IN SOLIDARITY INSIGHT

Countering centuries of oppression with resistance and reclamation

Featuring Nick Tilsen, founder and CEO of the NDN Collective.

Transcript

[00:00:00.46] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:06.04] This is In Solidarity, a podcast where we draw connections between power, place, and health and discuss how our lives, our fates, are all interconnected.

[00:00:17.04] Hi, everyone, and welcome to In Solidarity, a podcast from County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, a national program from the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. I'm Ericka Burroughs-Girardi, your host. Our culture, our language, our history, and our health and well-being are all deeply connected to where we are born and the places we call home, tethered in strictly to the land itself. And here in the United States, the story of the land is fraught with the violence of colonization, centuries of theft, the murder of millions, and the destruction of Indigenous' peoples communities that occupied North America for thousands of years before others arrived, since time immemorial.

[00:01:12.40] In this episode, we're covering the Land Back Movement. The episode continues conversation from our January 2025 webinar, which marked the National Day of Racial Healing and focused on this movement. We're grateful to be bringing you this conversation on our podcast today.

[00:01:33.24] In the US, Land Back is a social movement that calls for the return of the nation's land, especially federal public lands, to Native American and tribal ownership. It's a concept that's also known as land return, land restitution, or land reparations.

[00:01:55.80] And many questions surround the Land Back movement, such as is what does land reclamation look like? How does it help improve health and build power? And how do we actually get there? To find out, we'll talk with Nick Tilson.

[00:02:14.09] Nick is a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation. He is the founder, president, and CEO of the Indian Collective. This Indigenous-led organization is dedicated to building Indigenous power through organizing, activism, philanthropy, grant making, capacity building, and narrative change.

[00:02:41.81] Nick, I've been so excited about this conversation. So thank you for joining us.

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[00:02:47.37] Absolutely. Happy to be on.

[00:02:49.85] Well, let's start with some grounding. Tell us about your work at the Indian Collective. And how did the organization start, and what do you do?

[00:03:00.37] Yeah, so the Indian Collective is an international organization dedicated to building Indigenous power. And it grew out of the community-based, place-based work that I was doing in my home community on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. And it grew out of that place. And what happened was so many communities and people were reaching out to us about what we were doing at this organization, at the time called Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation.

[00:03:27.89] And they wanted to do something similar to what we were doing, but within the context of their own tribe, their own climate, their own culture and their own place. We didn't have a whole lot of capacity. We didn't have resources to share. We were kind of just doing our thing in community grassroots on the ground. And we were building a community from scratch at that time.

[00:03:49.51] And so we wanted to build an organization that could answer this call and help build the capacity of Indigenous-led movements who were bleeding that work. And when we say building Indigenous power, what we mean is like throughout the process of colonization, they took the decision-making power away from Indigenous people to make decisions over our lives, our land, our education system, community safety, food, all of these different things. And so part of us is reclaiming that power, reclaiming our decision-making power over our lands and our people and our communities. And so Indian Collective invests into that.

[00:04:27.25] And so we support grassroots organizers. We support local community developers. We support tribal leaders. We support people that are doing this work in the ground, and we invest into their self-determination. And we both do that through grant making, but we do that through lending too. We have a lending arm of Indian.

[00:04:44.79] We also do that through organizing and running our own campaigns. And then we do that through training and capacity and power building at the same time too.

[00:04:54.55] So that is the origins of our work. And now, we've been in existence now for seven years. We have over 1,400 partners that we support throughout North America from all 50 states to American Samoa, to Guam, to Puerto Rico, to Mexico to Canada, all the way to the Arctic Village and Alaska and support the work of Indigenous self-determination and power building throughout that part of the world.

[00:05:28.50] That's amazing-- over 1,400 groups. So, yeah, thank you for the work that you do. And one of the movements that you're spearheading is called the Land Back Movement. What is the Land Back Movement, and what are the goals?

[00:05:47.34] So the Land Back Movement is a movement that is about the return of stolen Indigenous lands back into Indigenous hands and to help create a path towards liberation and freedom for

Indigenous people, because throughout the process of the act of stealing the land, they took decision-making power over our people. And then they imposed systems, settler colonial systems of why our people continue to be disenfranchised in these systems to this very day. And then you see that translate into the indicators, like in the social determinants of health.

[00:06:28.14] Lower life expectancies, higher diabetes rates, higher infant mortality rates-- and people don't understand how intertwined land is to all of those things, because land was the means that we use to feed ourselves. It was our economic engine. It was used as our trade. We didn't operate off of the capitalistic models that we do today, but we did have economic systems that were founded in trade and land stewardship and the implementation of traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge and land stewardship practices.

[00:07:05.99] And so when we think about the Land Back movement, it's really about reclaiming what they stole from us. It's a reclaiming of our identity and our language and our governance structures, our ability to be able to enact in our own self-determination. And so the Land Back Movement is about those things, and it's about the liberation of our people.

[00:07:24.73] When we say liberation, we're talking about reclaiming those things. It's not about transactional. Just get this particular piece of land back for this specific thing.

[00:07:35.79] We're not just talking about real estate transactions here. We're talking about the methodology. We're talking about actually understanding that for there to be repair between this country and the Indigenous people of this land, there needs to be truth. There can't be reconciliation without truth.

[00:07:55.27] And so part of land back is it's a framework. It's a meta framework to have a conversation about what does it mean? And if in the reality is, if people aren't ready to have a conversation about the founding of this country, this country's economic system, and about how the land was stolen and the resources extracted from this stolen land to then build this economy that we now operate under, they're not ready to have a conversation about race and repair, not really to have a conversation about that.

[00:08:31.73] So Land Back is a movement that puts the core of what happened to us as Indigenous people on the dinner table right away. And it's become something that our identity is very much bound up into. And it's an intergenerational movement, because although we put the words land back together, the truth is ancestors and elders for generations before have been fighting for our land ever since it was taken from us. It's the story of every Indian person, every Indian Nation everywhere. And so it's about a movement to make sure that erasure doesn't continue and that it puts what we're fighting for right out there in the open.

[00:09:13.81] Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, I love what you said. We have to start with the truth first before we can build anything and move forward. Yeah, I can definitely appreciate that. And you also made this connection between the land and our health, like birth outcomes and other health outcomes.

[00:09:33.85] I love how you pointed out that our health outcomes are tied to place where we are, the land, what has happened to us, and our history. That is all tied together. And what does Land Back Movement think that land reclamation can do? How can it help improve health? How can it undo some of those harms related to health?

[00:10:00.48] At one point, we were like, prior colonization, we were some of the healthiest people in the world. If you look at historically, some of the tallest, healthiest people, like in the world came from the Great Plains, and most of it was based on diet. The backbone and primary of that diet was the buffalo or bison-- really, really lean-- so very low in fat and very rich in protein and nutrients.

[00:10:25.68] And it wasn't just the buffalo, but it was the lifestyle that we had on the land. So it was a nomadic lifestyle. We didn't aimlessly follow the buffalo.

[00:10:35.54] The reality is Lakota people and Indigenous people of North America were in a symbiotic relationship where the natural stewards of the actual ecosystem of the environment was the buffalo. At one point in the North America, there was 60 million buffalo. And they were natural stewards of the land. So they tilled up the soil whenever they would run.

[00:11:00.00] The rain would seep in. The plants would grow taller. Our average plants and traditional plants, foods and herbs and our natural grasses, in some places were 4 feet tall. The Great Plains and the ecosystem look entirely different.

[00:11:15.36] And so we were healthy because we were-- and we would dry that meat, that buffalo meat, and we would eat. We would eat dried buffalo meat throughout the day, sometimes about six times a day.

[00:11:26.56] People think of buffalo and think, well, these Indians had these big, huge feasts. We probably had a feast around the time that we had to hunt, but other than that, we were consuming smaller amounts of food more times. We were really, really healthy.

[00:11:42.48] And in order to restore buffalo back onto the land, we have to get land back because buffalo are a societal animal. They operate in societies. They're not like cows. They operate in societies. So the more land you have, the better.

[00:11:58.72] And so by increasing land base, you can reinstitute buffalo. You can rebuild healthy food systems. You can get away from processed food. And then all of a sudden, you do that over a period of time, and you can have direct impacts on health.

[00:12:15.16] You can decrease diabetes rates. You can increase the quality of life that we have. You can decrease infant mortality rates, increase the amount of hours that kids are playing and exercising.

[00:12:31.74] There's all this data out there in the health equity movement that talks about here's things that you could actively do that actually directly affects the social determinants of health. And the reality

is, Land Back is one of those intertwining things that has the ability to do that. And that's how we've been able to see as we've gotten land back, more and more tribes and people are restarting buffalo herds, rebuilding food systems, and rebuilding their connection to the land.

[00:13:01.75] So it's not just for the sake of putting your fist in the air and saying, land back. It's about land back for the rebuilding of our societies and our systems and our economic systems and food systems. That affects our health.

[00:13:16.85] How do you define power?

[00:13:20.57] Power-- oh, this is an interesting one. I go back and forth on this one about how I define power. In part, our ancestors, I looked at the old way. What was the old way in which we referred to power or referred to even creator?

[00:13:41.57] And in Lakota, you would sit there and you would see the wind come, and the wind would move the leaves on the tree. And our ancestors would be like [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. And what that would mean is the mystery that's causing that movement to happen.

[00:14:00.49] And to me, that was referring not to us power. It's referring to this idea that one creator, it doesn't matter. We don't have to identify creator as a he or she or they that there is a mystery out there. There's a higher power, and it has the ability to create movement. And that movement has the ability to build ecosystems and build.

[00:14:28.73] And so I think about power as the interconnected relationship between people, land, and the ancestors. And that's how I think about power. And so when I think about building power, I think about how are-- how are you rebuilding the connection between those things? How are you braiding the connection between those things together in a way that creates forward momentum for your family, your community, your people? So that's how I define power and how I think about-- how I think about power.

[00:15:04.41] Yeah, let's talk a little bit more about the power and how you define it. How are you using power to help propel this movement for improving health?

[00:15:16.57] Yeah, so I think it's part of this reclamation. It's like we're in this period of time where they tried to completely-- prior to this period era that we're in, they tried to destroy Indian people.

[00:15:30.61] They tried to wipe us out. They tried to murder us. They tried to do all these things. And they couldn't do that successfully.

[00:15:39.27] We resisted. We put our ceremonies underground. We did these different things to ensure our survival as a people. And no matter what they did to try to wipe us out, they were unsuccessful at doing that.

[00:15:52.55] And so now we're in this era of reclaiming, reclaiming our power that we always knew was inside of us. But part of that is also healing. So we have to be able to heal because our generations of our families have went through deep settler colonialism in which they were murdering and killing our people, separating, breaking down the familial structure, putting us in boarding schools to try to wipe our database clean or wipe our mind clean from our identity. And so we're in this process of reclaiming that.

[00:16:33.96] And you think about that through that process, we also became-- our bodies became a reflection of the colonization of our people. So the sicknesses, our health, all of these things became the things that all of a sudden, our bodies started reflecting how our people were treated. And so many of our people have been sick, and many people have been unhealthy and all these things.

[00:17:04.52] And so being able to start making those changes has been a key. But part of it is also this element to that we're worthy. We're worthy of living strong, healthy lives and strong, healthy bodies and being the warriors that we once were.

[00:17:24.18] And I think that this connection to power and this connection to work is about this reclaiming. Because if we can reclaim the power to make decisions over what we put in our bodies, how we take care and balance our lives, then all of a sudden, we can live longer, and we can fight for social justice. We can change these systems, but we also have to embody those things too. And then we have to pay it forward and create opportunities for other people to be able to do that.

[00:17:54.18] And so I think that in the Land Back Movement, often health is talked about, especially as it relates to this system-- this rebuilding of this symbiotic system, because I think that capitalism and settler colonialism really creates isolation. It really creates isolation and that we're trying to break down that isolation and recognize that all systems and all things are actually interrelated and that we have to build and make decisions in an understanding that things are interrelated with one another. And that will give us the ability to really begin to get stronger and healthier. So that's where I've seen it be, the cross intersection, whether it be Indigenous education models.

[00:18:43.86] Most community-based models for Indigenous education have a land-based learning models now that they basically say, hey, education and land-based learning needs to be integrated into all aspects of curriculum, and so does the food that the kids eat in school because then their readiness to learn is going to be increased. And therefore, they're going to absorb more information, whether it be academic or whether it be cultural or whether it be both. I've seen those things really begin to interact in our work quite a bit.

[00:19:17.15] And I'm seeing that the reclaiming of the land is also just as important as reclaiming the culture. They're all linked. And I'm seeing that as the way you describe that-- reclaiming the land, reclaiming the culture. How can and why should public health support this movement and others like it?

[00:19:39.91] I think that what we've learned, like in the health equity movement and the public health movement, is this idea that so many of these problems that we're faced with, they are interrelated. It's why people are doing supportive housing instead of trying to criminalize the homeless or the unsheltered. Well, if people are being progressive, that's what they're trying to do, because then people

see this as a massive actually health thing because it creates a huge drain on the health system if people don't have access to housing. And we treat housing like a human right, and all of a sudden, people actually have that place to sleep and rest and prepare food and eat and get their basic needs met.

[00:20:28.11] And I think that one of the realities is that the commodification of land by capitalism, supported by the governance structures that were then created by settler colonialism, that structure has created detrimental health problems. It's one of the reasons why all of America is in a health crisis. And it's also why there's a massive need for a public health overhaul, because it's draining the system. And then people are fighting over where to allocate tax dollars whenever the reality is that we actually have to look at the whole system. And I think public health is beginning to understand the interrelatedness between these systems.

[00:21:17.16] And I think that land is an important part of the glue that holds that all together. Because why is it that land has been commodified so much that in inner cities, it creates gentrification? Gentrification then creates people who are unsheltered, who might have lived there for generations. Yet they're the people that you're seeing, asking you for money, and then you're treating them like they're not human beings when the reality is it's a product of a system that is not working.

[00:21:49.80] And I think that public health and the public health movement is beginning to understand a bigger context of what that looks like. And I think that when we start to get into land and how we utilize land to feed people, how we utilize land to house people, how we utilize land to meet basic needs, how we utilize land to rebuild ecosystems, the rebuilding of ecosystems actually can improve our health. There's so many traditional plants, foods, herbs, medicines that you can use if you rebuild these ecosystems and steward off of the land that are preventative. Because that's the other thing that I think that in the public health movement that's key is that I think people have realized that this idea of, oh, I'm sick now.

[00:22:40.88] So now I need to use all these medicines, quote unquote, "to get well," as opposed to the data shows if you actually work towards preventative models, it's always going to be better. That's what the data and public health field shows.

[00:22:53.08] So then let's create models. Let's create models where prevention is a way of life, where we're creating a way of life with each other in our connection to land. So then we're not trying to solve these problems with overpriced medicines later that are subsidized and create all kinds of infighting over taxes. And so there's opportunity here. That's the thing I would say that excites me the most about the cross intersection of Land Back and the public health field.

[00:23:20.56] Nick, one of the things I've often heard is that there's just some confusion or maybe some misconceptions about what the Land Back Movement is. And can you share a little bit more about what's really underneath the movement?

[00:23:36.76] When we say the words land back, it seems like all of a sudden, especially white folks, their fragility kicks in. And they're like, wait, land back. Like you're coming for my house? We'll lock the door and look out the blinds. When the reality is it's like, no, you're missing the point.

[00:23:58.43] Yeah.

[00:24:00.09] And I think that is important that we demystify land back and understand that it's actually about right and wrong. We have to acknowledge that the stealing of land in this country was fundamentally unjust, that the United States of America in its dealings and relationship with Indigenous people, not only did they just like, quote unquote, "steal the land," they violated their own US Constitution in the process of stealing the land. And they actually weakened American democracy in the process, because there's over 600 treaties signed between Indian nations and the United States.

[00:24:43.01] And Article 6 of the United States Constitution states that treaties are the supreme law of the land. So every single treaty violation is a violation to the US Constitution. And every time that you continue to erode the Constitution, you actually erode the democracy, and you erode people's relationship to the democracy. And I think that you end up having a situation in this country where now democracy is at stake. The American democracy is now at stake.

[00:25:14.05] And as Indigenous people, we believe in democracy. In fact, one of the biggest historical. We were the innovators of democracy. Most of the American democracy and the Constitution of the United States was inspired by Indigenous governance systems. And most people don't know that because of the active erasure of Indigenous people to erase us from history.

[00:25:37.37] And so this movement creates ability for-- to create a path for Enlightenment for us all as a people and all of us as human beings, at a time where we need each other, as a time where we need each other to rely on one another and to cause us to innovate and create something new that works for all of us.

[00:25:56.77] And so I think that there's a lot of opportunity in these hard conversations. They're worth it to have conversations about truth. Because if you can have conversations about truth, then you can have conversations about repair and reconciliation. And if you can do reconciliation, then you have the ability to innovate something new that works for everybody. And I think that's what we want. That's what we want and what we want to see in the world.

[00:26:20.35] This has been a fascinating conversation, Nick. Thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:26:27.05] Absolutely. It's an honor to be on here. And I really do appreciate you reaching out and especially this purpose of being able to connect the public health movement that is so important for the survival of people everywhere to the Land Back Movement that is equally important to the survival of people everywhere. And I really appreciate the opportunity to be invited on the show. Thank you.

[00:26:53.30] Thank you. Wow, it was an honor to have Nick share with us all the ways that the Indian Collective and the Land Back Movement have organized Indigenous communities together to make their voices heard. Shift power and prosper. I'm Ericka, and thank you for joining us on In Solidarity.

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