

## Anne Cook

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In this edition of the G&G Storyteller, we highlight some examples of “Land Back in Action” from 2024. As we approach the March Madness Men’s and Women’s College Basketball Tournaments, we look at numbers of the increased participation of Native American Student Athletes in NCAA Athletics. We then shift gears to focus on Tribal communities’ investments and shifts towards renewable energy on Tribal Lands. We wrap up by celebrating the release of Political Prisoner, Leonard Peltier. Welcome Home Leonard!

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The Land Back movement advocates for a transfer of decision-making power over land to Indigenous communities. The movement does not ask current residents to vacate their homes, but maintains that Indigenous governance is possible, sustainable, and preferred for public lands. The Land Back movement is ultimately a manner of securing an Indigenous futurity that includes self-determination, environmental sustainability, and economic justice. Below are some highlights of Land Back in Action from 2024:

- Upper Sioux Community acquiring current Upper Sioux Agency State Park land in Minnesota where ancestors are buried
- University of Minnesota to return 3,400 acres to the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Tribe
- The Yurok Tribe will be the first to co-manage tribal land with the National Park Service under a historic agreement. National Park Service and California State Parks will work together with the Yurok Tribe to co-manage these lands.
- 1,000-acres of landback for the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community
- The U.S. Senate unanimously passed legislation that would transfer approximately 1,600 acres of land back to the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska that were illegally seized in the 1970s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.
- U.S. Department of the Interior placed land in trust in Illinois for the Prairie Band of Potawatomi Nation 175 years after the U.S. government stole land from the Chief while he was away visiting relatives.
- Secretary Haaland upholds protections for 28 million acres of Alaska public lands
- Onondaga Nation receives 1,000 acres of ancestral land as part of Onondaga Lake cleanup deal

- Sugarloaf Mound, the last remaining intact Mississippian mound, is returned to the Osage Nation



As the month of March begins, many basketball fans in Indigenous communities will be looking forward to the March Madness Men's and Women's college basketball tournaments around the country. Some will be following their favorite teams and athletes, and especially the student-athletes who are of Native American or Indigenous background. In recent years the number of Native American College athletes has increased, and are continuing to climb each year as the popularity of certain sports grows at the college level. University of New Mexico swimmer Kaylah Yazzie states "Being in the water, I was always taught as a young kid that I chose a sport that really embraced who we are as Native American People. I go every single day, and I swim in water. It's mother water to us, and it's very sacred." Below are numbers and data on Native American College Athletes:

In 2023-24, the number of Native American student-athletes across the NCAA reached 2,315, representing a 31% increase (550 athletes) from the 2013-14 academic year.

Divisional breakdown of Native American student-athletes in 2023-24:

- Division I: 544
- Division II: 981
- Division III: 790

Sports with most Native American student-athletes in 2023-24:



- Football: 407.
- Baseball: 187.
- Softball: 169.

Sports with the highest percentage of Native American student-athlete participation in 2023-24:

- Softball: 0.78% (169 athletes).
- Men's wrestling: 0.64% (56 athletes).
- Women's basketball: 0.62% (103 athletes).



In the vast landscapes of Native American tribal lands, a revolution is quietly taking place. As the sun blazes overhead and the wind sweeps across the plains, these natural elements are being harnessed to generate renewable energy, highlighting a new era of sustainability, economic growth, and sovereignty for tribal communities.

Native American tribal lands hold significant energy resources. According to the Wilson Center, these lands hold more than 35% of America's fossil fuel resources. This includes oil and natural gas, which have long been associated with tribal lands. The extraction and production of these resources have provided economic benefits for many tribes but has also led to environmental challenges and concerns. Native American tribal lands hold significant renewable energy potential. According to data from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), American Indian land comprises 2% of U.S. territory, but it

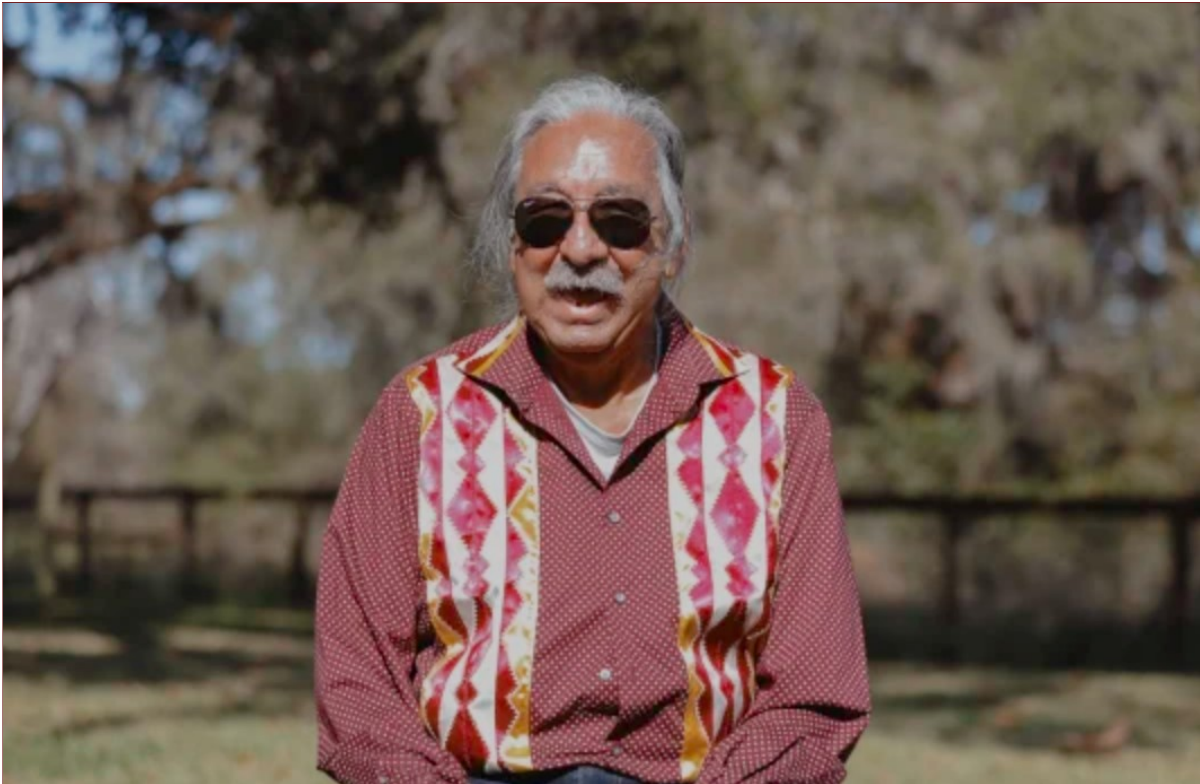
holds an estimated 6.5% of the country's renewable energy resource potential. Renewable resources such as solar, wind, and biomass are available on these lands. For instance, the Southwest tribes have high solar potential due to their geographic location, while the Great Plains tribes have significant wind resources.

One example is the Moapa Band of Paiutes in Nevada, which established the first utility-scale solar farm on tribal lands. The 250-megawatt project provides clean energy to Los Angeles and generates lease revenue for the tribe. Another example is the Blue Lake Rancheria Tribe in California, which developed a microgrid system powered by solar and biomass. This project not only provides reliable power but also serves as a disaster response center during power outages. In New York, the Akwesasne Housing Authority have successfully implemented two DOE-funded projects, Net Zero and Go Solar. These initiatives support the tribe's mission to push towards a clean energy future, showing how renewable energy can support economic development and sustainability goals. These projects highlight that with the right resources and partnerships, tribal lands can harness their renewable energy to bring economic benefits and energy sovereignty to their communities.

#### Impact of Office of Indian Energy Investments in Tribal Energy Projects, 2010–2024

- More than 240 funded Tribal energy projects
- Over \$190 million in DOE investments
- Over \$300 million in total project value
- Over 63 megawatts of new generation installed on Tribal lands
- Collectively nearly \$530 million saved in communities over the life of the systems
- Nearly 11,000 Tribal buildings affected
- \$3.29 saved for every DOE dollar invested.





A few weeks ago political prisoner Leonard Peltier (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) was released from the Federal Correctional Complex in Coleman, Florida, and driven to the Leesburg airport to be flown to North Dakota. President Joe Biden made freedom possible for the American Indian Movement (AIM) member when he granted Peltier a commuted sentence just before he left office.

Peltier had maintained his innocence since his conviction. Biden ordered Peltier now 80 and in poor health to transition to home confinement after spending nearly 49 years federally imprisoned. Peltier's imprisonment resulted from a 1975 shootout that occurred on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Indian Reservation between two FBI agents. The agents had entered the private property to serve arrest warrants. The American Indian Movement (AIM) is a liberation and activist group that sought to address police brutality and discrimination against Native Americans. Peltier has consistently claimed that he did not shoot the agents. His supporters have long argued that prosecutors withheld critical evidence that could have supported his defense while also fabricating affidavits against him. For decades, advocates such as Nelson Mandela, Pope Francis and James H Reynolds, the US attorney who handled the prosecution and appeal of Peltier's case, have fought for his release.

In a statement, Peltier said that he was "finally free!" "They may have imprisoned me but they never took my spirit!" he added. "Thank you to all my supporters throughout the world who fought for my freedom. "I am finally going home. I look forward to seeing my friends, my family, and my community. It's a good day today."

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