

Giving in a Good Way: Transforming Colonial Funding Practices for Conservation

A surge of interest in Indigenous-led conservation has led to increases in charitable funding. But is the philanthropy sector 'giving in a good way' or are funders exerting direction and control?

Interviews with 22 representatives from Indigenous, environmental, and philanthropic organizations (1) explored how colonial philanthropic approaches perpetuate challenges (thorns) for Indigenous-led organizations, and (2) produced key considerations (fruit) for philanthropic organizations to create meaningful, respectful, sustainable, and trust-based funding models.

The 'Giving in a Good Way' report serves as a starting point for a broader conversation on decolonizing philanthropy for Indigenous conservation organizations.



Thorns



Inequity and Power

Donor support for Indigenous-led organizations can be misguided, even if well-intentioned, due to biases and a one-size-fits-all approach that hinders genuine collaboration and co-creation.



Insufficient, Short-Term Funding

Constrained funding amounts and short timelines hinder the cultivation of meaningful relationships, perpetuate dependency, and prevent long-term financial and project sustainability.



Onerous Applications and Reporting

The demanding level of detail and rigid deadlines of funding applications and reporting perpetuate colonial standards. This undermines the efforts of Indigenous organizations to achieve deeper, lasting impact within their communities.



Accountability

Formal funding agencies can often prioritize corporate interests over community interests. There are concerns that philanthropic organizations fund Indigenous-led conservation initiatives to serve their own agendas and reputations.



Navigating Worldviews and Colonial Harms

Funders often support Indigenous-led conservation efforts without first gaining a deeper understanding of Indigenous rights, values, laws, and knowledge systems. This stems from a colonial worldview and ignores its enduring, intergenerational harms. This creates a mis-alignment in values and misguided approaches to conservation initiatives.



Competition

While financial support for Indigenous-led conservation grows, limited funding opportunities creates competition between Indigenous organizations that diverts energy and focus from reconciliation and conservation efforts.

Fruit



Conduct a Power Audit

Funders can rebalance inequitable power dynamics in colonial funder relationships through assessing and evaluating their influence and control; ensuring their values align with grantees; and re-defining what 'success' looks like based on community needs.



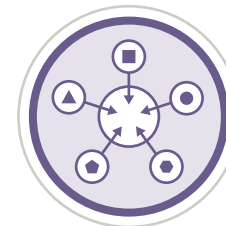
Shift to Trust-based Philanthropy

Discretionary funding with flexibility on timelines and goals is essential. Long-term, forward-thinking funding translates to increased security, trust, and impact.



Prioritize Relationships

Listening, learning, and transparency are essential elements for relationship-building. Direct interaction, presence, and spending time 'on the land' and within Indigenous communities is ideal.



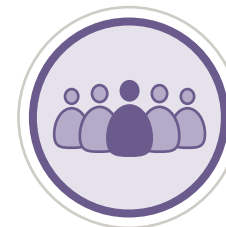
Take a Holistic Approach

Funding initiatives should extend beyond quantitative measurements and data. The separation between funding 'categories,' such as environment, culture, and social welfare, creates artificial barriers for grantees. Advancements in Indigenous-led conservation efforts are intrinsically linked with positive socio-economic, cultural, and health outcomes.



Do Your 'Homework'

Funders must invest in cross-cultural training for their entire organization that assesses inherent biases, assumptions, and approaches. Understanding and awareness of the harmful impacts of colonialism is foundational for partnering with Indigenous-led organizations.



Support Indigenous Leadership

Funders must create space for diverse Indigenous perspectives, voices, and authority in strategic decisions. Embedding opportunities for capacity and skills development, especially among Indigenous youth, can ensure a bright future for conservation leadership.