forms, acknowledging the limits of Western frameworks, and prioritizing dialogue with Indigenous knowledge-keepers over imposed solutions.

The urgency of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice demands that we listen to Indigenous voices and traditional ecological knowledge. As Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us, recognizing that the earth loves us back transforms our relationship from extraction to reciprocity, from exploitation to celebration. This transformation is not merely philosophical; it is practical, necessary, and long overdue.

Ultimately, the challenge is not merely about protecting animals, but about decolonizing our understanding of human-nature relationships entirely. Moving forward requires structural changes that center Indigenous sovereignty, support traditional food systems, and challenge the anthropocentric assumptions underlying industrial agriculture. By embracing the Indigenous understanding that animals are our relatives rather than our resources, we can begin to heal the broken relationships that industrial food systems have created between humans, animals, and the land that sustains us all.

Only by acknowledging these connections can we begin to imagine food systems rooted in justice, sustainability, and respect for all living beings. In this healing lies not only the possibility of justice for Indigenous communities and farm animals, but the foundation for a more sustainable and ethical future for all life on Earth. The future of both animal welfare and

Indigenous sovereignty depends on this crucial transformation—one that honors the profound truth that humans, too, are part of nature, not separate from it.

Reforming our food systems is not just about improving animal welfare, it is about confronting the injustices inflicted on Indigenous peoples, their land and practices. By embracing education, reawakening biophilic values, challenging anthropocentric thinking, and integrating Indigenous knowledge, we can move toward a food system grounded in ethics, sustainability, and respect. Such a system would value animals as co-inhabitants, not commodities; honor Indigenous sovereignty and foodways; and foster deep ecological awareness. By learning from Indigenous practices and worldviews, we can begin to repair the damage caused by industrial agriculture and move toward a future where humans live in harmony with the land, animals, and each other.

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