

Consent in Carbon Mitigation Projects in the Pacific Northwest

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Climate change is a complex and wicked problem. It impacts different places, communities, and institutions in a diverse and complicated ways. The solutions to this global problem, particular carbon emission mitigation, are varied and complex, and they range from technological innovations, policy measures, and governance mechanisms at multiple political, economic, and socio-cultural scales. Carbon mitigation solutions range from utility scale renewable energy projects like solar and wind farms to carbon capture and storage projects. Along with this, there are different perceptions, ideologies, and histories that shape public and community deliberations and implementation processes. As climate change solutions appear in policy documents and as they move through different scales and spaces of governance, questions around “consent”, “consultation”, and “consensus” have become ever so critical, complicated, and contested.

During the Carbon and Culture Symposium, we requested community members to reflect on three questions in relation to “consent” around carbon mitigation project. The three questions were: (1) *What does “consent” mean to you as an individual?* (2) *What are the concerns with development of carbon mitigation projects?* and (3) *How would you shape the future of “consent” in carbon mitigation projects?* Community members made notes on colorful post-it/sticky notes, and these reflections were placed on flipcharts in a common room for the entire duration of the symposium (refer to the Annexure for the flipcharts). We prepared this report after collating and reflecting on the different responses, and the ways these ideas have shaped and are yet to shape the landscapes around climate solutions in the Pacific Northwest.

¹ Sylvie King is a first-year Whitman College student, and she helped with the illustrations for the final report. The illustrations have been incorporated into a chapbook for public distribution. Benjamin Anderson and River Woodruff are Environmental Studies-Politics seniors at Whitman College. River and Benjamin participated in the Carbon and Culture Symposium, and both wrote their final thesis on topics related to climate change, critical mineral mining projects, and “consent and consultation” processes in the Pacific Northwest. Benjamin and River helped with transcriptions for this report. Denise Fernandes is Assistant Professor of Global Environmental Politics at Whitman College. All photographs in this report were taken by Denise Fernadnes in Cove, Oregon, during the Carbon and Culture Symposium, 2025

A. What is consent?



Illustration: Sylvie King, Whitman College

The idea of consent, particularly in relation to climate change solutions and carbon mitigation projects, is fractured and fragmented. This fragmentation is based on varied definitions that come from past histories, political and social ideologies, perceptions of natural landscapes, and scientific understandings of place and space. These varied definitions are further complicated by a pessimism or optimism in mitigation technologies, and the ways in which past experiences with the implementation of certain technologies in the region and the planning and governing processes have dispossessed Indigenous communities and those that continue to shape the present-day perceptions around climate change solutions. In the construction of the American West, the idea of consent has deep roots in histories of settler colonialism and Indigenous genocide. The superimposition of the American legal tradition in the Pacific Northwest have shaped the trajectory of the present-day meanings of consent as it relates to climate change solutions. In short, consent is constituted, constructed and conditioned to take on certain meanings and relevance based on place-based relations to land, spatial implementations of technologies, and often violent histories of dispossessions.

During the symposium, we observed that many participants construed “consent” to be synonymous or similar with **“consensus”, “consultation”, “permission”, or “agreement”**. For the simplest interpretation, one community member highlighted that *“consent is one[']s ability to say yes or no to any activity.”* This interpretation frames consent in the binary “yes” or “no” with tick-boxes to enable an individual or community to approve a project. Another participant observed, *“I give permission to..... (doesn’t necessarily mean ‘agreement’ or ‘consensus’).”* Another member stated, *“[consent is] giving permission to do or act in a specific way.”* While another symposium participant mentioned, *“[consent is] asking permission in a respectful and back and forth manner.”* In this case, it is the invocation of self-right to allow something to proceed but it does not necessarily mean that there is an agreement or consensus around the project.

While symposium participants reflected on the idea of permission in the consent processes, one community member stated, *“[consent is to] have the power to say that you agree w/a decision. Power being strong enough to voice yourself w/o fear.”* Through this statement, it is clear that consent as a concept and a process involves a power hierarchy that could be detrimental to the well-being of certain groups and communities as climate change solutions are implemented across unequal and unjust geographies. Another community member stated, *“[Consent is the] agreement on a decision or actions based on a complete decisions and w[h]at is being asked.”* One symposium participant noted, *“[consent is to] agree to disagree but move on in [a] positive direction.”* Another participant stated, *“[consent is an] agreement on a path forward between interested parties.”* Another member noted, *“[It is] okay to agree with working to get an agreement”*. These reflections point towards some form of decision making that is based on complete agreement within a community where a proposed action moves forward in a positive direction. At the same time, a few participants nudged towards the idea of working towards an agreement in the event of a disagreement.

For a few participants, consent was synonymous to **“approval”**. One participant did ask a provocative question, *“Does lack of consent equal veto?”* Another participant stated, *“[consent is] the right to say NO”*. Another member stated, *“[consent is the] approval to let someone or something change your life in some way.”* Consent was interpreted as an **“opinion” or “honoring that opinion”**. The perspectives ranged from colonial to decolonial practices to queer and Indigenous perspectives. These perspectives varied in the types of politics needed to engage with carbon mitigation technologies, the types of social practices needed to shape the implementation of these technologies in the PNW, and the ways we as a community can dream and imaging news spaces of life and existence that have been neglected by mainstream Western conceptions

of space and place. There was a strong invocation on “**self-sovereignty**” and adherence to the “international legal definition of Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC)”². Once community member stated, “[Consent means] autonomy, control and approval of decisions or access to things that impact me. Self-sovereignty.” Another community member noted, “Consent in social spaces. Queer space is built on consent, where “traditional western” is the antithesis and is to demonize consent itself”. A few symposium participants gave the text-book definition of consent that leaned heavily on the American Constitutional tradition.

Community members interpreted consent as a “**process**” that is an act of deliberation or dialogue that shaped life forms, the environment, and inclusive behaviors. As one member noted, “[Consent] is a 2-way process.” or as another member wrote on a sticky note, “Consent or consensus is not words but BEHAVIOR such as listening, inclusion.” Another member stated that “[consent is the] willingness to participate in a process”. Through this interpretation, consent was not fixed or set in stone, but something that is supposed to be reiterative and generative over time. A community member states, “[Consent] is not permanent/must be resought.”

Another interpretation of consent related to **community decision-making**. A participated stated, “[Consent is the ability to live with [a] group decision” while another noted, “[consent is] community defined mgmt. [management] reference points.” In contrast to the binary, yes or no, interpretation of consent, the power of community decision-making offered another perspective for reflection.

Many symposium participants interpreted consent as the **access to information** for communities and individuals to make an informed decision on the given project. One member stated, “informed [by different actors] of all risks and benefits” while another stated, “consent [is] in consultation w[with]/tribes that includes full disclosure of impacts to local communities via public meetings w[with]/those meeting comments shared w[with]/tribes +responses to comments.” Information sharing was the central theme of this interpretation where another member stated, “complete information and understanding of what is being asked.”

Finally, community members interpreted consent as a **relationship** “towards something, someone, someplace” rather than a one-time transaction or market-based interaction. Consent is not built without the creation of trust and a strong relationship. During the circle time discussion, community members expressed “that [the] foundation of consent is the act of mutual care.” There were reflections on a “structure” to work through trust and relationship building. During these reflections, participants wondered about building a global consensus on carbon mitigation, but the biggest question was “how”. Members asked questions on the differentiation between the terms “consent” and “consensus” particularly in relation to global frameworks and an incorporation of diverse perspectives through unequal structures of decision-making processes. With the Kyoto Protocol³ under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) there was some consensus around action and the reduction of carbon emissions, but as of now the US is divided on “how” and “what” needs to be done particularly after the Paris Agreement.⁴

² For more information on the Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples and FPIC, do refer to <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/consultation-and-free-prior-and-informed-consent-fpic>

³ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-kyoto-protocol>

⁴ The United States of America pulled out of the 2015 Paris Agreement. More information on the same can be accessed here: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48504>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/global-us-withdrawal-from-landmark-paris-climate-agreement-threatens-a-race-to-the-bottom/>

B. What are the Concerns with Carbon Mitigation Projects?

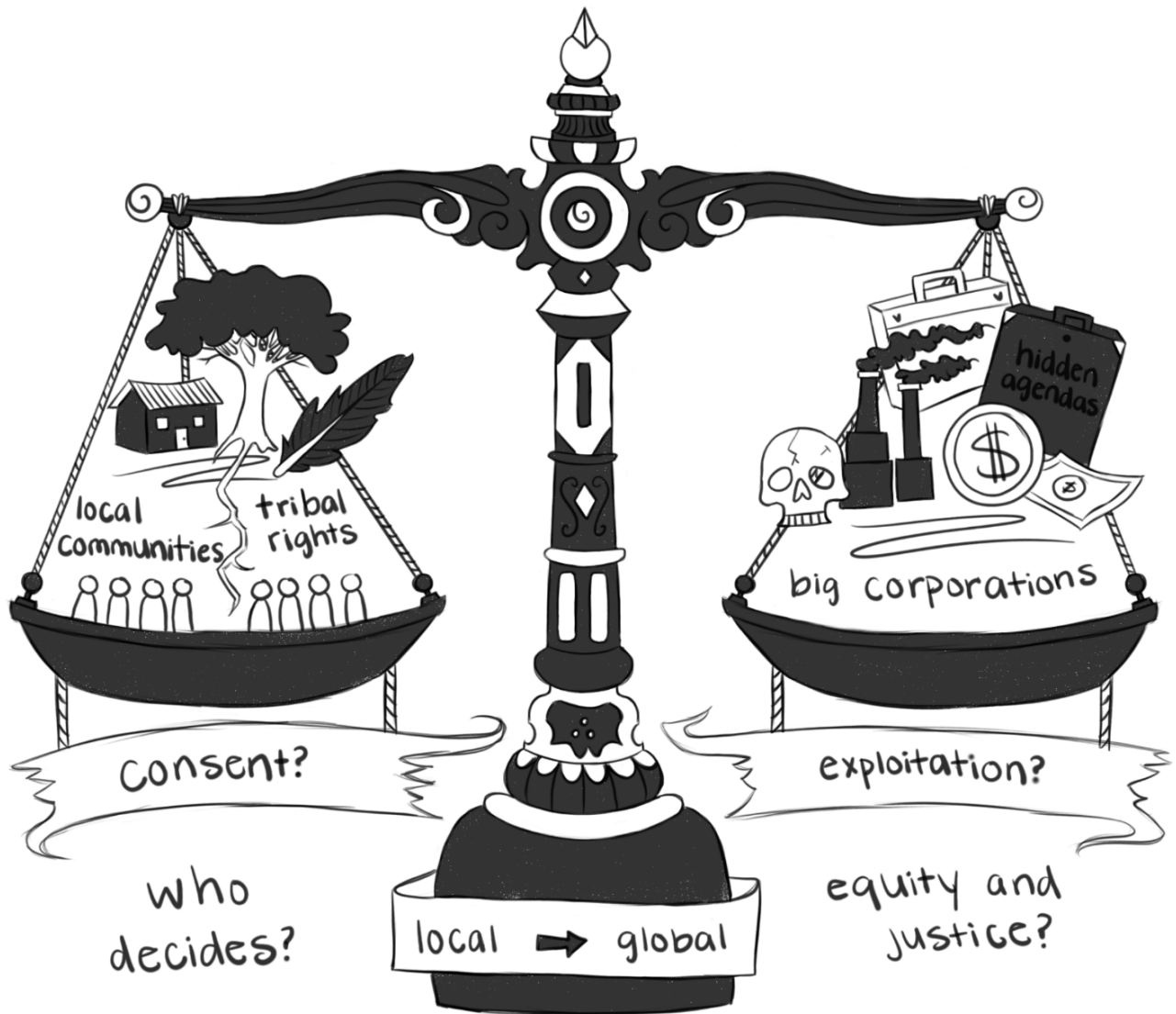


Illustration: Sylvie King, Whitman College

Discussions around the concerns with carbon mitigation projects ranged from questions on **scale (from global to local)** and **the types of consent and decision-making authorities** involved in the process of approval and implementation along with the unequal power differentials that came out of policy making process. For example, one community member noted, *“That consent is “scale” dependent- individual, family, community, regional..... At what scale of consent is considered for decision making.”* Similarly in relation to scale and scope of these projects, one community member noted, *“I am curious about the scale/scope of what consent includes on a project in a particular site when many communities hold relationships with the site. With tribes and indigenous communities, who is in the conversation, what does consent look like, and who decides if consent is given?”* The question of scale came up again in the circle-time discussion where members noted, *“who decides [the] economics, extent of exploitation, compensation vs/ profit, and the potential export of the community’s wealth.”* Briston Bay, Alaska, was cited as examples of de-commodifying the salmon and working with local communities to engage in profit sharing. Similarly, the Okinowa Fish Cooperative used restoration practices like “satoumi” that intertwined with ocean management.

Community members were concerned about the **interpretation of the term “consent”** where one participant noted it is *“unequal and/or [a] misunderstanding of what it means”*. Besides this, there were questions surrounding the **transactional nature of consent and its temporality**. A member questioned, *“Who is the consent between? How long does the consent last? Are both parties on equal playing ground? What does this actually mean?”* Another member stated and questioned at the same time, *“Informed! Who defines FPIC [Free Prior Informed Consent]?”* and pushed strongly for the FPIC to be followed in the consent process. Another member asked for *“community outreach for basic info [information]”*

In relation to scale, community members were concerned about the **process and content of information** that project developers would give to the community. For example, one member stated, *“[We need] full transparency from [a] project developer. What is it? Negative impacts? Real Benefits.”* Another member noted, *“All concerns will not be met. Not all affected will have input.”* Another community member noted, *“carbon mitigation on aboriginal land often comes w/o tribal input specifically on cultural + environmental importance + significance.”*

Participants were concerned about **“manipulation”** and **“corruption”** particularly surrounding experiences with carbon credit projects. While many were concerned about **transparency** surrounding these large technology and market driven projects, some participants were interested in the idea of **“compromise”** in the planning process in the interest of solving the “climate crisis”. For example, a participant noted, *“All parties agree to solve the climate crisis and in the process of compromise.”* Another participant stressed on the idea of **“inclusivity”** in the process where they stated, *“carbon mitigation consent, benefits all. [It should] include adaptation/resilience. [It should be an] inclusive process.”* The idea of inclusivity included concerns on **“voice”** and **“bodily exposure”** to toxic pollution. One member noted, *“[A] choice to what my body is exposed to. Particularly the air I breathe, including my voice in planning decisions.”* One participant complained that the *“tribes [are] not interested in listening/hearing”*. Another symposium participant noted that these projects were linked to a “number of issues” and should be avoided.

As symposium participants raised questions on **power and authority** as one of the major concerns, a community member asked, *“Is this a project that a large, powerful, wealthy, or influential organization, govt [government], or entity is forcing on land, people, plants or soils.”* Similarly, another member asked,

“who is the project for and how are benefits (and risks) distributed?” Another community member stated, *“Many of the most egregious abuses of power are justified as ‘for the greater good’”* Another stated, *“Concerned about the power dynamic and information asymmetry created when carbon mitigation, markets, and finance drive decision making around projects.”*

Besides the scale of the governance and decision-making in carbon mitigation projects, participants were concerned about **the temporality and inter-generational impacts of these gigantic projects along with the class dynamics involved in their structure and functionality**. As one community member commented, *“[These projects are] Rushed! Pay-off landowners w/o disclosing permanent + long-term impacts to environment + what those impacts mean to future generations”* Another noted, *“will effort lead to tangible desired results? At whose expense? Will carb-mit [carbon mitigation] efforts lead to increased worldwide poverty or reduction in quality of life? Who becomes powerful because of the change?”* Another member noted, *“Is the MRV [Measuring, Reporting, and Verification] reliable? Does MRV include social+ environmental effects? Does benefit flow only to elites.”* Another noted, *“carbon mitigation doesn’t fix anything, just shifts the burden. Allows polluters to continue polluting.”* And another noted, *“does the impacts/footprint of the carbon credit purchaser outweigh the benefits of the off-set projects?”* There were serious concerns expressed with equality, equity, and justice, and the role of finance capital used to guide decisions in this process.

The idea of “comprise” in a climate changed world was strong and there were some participants who believed that irrespective of what there needs to be a middle ground. This thus brought out a tension in the narrative on who is made to compromise for the “greater good” and does this lead to acts of **settler colonialism** again. For example, a participant observed, *“the roots of western social constructs are born from the same place as the philosophical concepts and physical changes made throughout the development of the U.S. Consent has not been considered outside of economics+ exploitation when climate impacts are made.”* Questions on the **unequal outcomes** of these projects were large. For example, one participant stated *“will effort lead to tangible desired results? At whose expense? Will carb-mit [Carbon Mitigation] efforts lead to increased worldwide poverty or reduction in quality of life? Who becomes powerful because of the change.”*

There was also a philosophical concern shared here, *“the unknow can draw people to fear change.”* This fear of the unknown comes from the traumas of the past and the ways colonialism, particularly with land dispossession has impacted the PNW along with damage done to the environment and Indigenous relations. For example, one participant noted, *“what if a project impacts a community in a negative way? When will they have a chance to provide feedback? Who makes the final decision?”* Another community member noted, *“those whose land is being used are not benefitting from the outcomes-rather at risk for loss of resource, culture, knowledge.”* Since culture is embedded and connected to land in some way shape or form, there is an invocation of a cultural dispossession that is going to ensure if there is no proper consent taken for these large-scale projects.

During the symposium and the deliberations on consent and consultation, there was a clear call to engage with the more -than -human or the other-than- humans either through the idea of agency or the impacts that carbon mitigation projects would harm existing conservation and restoration projects. The local environment featured prominently in many of the concerns raised by participants. For example, *“will these practices impact the land, water, wildlife, and plants? Additionally, will practice influence geologic and hydrologic processes?”* Another participant noted, *“open range lands at risk for projects that create more*

harm” Still other participants noted, *“Carbon mitigation for climate is a shell game, full of fraud + fantasy. Carbon increase in soils + trees has enormous use value for soil health, biodiversity, and WATER.”* Protection of the First Foods was a serious concern for many tribal community members where one participant asked the question, *“How bad is it for our tribal foods? Where do we start in change?”*

During the circle-time discussions, there was once again a strong reiteration on the relationships to **“land”** and **“place”** and the *“need to speak for those who can’t but are affected”*. Members noted, *“community includes the land and water and animals. How do non-human relatives consent. And what do we do to prevent othering that can be weaponized.”* Members asked, *“what do we do with those who don’t agree but do it anyway”*. Another member noted, *“consent goes deeper than changing an administration. Indigenous communities are the connection to those without the voice”*. Other members noted, *“complexity [of a place] requires patience, restoration, and care. The considerations need to be in consideration with the place”*.

Some participants noted that the Federal Government is required to have consultations with the Tribes, but there is patchy adherence and there are no consequences for violation by project developers or other entities. This brought in questions of *“how can we **enforce** consent?”* Still others in the circle-time discussion noted that “money” is the central deciding factor and “funding” is the potential leverage communities must think about the cost these projects would have on the place and people.

During the circle time, community members noted that *“community”* drew a circle around people and that NEPA was connected to Eminent Domain which was a relationship between “action” and “outcome”. By there were questions on *“how do we decided when there is no circle? When have the boundaries of “community” been broken”*. Members stated that consent must be a continuous process and mutually beneficial.

C. What could the future of “consent” in Carbon Mitigation Projects look like?

Community member reflections on the future of consent revolved around the interrelation between the **global and local scales carbon mitigation projects and questions of sovereignty and power hierarchies**. There was a strong invocation of the idea **“consent not coercion” with an adherence to community processes rather than very top-down driven governance mechanisms or impositions on impacted communities**. A community member stated, *“[the future should be] with the opportunity to consent”* Another member noted, *“Free-uncoerced. Prior-before implementation. Informed-most of the big “projects” are conducted w/o public knowledge, let alone understanding, let alone actual consent.”* Or as another participant noted, *“consent should be the first action in any potential project.”* While another member noted, *“Honoring Tribal Consultation.”*

Sovereignty was another strong theme that needs to shape the future of “consent” in carbon mitigation projects. One member drew examples from Colombia and the Indigenous rights in South America by stating, *“Colombian Prez recommendation of military coalition for UN enforcement of indigenous sovereignty and leadership in climate mitigation projects.”* Another member drew comparisons to projects in Adivasi (tribal) and lowered-caste areas in India by stating, *“How do sovereignty and land tenure in the US differ from India? Where do US tribes face essentially similar level of disenfranchisement?”* There was a clear call for looking at global solidarity and ways to relate to other Indigenous communities and historically marginalized/vulnerable groups that are facing similar issues.

In relation to sovereignty, the idea of **rights and responsibilities** was central where a member noted, *“not a blanket policy. Each tribe holds their own right to define. FPIC [Free Prior Informed Consent]. Should not be defined by industry.”* Another member notes, *“future consent means no more ‘stakeholder’ labels and more ‘partnerships’ where Tribes/Indigenous people are leading the conversations + needs of their land + communities.”* The idea of stakeholders stems from a very neo-liberal logic of governance that has shaped climate change policy discussions and the ways more-than-human subjects and communities are treated as commodities and objects in the production of carbon and decarbonization efforts.

The idea of **“community consensus”** was expressed strongly where one member noted, *“community demographics equally brought into the project. Jobs, food sovereignty, education, safety”* or as another participant noted on the timeline of these projects, *“through the community, the people getting input from them first.”* The need for the “whole community” to be involved was critical to a larger group at the symposium. The “whole community” meant that “voice” was critical for these projects where one member noted, *“all members of the community to have a voice.”*

The idea of process in relation to community was fractured where there were two types of perspectives that came about, (1) grassroot-bottom-up approach to community engagement for consent in carbon mitigation projects, and (2) an American West text-book definition of the same. Process was an important theme for symposium participants where one participant noted, *“I would like to see Tribes and communities engaged before project planning occurs & have FPIC be a condition for project approval.”* Another member noted in the context of process and power hierarchies, *“starting w/community then work its way up. Not from the top to the bottom. Every opinion matters.”* One participant noted, *“make sure all communities have a say with projects that affect the whole community, whether that’s a project on public, tribal, private lands.”* Another community member noted, *“seems like the basic necessity is protecting and advocating for maintenance of public comment and government to government consultation that adheres to FPIC. At least*

in the context of the U.S. west, particularly in light of proposed NEPA reforms". This was a text-book definition of consent that tends to indicate the due process of law according to the American legal tradition. Another textbook definition mentioned related to, "Legally required & acknowledged education of local context, environmental, social, cultural policies, economic functions. Informed Consent Legally binding definition of 'informed'"

In relation to the process, there was a Lockean understanding to private property and wastelands of the American West where one member noted, *"locate suitable and unused land (deserts, mountains) or compensate the local people over and above what they would generate from the land."* Another noted, *"1) stakeholder group developed 2) facilitated sessions 3) Consensus based decisions"* Participants had concerns about how the process is difficult to encourage participation. For example, a participant stated, *"In today's age, getting people to participate and share their opinions are a lot harder. We could have public meetings, Forums, or even online questionnaires. Gathering as many opinions [as possible] and views [for the project]."* Another community member talked about the, *"Transparent process[being] temporal vs Benefit to begin + reevaluated."*

There was an invocation to community including the **more-than-human** particularly the "land". For example, a community member noted, *"Consent from the local community, those whose ancestral lands reside there, and the land itself."* Another participant noted, *"[I] would like for the community affected to be at the center of this work?"*

There was a strong invocation for **"public knowledge."** To shape this complicated process, community members called for a dialogue and conversation with a space for education and awareness of these projects. One member noted, *"communicate ramifications on a neutral level, even the intangible sides-future impacts. Educate those impacted."* While another participant called for the project developer to be responsible in sharing plans and cumulative impacts by stating, *"Oweness [onus] on developer to share annual plans + prospects for projects with cumulative land impacts and pre-populated list of consentees."*

Some practical suggestions *"Needs to have its own body of review project by project- the community nominates the representation"* and *"Talking circles, long ones! Go slow to go fast. No powerpoints!"*

During the circle-time discussions, there were questions on *"what does [it mean] to have a culture of Carbon in a positive way? What is the character of culture [that which is thought to be scalable]? v/s a government decision making process. There needs to be a community guide as a decision framework, defined by the community and one that is replicated."*



Additional Resources

- Documentary- “These Sacred Hills”, Rock Creek Band of the Yakima Nation
- Whyte, K. (2016). Indigenous peoples, climate change loss and damage, and the responsibility of settler states. *Climate Change Loss and Damage, and the Responsibility of Settler States*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2770085
- Whyte, K. P. (2016). Is it colonial déjà vu? Indigenous peoples and climate injustice. In *Humanities for the Environment* (pp. 102-119). Routledge.

Annexure

Do viable projects exist under GAO/IGT?
Investigating

Relationship to land + place, we need
to speak for those who can't or are affected

What do we do w/ those who don't agree or who
do it anyway → community includes the land
and water and animals
↳ how do non human relatives consent?
↳ something that can be weaponized
↳ consent goes deeper than changing admin
↳ Indigenous communities as connected to those who use
Complexity requires patience, restoration and care
↳ place-based considerations, be w/ place

Federal gov's consultation w/ Tribes is required
↳ patchy adherence, no consequence for violation
↳ how can we enforce consent?
Money is the current decision factor, funding as
potential leverage, card

Scale considered in relation to community

↳ Who decides economics
Extent of exploitation
Compensation vs. profit
Potential to export community's work/te

Ex: Bristol Bay in AK → Salmon harvest
↳ how do locals engage in profits/harv.
↳ De-commodify the Salmon

Ex 2: Okinawa Fish Cooperative
w/ restoration practices "sato umi"
interwined w/ ocean management

Consent viewed as a transaction
↳ must be part of a longer relationship
↳ structure as a unity toward though on issues
↳ no consent w/ time → relationship

"Community" is a social construct
↳ relationship + ATR
↳ relationship + place
How do we decide what is in or out?
Boundaries of "community" - how?
Background of local consent - how?

"Consent" is a social construct and culturally particular
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks

What does a culture of consent look like?
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks

US government - how consent is constructed in different frameworks
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks

WHAT DOES CONSENT MEAN?

Consent is a social construct
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks
↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks

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↳ how consent is constructed in different frameworks
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