

A detailed illustration of a raspberry branch with several leaves and clusters of raspberries, rendered in a light purple and grey color scheme. The branch is positioned diagonally across the top and right side of the page.

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# GIVING IN A GOOD WAY: Transforming Colonial Funding Practices for Conservation

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conservation  
through  
reconciliation  
partnership

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My most sincere thanks go to Larry and Tim for guiding me in this work. I am grateful to Dr. Robin Roth, then-coordinator of the MCL program, for her ongoing advice. Thanks also to Lisa McLaughlin of the Nature Conservancy of Canada, for helping me to develop the idea of comparing the challenges and seeking common ground.

I appreciate Jamie Kapitain's work to beautifully and efficiently illustrate the barriers and considerations through the analogy of a blackberry bush with thorns and fruit. Finally, thank you to Kristy Tomkinson of the CRP and the IISAAK OLAM Foundation for her persistence in bringing this paper to life. I am grateful for your tenacity!

I dedicate this toolkit to the twenty-two individuals whom I interviewed to inform the guidance and considerations contained therein. Thank you for sharing your stories, challenges, and insights with me.

Sara Wilbur-Collins  
March 2024

## Overview

This report was developed from a more extensive research paper requirement of the [Masters of Conservation Leadership \(MCL\)](#) program at the University of Guelph in 2022<sup>1</sup>. The paper was centred around the voices of those who shared their perspectives on challenges related to meaningfully funding Indigenous-led efforts.

Condensed to a practical set of guidelines, this report outlines substantial barriers (thorns) for Indigenous-led organizations seeking and obtaining funding from donors. It also offers key considerations (fruit) for philanthropic organizations to create meaningful, respectful, sustainable, and trust-based funding models. These are further illustrated through a diversity of perspectives and voices within the Indigenous-led conservation space.

In an effort to bring my whole self to this project, this report includes personal reflections told in first-person perspective.

Every effort was made to ensure an ethics process has been followed during my conversations with 22 individuals. All direct quotes have been reviewed by their contributors but will remain anonymous.

This report serves as a starting point for a broader conversation on decolonizing philanthropy, urging funders to critically assess and address colonial practices and assumptions in their engagements and relationships with Indigenous conservation organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> This toolkit was developed from insights and perspectives shared with the author in 2022. However, additional information was added during the development of this toolkit in 2024, including a summary on the [Right Relations Collaborative](#) and the [JPCA Development Fund](#).

## Introduction

In 2018, there were more than 86,000 charities in Canada ([Government of Canada, 2019](#)), receiving just under \$10 billion in receipted donations (Statistics Canada). In the same year, the total amount given by Canadian charities to Indigenous organizations was \$46.9 million, or about half a percent of all funds granted over \$30,000 ([Redsky et al., 2021](#)).

In 2016, Statistics Canada stated that 1.67 million people in Canada identified as Indigenous, or 4.9 percent of the population. This means that nearly 5 percent of the population was only receiving 0.5 percent of donated funds ([Redsky et al., 2021](#)).

More recently, however, interest in supporting Indigenous efforts has increased. [CanadaHelps' 2022 Giving Report](#) notes that while Indigenous causes still only account for 3.3 percent of total online giving, it is one of the few giving categories that continues to grow, despite the challenging philanthropic conditions caused by the pandemic.

It is important to note, however, that not all Indigenous organizations are registered Canadian charities, which limits their ability to access donated funds. While it is possible for registered charities to work with non-registered groups, under the current legislation charities must exercise “direction and control” over the partnership. ([Omidvar, 2021](#)). For peoples rebuilding their culture, this could be deeply unpalatable.

The proposed [Effective and Accountable Charities Act](#), which received first reading in 2022, would make it easier for funders to work with non-registered charities by eliminating the “direction and control” clause. The champion of the bill, Senator Ratna Omidvar, [noted](#) that the current legislation is an expression of systemic racism, as many agencies supporting underserved populations — including Indigenous organizations that are not band councils or forms of other government — are not registered charities.

As a conservation professional who has worked in philanthropy for more than two decades, I have become adept at requesting funds from individuals, government, corporations, and foundations.

Meeting with funders can be a comfortable experience, filled with shared purpose and joy at achieving positive outcomes. Often, however, the process can be fraught with tension and frustration. The reasons for this are diverse.

A funder may:

- Ask for restrictions on their gift that are difficult to implement;
- Request disproportionate recognition for their contribution;
- Try to dictate how the program they support should be run; or
- Imply that if they don't have their way they will withdraw from future giving.

Prior to working with [Plenty Canada](#), an organization whose [mission](#) recognizes “that people are part of the environment and we sustain healthy lives only when the environment as a whole is healthy,” my funding experiences have been entirely within the sphere of colonial philanthropy.

The ‘rules of the game’ of mainstream fundraising, such as how to frame a request for more likely success and which of-the-minute language to use, have become so entrenched that most longtime professionals are hardly conscious they use them.

When the concept of conservation is layered upon philanthropy, my experience has been that funders often think of the John Muir ideal: providing financial support for a set-aside area to be protected and preserved, away from the damage that humans bring ([Cronon, 1996](#).)

I have found that while most funders are aware of the climate change crisis, only a few are aware of [Canada’s Pathway 1 targets](#). Even fewer have made a connection between conservation and the need to restore Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

Many Indigenous organizations and partnering environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) are striving to secure funding for the restoration of environmental and cultural practices within Indigenous ancestral lands and waters.

Not only must they navigate colonial processes as they seek funding, but they also hold a fundamentally different view of conservation: that humans and nature are not separate, but are equal and in relationship ([Wall Kimmerer, 2013](#)).

The cumulative impact of these barriers is substantial, particularly in the context of hundreds of years of sustained efforts by the Crown, the Canadian government, and many others to destroy Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

Recently, I have noticed a surge of interest in supporting Indigenous organizations and efforts. This trend coincided with two key milestones: 1) Canada Day 2021, when thousands of people paid [public tribute](#) to the Indigenous children who perished in the residential school system, and 2) Canada's first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

It seemed to me that this interest might lend itself to increases in financial support for Indigenous efforts, including those of conservation. However, I observed that most philanthropic giving was funneled toward social issues among Indigenous communities. Framing grants around a singular focus fails to recognize and address the interconnections between Indigenous Peoples' access to their traditional homelands and their social, cultural, physical, and spiritual health and well-being. This observation led to the conception of this project.

My key objectives for this project were to:

- Learn about barriers to funding success that are experienced by Indigenous-led organizations and the ENGOs that partner with them;
- Learn about the barriers that colonial or "mainstream" funders experience when attempting to fund Indigenous-led conservation efforts; and
- See how they compare: Do they mirror each other similarly, or are they very different in nature? This distance could suggest the amount of work needed to bring philanthropic organizations into alignment with Indigenous-led organizations.

This report is largely subjective in nature, and reliant on the perspectives of twenty-two voices, including:

- Eight individuals representing Indigenous-led organizations;
- Six individuals employed by partnering ENGOs, who have been involved with funders to Indigenous projects; and
- Eight representatives of corporate, community foundation, and government funders and/or those who create capacity for funders and fund-seekers.

I reached these individuals through my own professional network or in that of the [Master of Conservation Leadership \(MCL\)](#) program offered by the [University of Guelph](#).

In each case, my five primary questions were:

- Tell me about why you found this subject compelling.
- Tell me about a positive experience with a funder.
- Tell me about a time when it didn't go well. What were the barriers?
- How would you define success with a funder?
- Is there anything else I should know about this topic?

Interviews with 22 representatives from Indigenous and non-Indigenous environmental and philanthropic organizations revealed several barriers (thorns) to meaningfully supporting Indigenous-led conservation efforts. They also produced several key considerations (fruit) for philanthropic organizations to create meaningful, respectful, sustainable, and trust-based funding models. These barriers and considerations are outlined in the following sections.



# Barriers to Meaningful Funding Relationships: Thorns

## Inequity and Power: Whose Goals Are Being Met?



- Donors bring their own agendas, biases, and objectives to the funding relationship, but may not realize it.
- Requesting and receiving financial support from colonial funders can lead to power imbalances.
- It's very important for funders to do their own self-reflective work before engaging with Indigenous organizations.
- Western or colonial biases can be strong but subconscious.

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*“The language of conservation, climate action, and carbon capture is being led by those who have the most to benefit from turning it into an elite space. There are organizations that seek out partnerships with Indigenous communities to gain credibility, so that they can access funds. Often these relationships are predatory: they end up funding a canoe trip for three days, and with the rest of the money they do research that will further benefit their company.”*

*– Indigenous-led Organization Representative*

*“In the conservation space there are (non-Indigenous) people who have been involved for a couple of generations. They are of a generation who believe that they are good people, doing the best they can to help save the environment.*

*This thinking prevents them from recognizing the behaviours of white supremacy that they are complicit in upholding.”*

*– Indigenous-led Organization Representative*

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## Onerous Applications and Reporting



- Funding applications and reporting require too much detail for Indigenous organizations with limited capacity.
- Tight application timelines do not allow space or time to respect and follow community approaches and protocols.
- Indigenous communities are expected to do more than what is reasonable due to increased public interest, changes in engagement, and funder expectations.

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*“Federal funding agencies are still too Western viewpoint-oriented...they don't understand the more intangible pieces of Indigenous efforts. Instead, they must have copies of all the receipts and report progress in the 'squares' they provide.”*

*– Partnering Organization Representative*

*“Funding deadlines are a huge problem, especially if you have staff in First Nations who need to take things back to their leadership to confirm how to proceed. Sometimes big funding proposals involve community members, and you can't possibly hear back from them as quickly as the proposal deadlines require.”*

*– Partnering Organization Representative*

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## Navigating Worldviews and Colonial Harms



- Indigenous Peoples are rights-holders and not stakeholders.

- Funders must overcome the colonial separation of nature, people, and culture and understand that revitalizing culture will lead to positive land-based outcomes.
- Funders must gain a deeper understanding of Indigenous rights as well as distinct, place-based values, laws, and knowledge systems before engaging with Indigenous-led organizations and communities.
- Funders must commit to their own learning and understanding, rather than placing additional burdens on Indigenous-led organizations for guidance.

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*“[A] lack of foundational knowledge is really problematic.*

*The number one thing in the guiding principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is understanding the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP]. Anyone who wants to do supportive Indigenous conservation work needs to know what UNDRIP is, what it says, and how conservation should really be upholding the rights of Indigenous Peoples and access to their lands.”*

*– Indigenous Leader*

*“Settler-led funding organizations will often look to Indigenous organizations to tell them what to do to decolonize practices. We want quick answers and direction.*

*Instead, we have to take it upon ourselves to do our own learning without answers being handed to us.”*

*– Funder Representative*

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## **Insufficient, Short-Term Funding**



- Funders are restricted by Canadian charity regulations. Many Indigenous-led organizations do not

have charitable status and the registration process is onerous and lengthy. However, funders can push for policy changes and increase support for non-qualified donees.

- Constrained funding amounts and timelines hinder the cultivation of meaningful relationships between funders and Indigenous organizations. Short-term funding can perpetuate dependency and impede long-term financial and project sustainability.

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*“Foundation funders are constrained by Canadian laws. But if you are flexible and creative there are ways to support Nations. It can be extra difficult if a Nation doesn’t have the capacity; some want to set up a charity, but it takes more than a year to go through the process. Sometimes they must go through an existing charity.”*

*– Partnering Organization Representative*

*“Some Indigenous communities are so overwhelmed that donor timelines are not being met, expenses are not at the anticipated rate, and in some cases some work is not getting done with an attentiveness to the funding requirements.”*

*– Partnering Organization Representative*

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## Accountability



- Formal funding agencies often represent large corporations and not the communities they support. It is important for funders to be transparent about where the money comes from and to avoid “greenwashing.”<sup>2</sup>

\_\_\_\_\_ term for the creation of an illusion of environmental responsibility, often used to promote (Garrett, 2022).

- Indigenous organizations have expressed concerns that philanthropic organizations fund Indigenous-led conservation initiatives to serve their own agendas and reputations.

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*“One big shift we have made is creating mechanisms for accountability. In the original Declaration there was no financial benefit and no consequence for whether people did what they said they would. We have worked very hard in the last few years on developing learning opportunities tied to real action and related to real policy and practice.”*

*– Indigenous Leader*

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## Competition



- Limited funding opportunities for Indigenous-led conservation creates competition between Indigenous organizations.
- This competition diverts energy and attention away from reconciliation and conservation efforts.
- The colonial division of land has and continues to create conflict among and between Indigenous governments and communities.

## Considerations for Meaningful Funding Relationships: Fruit

## Conduct a Power Audit



- Inequitable power dynamics in colonial funder relationships stem from people as well as processes. Funders can rebalance this power in the following ways:

- Assess and evaluate their influence and control;
- Wait to be invited to collaborate with Indigenous-led organizations;
- Ensure their values align with those of grantees; and
- Redefine what 'success' looks like based on community needs.

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*"We owe it to ourselves to do deeper research on power, control, and accountability. If there are disagreements, one side (of the funder/fundee relationship) tends to get quiet. Until we understand the way power flows in decision-making and accountability, now and historically, it will be very hard to evaluate what the best way forward is. I haven't seen many power audits around the process of philanthropy. You can't manage movement in a positive direction if you can't measure."*

*– Funder Representative*

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## Prioritize Relationships



- Success should be measured by the quality of funder relationships, with less emphasis on quantitative outputs and metrics.
- There needs to be a shift from transactional relationships to ones grounded on respect, reciprocity, and responsibility.
- Listening, learning, and transparency are important elements for relationship building. For example, direct interaction, presence, and spending time 'on the land' and within Indigenous communities is an ideal way to develop and nurture trusting relationships.

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*"Listen and learn. Understand: how does the Nation operate, and how can we get funding to them that fits? If you're going to have a relationship you have to see people, go visit, test out ideas in the community, attend events in the community, break bread, find out what's important to them. It will help you see clear indications of what the people want."*

*– Partnering Organization Representative*

*"Critical to this are respectful, trusting open and honest conversations which are not always easy. It takes courage for people to say, 'this is not working', but it can be done in a kind and respectful way. I appreciate that spirit in my partners. They know that I have embedded assumptions that are problematic."*

*– Partnering Organization Representative*

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## Do Your 'Homework'



- Funders must do the work to understand the historic and continuing harms and impacts of colonialism. This could potentially help to decolonize the funding process. Understanding that colonialism is not a thing of the past is an important first step.
  - Funders must invest in cross-cultural training for the entire organization. This should include a critical reflection and assessment of the organization's inherent biases, assumptions, and approaches.
- Investing in organizational training and learning can help decrease the burden on Indigenous partners to bridge knowledge and understanding.

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*“Funders are listening. They are opening up conversations to understand what the barriers are and in what respect they are representative of a colonial mindset. It's learning to see where we are taking things for granted in the funding process; once you can see it, then it's a matter of addressing it.”*

*– Partnering Organization Representative*

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## Shift to Trust-based Philanthropy



- Many Indigenous-led organizations articulated a need for long-term, discretionary funding with flexibility on timelines and goals.
- Long-term, forward-thinking funding can translate to increased security, trust, and impact.

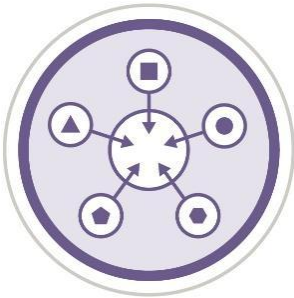
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*“We will be successful if we can shift the pendulum on who we are funding. Right now, we know that Indigenous-led work is getting a miniscule piece of the pie. If we have an ability to at least benchmark ourselves and change that piece of the pie, that’s a step in the right direction.”*

*– Funder Representative*

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## Take a Holistic Approach



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

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*“Critical culture and nature connections don’t lend themselves well to quantifiable measurable outcomes. You shut the door if the funder only wants to know about dollars spent and acres protected.”*

*– Partnering Organization Representative*

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## 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.

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*“We need more Indigenous power over philanthropy from diverse Indigenous leaders. Success is having someone in my job who is Indigenous. So much falls on Indigenous thinkers in the philanthropic space; it would be great to share these efforts...We need a whole lot of diverse Indigenous leaders leading in the philanthropic sector.”*

*– Funder Representative*

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## Indigenous-Led Philanthropy and Other Sustainable Funding Models

Indigenous-led funding efforts have a distinctly different tone from colonial mainstream philanthropy. In his book [Decolonizing Wealth](#), Edgar Villaneuva (2018) refers to “money as medicine” (pg. 7) – a way of achieving balance and facilitating exchange. In turn, this leads to a relationship between the giver and the receiver and a sense of sharing that transcends social and economic situations ([First Nations Development Institute, 2000](#)).

When asked about characteristics of sustainable, trust-based philanthropy, representatives from Indigenous-led organizations stressed the importance of sharing resources, eliminating hierarchical systems, and the role of fairness in giving.

The following organizations offer funding models that work to rebalance power and cultivate relationships, reciprocity, and respect.

### The Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund (IPRF)

The [Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund \(IPRF\)](#) emerged out of the COVID-19 pandemic with the aim of supporting Indigenous non-profits organizations without charitable status through the public health crisis.

According to a representative of the Fund, “The IPRF doesn’t use the term ‘granting’ because that has a power connotation. Instead, we use ‘supporting’. IPRF communities know what they need and have the brilliance to do what they need to — they may just lack opportunities.”

### The Circle on Philanthropy

The [Circle on Philanthropy](#) (The Circle) offers supports, learning opportunities and connections to “dream into a future that increases Indigenous-led solutions for systems change and increased equity, justice and self-determination.” ([The Circle, 2023](#)). Their [I4DM Definitonal Matrix](#) is a tool providing criteria that help determine whether an organization is Indigenous-benefiting, Indigenous-informed, in Indigenous partnership, or Indigenous-led.

The Matrix increases transparency for settler members about who they fund, and helps Indigenous members work with others in an empowered way, centred on Indigenous teachings, laws and relationships and ensuring accountability and ownership for their own work ([The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, 2022](#)).

## **The Deshkan Ziibi Conservation Impact Bond**

In an effort to address 85 percent habitat loss in Southern Ontario, the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Carolinian Canada, 3M Canada, Verge Capital and others partnered to create the Deshkan Ziibi Conservation Impact Bond.

As part of its establishment, healthy landscapes and measures of success were identified. ([Bevacqua, 2019](#)). Five 'evaluation pillars' speak to holistic impact, connecting healthy habitats, opportunities, knowledge/circling and learning, hearts and minds and bodies. ([Deshkan Ziibi Conservation Impact Bond Leadership Team, 2021](#)).

Then they sought financial partners, some of whom pay a fixed price when conservation outcomes are achieved on an ongoing basis. Others contributed to creating momentum initially, understanding that their funds would be returned when outcomes are achieved.

*“Current funding programs don't support nature in the way it needs to be supported. Colonial funding is fragmented; there is one stream for wetlands, one for forests, etc. It should be about simplifying conservation and making it available to everyone. Voluntary granting programs won't save the world. With the Conservation Impact Bond, we are trying to take funding out of 'handout' mode.”*

*- Partnered representative for the Deshkan Ziibi Conservation Impact Bond*

By mid-2021, the ecological, sociocultural, and economic impact of the initial phase was clear. The partnership completed 53 projects in the Deshkan Ziibi (Thames River) region. As a result, 69 hectares (171 acres) of habitat has been enriched, more than 39,000 native plants have been planted, and about 450 people have participated in land-based activities.

## The IPCA Development Fund

The [IPCA Development Fund](#) aims to financially support the creation of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) across Canada and the establishment of IPCA Innovation Centres ([MakeWay, 2024](#)). Conceived by the IISAAK OLAM Foundation and situated within the MakeWay Foundation as a Donor Advised Fund. The Fund's purpose is to create a sustainable funding system by encouraging endowed IPCAs to reinvest some of their earnings into a mother fund — called the IPCA Fund — once their individual project needs are complete (personal communication, IISAAK OLAM Foundation, 2020).

In addition to these reinvestments, which may come from ecosystem service fees, other contributions to the mother fund may be made by government, philanthropy or other private sector sources. The Fund's companion agency, the IPCA Innovation Program, takes the lead in developing IPCA Innovation Centres using resources generated from the Development Fund ([Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership, 2023](#)).

## Coast Funds

Coast Funds is another example of innovation in sustainable funding. Up to the 1990s, destructive settler logging practices in British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest and the Haida Gwaii archipelago resulted in significant degradation of the landscape. This landscape was the home of species including the Kermode (Spirit) Bear and 20 percent of the world's wild salmon. In turn, this affected the social and economic conditions of the area's First Nation communities, with unemployment rates at 80%, limited healthcare access and poor housing conditions. ([Coast Funds, 2023](#)).

In February 2006, following a decade of work by the B.C. government, First Nations, environmental groups and forest companies, a conservation finance agreement was announced, which would see \$60 million in private philanthropy donated to create the [Coast Conservation Endowment Fund Foundation](#). This would in turn leverage a further \$60 million in funding from the provincial and federal government for the Coast Economic Development Society ([Coast Funds, 2023](#)).

Coast Funds was created to manage these funds for social, cultural and economic well-being, to support healthy and vibrant communities and economies in tandem with conservation of the Nations homelands ([Coast Funds, 2023](#)).

Nations also have income from interest earned from their funding allocation within the [Coast Conservation Endowment Fund Foundation](#) (CCEFF). This interest enables Nations to accomplish their Indigenous-led stewardship activities.

## **Right Relations Collaborative**

The [Right Relations Collaborative](#) (RRC) works to break down the colonial structures of philanthropic giving. The collaborative currently serves communities in the Haida, Haíłzaqv, Nuxalk, T̓silhqot'in, Ts'msyen, Secwepemc, and W̓SÁNEĆ homelands ([Right Relations Collaborative, 2024](#)).

The Right Relations Collaborative is guided by the Council of Aunties, who create a space for learning and relationship building. They urge prospective funders to examine the sources of their wealth, discard harmful funding practices that uphold inequity and power imbalances, and make a strong commitment to build anti-colonial, right relationships with Indigenous partners ([Right Relations Collaborative, 2024](#)).

Once funders are vetted by the Council of Aunties through an Engagement Framework and other assessments, they are invited to make a three-year (preferably five-year) commitment to the Collective and their Pooled Fund that directly supports Indigenous community-based organizations ([Right Relations Collaborative, 2024](#)).

The Pooled Fund offers multi-year, unrestricted financial support along with co-learning opportunities with Indigenous knowledge-holders, direct engagements with funder partners (vetted by the collaborative), and participate in initiatives such as Auntie Camp ([Right Relations Collaborative, 2024](#)).

## Resources

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