

## **Recognizing The Past For A More Inclusive Future**

*Words by Ben Pease*

Introduction in Apsáalooke/Crow

Hello, my name is Ben Pease. My crow name is Steals Guns From Two Enemy Camps. It was given to me by my grandfather, and I'm from what is now known as Montana. I presently live in Billings, Montana. I am a father and a partner and I've been an artist for about 14-15 years. Really trying to understand how I can use art as a tool for understanding for myself, for my environment, and for the larger world, I guess.

My clan is the Newly Made Lodge, and they were absorbed into the Big Lodge after a range of pandemics in our tribe. The clanship system for the Apsáalooke people is a social organizer. We call ourselves the Driftwood Lodges because in the river, when the driftwood comes together, it's stronger. You know, it's a metaphor for communal strength.

When I think about the concept of home, I think about a place of belonging. At the same time, this is a human concept, we need to understand where we live as humans and our impact on the places that we live. At least for our people, we have four mothers. And one of those mothers is the land. And one of them is our home. And if we're thinking about how we treat the land, I think we're always taught to respect it like we do our mothers.

When we make designations for these places, these ideas of wilderness across the West as somewhat untouched or pristine land, that is somewhat of a myth that sort of overlooks thousands of years of indigenous presence, knowledge, and stewardship in so many different ways. These areas are now labeled as wilderness, and I think to only simply turn them as wilderness sort of immediately erases the thousands of years that indigenous people have spent here and worked with the land.

For thousands of years, many indigenous peoples, many groups, existed here. For all those years, we also played a huge role in the ecology of the environment. Things like the Treaty of Fort Laramie or other nation-to-nation agreements, they're poignant examples of promises that were made that were just not kept. And despite the treaty's assurances, it led to the erosion of our land. It entirely disregarded our connection, our deep connection to this place, to what is now known as something like the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Which carried knowledge, scientific data, which we're only just now getting back, and some of the world is only just realizing the importance of it.

In not being able to access our sacred sites, or even the knowledge of the hunting grounds, or the other the water systems, you know. So much life is lost. Not only human life, but life life. I think we can't be so ethnocentric. In building policy, in building law and statute, I think we need to be much more intentional.

Because conservation policies frequently excluded the indigenous voice and perspective, we've lost our traditional ecological knowledge, which carries value. In our stories comes value, with all humans. Everybody wants a story. Everybody has a place, an identity, a sense of belonging. What's even more important and powerful to recognize is that we have an immense responsibility and opportunity to move forward. Stewardship and caretaking of the places that we call home and the places in which we exist is a shared responsibility for us all.

So in moving forward, when we celebrate things like the Wilderness Act, we need to re-examine from a new perspective that the lens in which it was created was also quite often very exclusionary. Realizing that wilderness has always been sort of a non-diverse idea. It hasn't always included people of color in a lot of ways, or the perspectives that we bring and the knowledge that we have.

By moving beyond outdated models, I think that we can foster a sustainable future that honors both the earth and the life on it, and the diversity of people and cultures that sustain it. We have the chance, together, to cultivate futures where we all thrive, where the land thrives, and where we respect each other. And hopefully, unify.