

First Stewards: Caring for our Homelands

BUDDY POCKNETT: Connection to the land is the way I was brought up; I was always raised to get all my food from the land. I'm a gardener, I get fish, I hunt, I forage; 80% of my food actually comes from the wild. I barely ever go to the grocery store still today. So, it's really important to keep all that stuff intact, it's really important to the Indigenous people to stay on their diet. When you go off your correct diet as [an] Indigenous person and start eating the foods that your body wants, then you start getting sick. I'm 65 and I'm healthy as a 22-year-old.

KAREN LOMBARD: You're listening to *Nature is the Solution*, a podcast from The Nature Conservancy. It's a show about how nature can help solve some of our biggest challenges. I'm Karen Lombard, director of stewardship and restoration for The Nature Conservancy in Massachusetts.

Much of the history of conservation has been built on the idea of separation: people on one side, land on the other. Protecting nature has often meant fencing it off, keeping humans out and letting it be, but that ignored the long history of people interacting with and caring for land.

In the last fifty years, conservation organizations have brought some people back to the land to do active restoration and management, but much of this work is done by professionals in land stewardship, such as myself. This has overlooked the vital role and longstanding knowledge of Indigenous People who have cared for and safeguarded land for generations.

And at the top of the show, you just heard from Buddy Pocknett, someone who's a bit of an expert in this. He's the Sagamore for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. We met up with him along the Mashpee River, where he told us that the Indigenous community's connections to the land is exactly why his tribe has as a stake in protecting it. For him, it's about survival.

BUDDY POCKNETT: Survival, that's what it is. It's—you're gonna have areas that you're gonna be able to harvest food from.

KAREN LOMBARD: This isn't an abstract conversation about conservation for Buddy. It's a dialogue about home and the home the next generation will inherit.

BUDDY POCKETT: The story is—that I have is—right here, I grew up in the yellow house up above, and all this area was kind of my playground. So, I could go down here and I could catch frogs or go over here and catch eels. That type of childhood, stuff that I love to do, is no longer here because of the polluted areas and the water. A lot of that stuff is gone and I can't teach my grandchildren to do that. So, it's very important for us to get these back together so I can teach my grandchildren when we walk the rivers.

[music]

KAREN LOMBARD: Native Land Conservancy is the first Native American-led land conservation group east of the Mississippi River. The Nature Conservancy is part of a new partnership established in 2024—at the request of Native Land Conservancy—called the Cape Cod and Island First Light Collective. This group of over a dozen organizations is committed to relearning history, recentering Indigenous leadership and returning land, resources and access to the Indigenous communities in southeastern Massachusetts.

Native Land Conservancy approaches conservation through the lens of maintaining Indigenous connection to place. They're a land trust focused on protecting land that is important both ecologically significant and culturally significant to Indigenous communities.

PAULA PETERS: I'm Paula Peters. I am the communications and programs coordinator for Native Land Conservancy and looking forward to spending the day with you.

KAREN LOMBARD: We spent the day with them, recording this podcast, starting at their headquarters in Mashpee, where Paula Peters showed us around.

PAULA PETERS: Here in our office you can see we have on display a number of the properties that we have rescued.

KAREN LOMBARD: She told us about many of the projects the organization has protected, like the Wampanoag Common lands in Kingston, Massachusetts.

PAULA PETERS: And that's a really significant property that I think we'll talk more about, because it is property that we hold for the Wampanoag Nation, so all

Wampanoag tribes to come and use that land for purposes of ceremony, for recreation, for camping, for hunting, for all kinds of purposes.

KAREN LOMBARD: It's important to note that although Native Land Conservancy is based in Mashpee, it's not officially part of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. The organization works to bring people and their land together across Indigenous communities.

PAULA PETERS: We preserve not just the land, but the culture. That's part of understanding why the land is important.

KAREN LOMBARD: Paula sees this idea in action when the organization hosts workshops that inspire people get their hands dirty.

PAULA PETERS: When we're putting our hands in the clay to create something, we're really engaging with the earth in a way that our ancestors did. So, we're engaging with DNA of our ancestors from thousands and thousands of years. They've also touched this clay, they've also touched this Earth.

KAREN LOMBARD: When land is protected, human use of that land is usually restricted. In some ways, this is good because it gives ecosystems room to recover. But if we recognize the deep connection between people and the land, that approach can get complicated.

Native Land Conservancy has championed what's known as Cultural Respect Easements. Here's Diana Ruiz, executive director of Native Land Conservancy.

DIANA RUIZ: Cultural Respect Easements are a legally binding agreement that guarantees Indigenous People's cultural access to parts of their ancestral homelands. It gets recorded with the deed and runs in perpetuity with the land, and within that Cultural Respect Easement, landholders are honoring and respecting Indigenous People's unique cultural connection to the land and guaranteeing certain practices will always be protected. Whether that's doing ceremony to renew their connection with the land or harvesting plants for medicinal or consumptive purposes.

KAREN LOMBARD: This is a relatively new concept, especially on the East Coast. Native Land Conservancy recorded their first cultural respect agreement in 2016. Yet, it's core to what they do as cultural use of the land is part of the organization's mission. Here's NLC founder Ramona Peters.

RAMONA PETERS: A lot of our culture and ceremonies are outlawed by the Federal Government. Through time, we've experienced a lot of opposition towards our culture, and so its survival is—has always been challenged. And so, we offer the land to be used for cultural practices so that people will be safe and free to do that.

[music]

KAREN LOMBARD: Much of the land that is culturally significant to the Wampanoag and other Indigenous nations is no longer in Indigenous hands. Centuries of western colonization, land theft and development have made it difficult to maintain that relationship with place, and to practice the traditions tied to it. Paula gave us a tour of the Mashpee Wampanoag Museum and shared how a lot of that land loss occurred

PAULA PETERS: People came to them and said: Hey, you know what? I'll give you \$50 and I'll hold the title on this land in a mortgage, and when you pay me the \$50 back, you can have it back. Not explaining that there's interest on that, and there's a date that it's gotta come back and all of the legalities of what that is. There were a lot of land losses that way—a lot of people benefited. Then there was obviously back taxes because people didn't have an understanding of what it meant to be a land owner. We come from people who never owned land. Land was familial to us, it was something we cared for, it's not something that we kept. So, without that understanding, lots of land was lost.

KAREN LOMBARD: Native Land Conservancy created a landholder toolkit for tribal members. It helps landowners understand their options, whether that means putting their land into conservation, transferring it to the next generation, or exploring other ways to keep it in Indigenous hands.

PAULA PETERS: By having a landholder toolkit and being able to relate directly to tribe members, a part of that is engendering trust between our organization and the tribal people.

[music]

PAULA PETERS: Yeah, we're ready to go out into the world.

KAREN LOMBARD: At this point in the day, we were ready to go outside. We walked to the car to visit a new site that NLC will be protecting.

PAULA PETERS: My sunglasses are in my car, so I'm gonna go grab them. We're gonna ride in this vehicle right here.

KAREN LOMBARD: We rode through the center of town.

PAULA PETERS: This used to be the center of Mashpee where we're going through now, where this Baptist churches and the town hall.

KAREN LOMBARD: Until we got to 82 Great Neck Road, the property NLC recently purchased.

PAULA PETERS: When I was a kid, I lived right over that hill and I used to take this road and this was not just a path, but this was a road—an ancient way. I could walk from my house to my Aunt Amelia's house on the other side of the river, and then auntie actually built a bridge, well, her husband built a bridge at one point, so that we could cross over. So it's not just a river, but it connects our community. It has always been connecting us. Anyway...

JAY FEINSTEIN: It sounds like it's like such a cultural centerpiece of this town and the community.

PAULA PETERS: Very much so.

KAREN LOMBARD: That's our podcast producer, Jay Feinstein, who was along for the ride.

PAULA PETERS: Very much the cultural centerpiece of the town, especially where it connects with the Mashpee Wakeby Pond. I know Chief E. likes to talk about that being the confluence of two waterways.

KAREN LOMBARD: The property is adjacent to the Mashpee River, a central waterway for the community. There's the environmental case for protecting the land: The fact that it has recently faced some water quality issues due to nutrient runoff. But there's also the cultural significance. As we walked down to the river, Paula shared stories of her childhood by the river.

PAULA PETERS: A lot of people go to the pond to swim or the ocean to swim. I loved swimming in the river. Of course, it's not deep anywhere, but in the corners of the river where it pooled up real deep, we just lay there and let the water flow over us.

KAREN LOMBARD: And it's not hard to understand why so many people have connected with this land. Standing by the water, you feel at peace.

PAULA PETERS: You get to experience its sound, its clarity, its beauty, and just this whole ecosystem—the birds—and in the spring, this is where the herring come. And the river, when I was a kid, I remember the river would just get black with fish and we don't get quite that many herring anymore, which is unfortunate. My dad used to say it was so black with fish, you could walk across their backs to the other side and never get wet. We would go to the edge of the river [as] little kids—it was the first fish I ever caught. I think for a lot of Wampanoag kids, that's the first fish they catch because you just step right into the water and you dip your hands in, scoop 'em up. And it's a great part of our heritage, the herring, my dad used to call it “Mashpee turkey”. We feasted on these fish, especially the—even though they're really bony, they're tasty.

KAREN LOMBARD: River herring are culturally significant to the Wampanoag. Current numbers of fish are a fraction of those that swam here a century ago.

PAULA PETERS: And these are fish that—they go halfway around the world. They're born here, they're born in the Mashpee Pond. They leave, they go out thousands of miles, swim around and somehow or another, they know in three years to come back here. But if we can't protect the place where they spawn, we're not gonna get them to come back.

JAY FEINSTEIN: So in a way, some of this land protection that we're talking about today helps the herring, too.

PAULA PETERS: Not in a way, directly, it helps the herring. Everything that we do to protect the integrity of this river and the water and the pond helps to sustain the herring,

JAY FEINSTEIN: Which then goes on to sustain the rest of the lands and people.

PAULA PETERS: Exactly. A lot of people don't understand why it's so important to protect things in nature, whether it be, you know—this is all the circle of life, we're all part of the circle of life and in the Indigenous tradition, we are, as people, no more important in that circle of life than that herring or that tree or that grass.

We're all sustaining one another and if you take any part of that circle of life out, it weakens the rest of the circle of life. It's just something that we know and understand.

KAREN LOMBARD: Looking out at the river, walking through the land and breathing its fresh air, it all makes sense. Of course we want to protect a place like this.

PAULA PETERS: I think that if more people were able to come out and experience the land in this way, they wouldn't be so dismissive of efforts to protect the land. We just had a big town meeting and there were people who came to the town meeting and just vehemently opposed an effort to construct a wastewater treatment facility that was going to help to protect the pond.

And they had all kinds of crazy ideas why it was not a good idea. But we've waited a really long time here for these kinds of efforts to really gain a foothold and it's really starting to happen, and that was reassuring. We were able to see that pass, that measure did pass, and that was very reassuring. But, it takes a lot, it's a lot of work, and I think part of that work is bringing people to the land, bringing people out and getting away from their TVs and their cell phones and being out here. I could stay here all day.

KAREN LOMBARD: As we were talking, Paula spotted a crushed beer can in the distance, walked over to pick it up and tucked it away to recycle later. This is exactly the kind of small, everyday care she brings to this work.

PAULA PETERS: It is a Bud Light [laughter]. You would recognize it [laughter].

ASA PETERS: I've seen the stars, you know [laughter].

KAREN LOMBARD: The second voice there is Asa Peters. He's the land and cultural knowledge caretaker for Native Land Conservancy.

ASA PETERS: You can see a lot of motion in the water right now. It's a calming sight, [a] calming sound for sure.

KAREN LOMBARD: As we looked out at the water, he had his own reflection about his connection to the land. Here, he's specifically talking about a recent visit to the islands on Mashpee Wakeby Ponds, which Native Land Conservancy holds the deed for.

ASA PETERS: A lot of people use the pond every day, but it was very quiet and calm in that moment. And that felt like a place—a small island—that's like: I know this place very well, as if it were a house or something, as if it were one of my homes or office, where you know where everything's at—and all the little corners and hallways. And so, I've been thinking about this question just the other day about that because it felt so familiar that I could almost forget: is this right now, or is this back last year, a year ago when I was here last? Because it just felt so familiar, it reminded me of deeper moments that I've had there, so...

PAULA PETERS: We do have a deep connection to this land, culturally, and we didn't—I don't know that we needed this proven to ourselves—but archeological evidence places our people here for more than 12,000 years, and to be Wampanoag and to be here, we feel that. It's not just—it didn't need to be told to us by some scientist.

[music]

KAREN LOMBARD: Another NLC priority is restoring bulrush to the area. It's an aquatic reed that Indigenous communities, including the Wampanoag, would use to for example line their wetus, which are traditional domed houses.

PAULA PETERS: It's an aquatic reed, it holds moisture and with the fire inside it would hold the heat, and on a hot day when there was no fire inside, when the wind would come through, it would actually cool the inside of the house.

KAREN LOMBARD: We visited a reproduction of a Wampanoag-style wetu. All of us huddled inside the wetu as Paula showed us an unfinished woven piece made from bulrush.

JAY FEINSTEIN: Where within the wetu would we see the bulrush?

PAULA PETERS: It would be hanging on the walls or it would be hanging here. I'm stepping on it—like this—and this is an unfinished one, so you can't really see the full—oh, what kind of bug is that? It's kind of cute—obviously it needed some finishing on it, but you get the idea that this is the way that they're made.

KAREN LOMBARD: Not far from the wetu, there's some bulrush growing in another part of the Mashpee River.

SEQUON WEEDEN: So, this is very young bulrush, so [it] looks like grass right now. You wouldn't really be able to tell the difference between this and grass, but as this would grow, it would become a lot taller and a lot thicker. So, you would feel this and it would be much more hollow than it is now since it's not that big.

KAREN LOMBARD: That's Sequon Weeden, a Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe member and a former Native Land Conservancy intern. He tells us that when bulrush is fully grown, it will be six feet tall, or even taller. He was part of a project that reintroduced bulrush, hoping to understand how it could once again take root and thrive here. Bulrush is personal to him.

SEQUON WEEDEN: My mom worked at Plymouth Plantation when I was born. And so, when I was born I was running around Plymouth Plantation, learning about native culture, and one of the things that my mom was always working on was bullrush mats. And so, I know the importance of bulrush and since it's so close to me, when I heard that this project was coming up, I immediately knew which project to do. So this was a project that I chose for my internship.

KAREN LOMBARD: After reintroducing bullrush to the area, he and his team counted and measured plants, and recorded water temperature, salinity and pH. Projects like this are laying the groundwork to help bulrush survive and thrive, even with pressure from invasive species.

PAULA PETERS: It has been pushed out by other invasive species like phragmites, which was brought here by the colonists because, ironically, they used that in building their houses and they made their thatched roofs out of the phragmites reed, which now is taken over all over the place. So the places where bulrush grows are much fewer and farther between.

JAY FEINSTEIN: What do you think the impact of land conservation might be on bulrush?

SEQUON WEEDEN: Hopefully it will improve bulrush's populations because this is also food source for some animals and to continue making these plants thrive mean that also other animals and other plants may also thrive.

KAREN LOMBARD: A few weeks later, our podcast producer, Jay, and I talked about our visit in the recording studio. We discussed TNC's partnership with NLC.

JAY FEINSTEIN: It was so much fun spending the day with Native Land Conservancy. Tell me, why does The Nature Conservancy partner with NLC?

KAREN LOMBARD: Nature Conservancy works with Indigenous Peoples around the world, actually, and that makes a lot of sense because Indigenous Peoples have been here for generations. They deeply know the land and how to protect and manage it. Indigenous People collectively manage one quarter of the world's lands, and this includes 17% of all forest carbon and vast stretches of fresh water and marine habitats. They've been stewarding these lands for thousands of years, and as conservation organizations, land trusts have really only existed for a little bit over 100 years, so there is so much to learn in this area. And it's also the right thing to do; as the United States

was developed, Indigenous People lost all their land and some of that land lost was to conservation organizations.

JAY FEINSTEIN: You mentioned this at the very beginning of the show, but essentially, for a long time, conservation organizations, when they conserved land, they were like: this is nature without people, this is nature by itself—but that’s not really how it’s always worked. For a long time, land has been conserved with people on it and this whole podcast is about how nature and people work together, it sounds like this is really part of that story.

KAREN LOMBARD: It is part of that story, that’s why The Nature Conservancy works with Indigenous Peoples and local communities, because in the long term, who’s going to be there taking care of these lands? It’s going to be the people that live on the lands.

JAY FEINSTEIN: So this is really a priority for The Nature Conservancy. A priority is to make sure that all of the stakeholders that are involved in all these different issues around conservation—about land, about protecting water, about protecting species, conservation, biodiversity—that all of these stakeholders have a seat at the table. You want to make sure that this isn’t a top-down approach, this is really inclusive of all voices. Is that—am I understanding that correctly?

KAREN LOMBARD: Yes, I think that’s a theme that runs through these podcasts, and this is how we think about durable conservation. If you just fence people out, what’s gonna happen when you have economic challenges or difficulties? It’s the local people who are going to take care of that land, if they care about it, in perpetuity.

JAY FEINSTEIN: We mentioned earlier in the show that one of the pieces of land that NLC protects is the Wompanaug Common Lands, and you’ve been there, right?

KAREN LOMBARD: Yes, it was a really moving visit for me. When I first started at The Nature Conservancy in 1999, I did some stewardship work on that land. We had hoped to protect it and so, I did a management plan and went out and removed invasive species and monitored rare plants, but then the land deal didn’t happen and I went on to other projects. And so it was really exciting to come back 25 years later and see the land cared for so well, it just felt like it was cherished and they were so excited to have the property. I just felt like it was the best solution that could have happened because in my work, we care for a lot of different properties and we are often able to get to a place once or twice a year, and this gets multiple visits a year, they’re taking care of the invasive species, they’re monitoring the rare species. It’s really a wonderful outcome.

JAY FEINSTEIN: So Tom O'Shea, commissioner for the Department of Fish and Game in Massachusetts, was telling us that the Indigenous community is actually really important for the state's biodiversity goals and for the state's conservation goals.

KAREN LOMBARD: Yes, they have been caring for the land a long time and their knowledge is really critical to both protecting the land as well as managing it off into the future, and we talked to Tom O'Shea about this.

TOM O'SHEA: We see and really acknowledge and respect our Indigenous and Tribal partners. They have been caring for our lands long before our agency existed and have a lot of knowledge, not just the care and the love of the land, but the knowledge to sustain and steward the land. And so, I think that they are such an important natural partner for us because they care so much and know how the tradition of stewarding the lands and living with the lands in the ways that we're trying to support through these goals,

KAREN LOMBARD: The commissioner's department is putting these ideas into practice; they're collaborating with the Nipmuc Tribe and Wampanoag Tribes on prescribed burning, Atlantic white cedar restoration, alongside other initiatives.

TOM O'SHEA: This is what life's about. The quality of our life is about really seeing, feeling connected to nature and seeing things that really give us joy. And when they see these fish in the hundreds, and sometimes the thousands, swimming up a place they haven't been able to swim in 200 years, it's powerful for people. It feels like there is hope in this world. We can make a difference and we're helping these fish and I can see them, I know it's happening. And think about it for our tribes and Indigenous People who have been waiting a long time to see these types of fish be able to migrate up river.

KAREN LOMBARD: For our last stop of the day, we met up with NLC founder Ramona Peters. She told us what makes Native Land Conservancy different from other land trusts.

RAMONA PETERS: It's our worldview. It's very different, we are not above the Earth or other living things. That equality is important and it's not just the equality, but to live in balance with it. Try to stay at a place where we have enough and not too much more than we need.

KAREN LOMBARD: She emphasized that being in nature and working to protect nature keeps her grounded.

RAMONA PETERS: The Earth speaks to us in different ways, it doesn't just speak to Indigenous People, it speaks to other people as well.

KAREN LOMBARD: *Nature is the Solution* is a podcast from The Nature Conservancy. In our next episode, we dive into renewable energy, exploring how clean energy solutions intersect with conservation and community needs.

JAKE MARLEY: Well, we all need food to sustain and we all need energy in the 21st century, and doing it in a way that is with clean renewable power is pertinent. We need to decarbonize our grid and get off of fossil fuels that are dirtying our air, water and soils. And so, this is a great way to do that while also contributing to farm viability, contributing to rural economies, to farmland conservation...

KAREN LOMBARD: For that episode and more, follow our show on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen. Thanks for listening to *Nature is the Solution*, I'm Karen Lombard.