

How Privatization Enables Environmental Harm

BY PHILLIP MEINTZER

Human society in the twenty-first century faces a growing number of worsening and interconnected environmental crises. All require urgent, collective action to maintain the health and function of the ecosystems we depend on for our own survival. These crises are numerous and interconnected, from climate change and biodiversity loss to ocean acidification, mass deforestation, and the disruption of nutrient cycles. But where do these crises come from? The answer can be found in our history.

We are often too quick to place the blame for worsening planetary conditions solely at the feet of specific bad actors such as politicians, political parties, corporations, and CEOs who have been corrupted by greed and self-interest. And while I acknowledge that bad actors certainly do exist, and that corruption is likely a factor, I feel that by focusing too heavily on individual failings, we risk misdirecting our attention away from the systems which allow these bad actors to have such an outsized impact on our environment in the first place.

Trust me, as someone who works on these issues daily, I understand the allure of blaming oil sands companies for the ongoing destruction of northern Alberta, or coal mining companies for polluting our headwaters along the Eastern Slopes. However, I also recognize that certain conditions need to be in place before these harms become a realistic possibility. To understand those conditions, we need to interrogate why individuals and companies have been given permission to “own” and exploit the natural resources that we rely on to meet our needs.

As a broad generalization, many of our environmental issues have their roots in Europe beginning in the 1600s and are a product of private property law, the enclosure of the commons, and settler colonialism which exported this suite of ideologies across the globe. These historical developments took place concurrently between 1600 to 1900 and we are still living through their very real impacts today.

Enclosure was the process by which public (or common) land was divided up, enclosed, and privatized to increase productivity, particularly in agriculture. Enclosure is often associated with Great Britain starting in the 1600s when thousands of enclosure acts were passed in parliament over 300 years, privatizing nearly 30,000 square kilometres of previously common land. Prior to enclosure, commoners were permitted to use common land for pasture, fishing, fuel,

mineral extraction, and to take wood for household uses. Enclosure changed everything. It meant that commoners were denied access to the resources they had previously relied upon to meet their needs (e.g., food, shelter, heat etc.). At the same time, enclosure gave exclusive domain over those same resources to a newly created class of landowners. Enclosure resulted in an exclusionary power imbalance between two groups, the haves (i.e., owners of property), and the have-nots (i.e., the landless class).

Although enclosure was meant to increase agricultural efficiency, it had the unintended consequence of kickstarting the economic system that we now refer to as capitalism. By privatizing land (and the resources produced from that land), it meant that certain individuals (i.e., land or property owners) could now restrict access to those resources and demand compensation for them in return. That meant commoners no longer had access to the resources they needed to survive, and people had to accept jobs provided by the landowner class in return for a wage so that they could afford to purchase necessities.

This process of dispossessing and excluding people from land or resources which were formerly held in common is also known as proletarianization. It can be a violent process that often leads to the destruction of traditional livelihoods and cultural practices because it severs the connection between communities and the environment that sustains us.

Human communities have always worked with the land to meet our needs throughout our history, but enclosure turned our natural resources into commodities that are meant only to be bought and sold on the market. Treating nature as property can only lead to inequitable outcomes because not everyone can afford property. Just as landlords can exploit tenants today via rent; they own the house, so they get to do with it as they please. Some people benefit, while others, including nature, are exploited.

As enclosure was underway in Great Britain it was simultaneously exported and imposed on Indigenous cultures around the world by European colonizers, including here on Turtle Island (commonly referred to as North America). The process of European settlement in the so-called “New World” occurred through the genocide, dispossession, and displacement of Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island. The imposition of colonial laws and ideas of private property — now upheld by the settler-state of Canada — created the conditions for capitalism to flourish as land was carved up and privatized at the expense of Indigenous lives and their traditions.

British archaeologist David Wengrow and the late

American anthropologist David Graeber, in their 2021 book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, describe the colonial process of dispossession as follows: “Colonial appropriation of Indigenous lands often began with some blanket assertion that foraging peoples really were living in a State of Nature — which meant that they were deemed to be part of the land but had no legal claims to own it. The entire basis for dispossession, in turn, was premised on the idea that the current inhabitants of those lands weren't really working ... James Tully, an authority on Indigenous rights, spells out the historical implications: land used for hunting and gathering was considered vacant...”

The destructive force of colonization allowed for a massive accumulation of wealth, property, and resources in the hands

of the European nation states and their businesses, like the

“Colonial governments continue to allow private companies to profit from the destruction of Alberta’s ecosystems.”

Hudson’s Bay Company in British-controlled North America. As traditional livelihoods were disrupted, Indigenous communities were forced to increasingly rely on settler institutions for work so that they could earn money to meet their needs (via the purchase of commodities). This is a similar process to what happened in Great Britain following the enclosure of the commons.

We still see remnants of this system today where the harmful impacts of industrial development — such as the oilsands — have pushed many Indigenous Peoples to rely on extractive industry jobs because there are few other options available. Some people even consider these companies to be benevolent for providing jobs without recognizing that we are only reliant on industry jobs because colonization has already destroyed other possible ways of living.

In the 2017 publication *Whose Land Is It Anyway? A Manual for Decolonization*, Mohawk philosopher Taiaiake Alfred from Kahnawake writes, “The essential harm of colonization is that the living relationship between our people and our land has been severed. By fraud, abuse, violence and sheer force of numbers, white society has forced us into the situation of being refugees and trespassers in our own homelands and we are prevented from maintaining the physical, spiritual and cultural relationships necessary for our continuation as nations.”

As you can hopefully see by now, enclosure allows a small group of people to exploit both the land (i.e., natural resources) and human labour for private gain. Contemporary capitalist society is enclosure taken to its logical conclusion, with property rights granted to corporations for almost any natural resource you can imagine (e.g., land, water, trees, fossil fuels, minerals etc.). As a result, productivity and profit growth have become the primary goal of human society rather than satisfying human needs sustainably or equitably.

In Alberta, we can still see enclosure at work today as the Government of Alberta continues to sell off our publicly held land and resources for private gain. Under Alberta’s *Forests Act*, forest tenures give the right to harvest “Crown” timber to private companies. In southern Alberta, corporate entities known as irrigation districts own licences for nearly 70 percent of all the water allocated in the South Saskatchewan River Basin. The McClelland Lake Wetland Complex in northeast Alberta was off limits to oilsands mining in 1996, but lobbying led to the sale of leases for bitumen reserves beneath McClelland to an American company in 1998, despite the existing protections. Privatization has played a key role in all the environmental crises we currently face from deforestation (via forest tenures), drought (via water licences), and global warming (via fossil fuel leases). These are just a few examples of how colonial governments continue to allow private companies to profit from the destruction of Alberta’s ecosystems, while the rest of us suffer the consequences.

As I mentioned before this isn’t just a case of greedy businessmen. Our ancestors may not have considered the long-term consequences of enclosure, but by permitting the private ownership of natural resources they created an exclusionary system that allows certain groups to profit at the expense of others including the nonhuman world. As a result of enclosure, profit growth is now the dominant driver of human activities. The pursuit of wealth leads to a forest valued for profit as timber, rather than as an ecosystem of living organisms that sustains us.

Putting profits first prevents us from recognizing that our ecosystems have real limits that we need to adhere to if we want to have a sustainable future. If we are going to begin addressing these environmental crises, we will need to restore the commons and work towards repairing damage that enclosure has caused. Only by restoring the commons can we begin thinking about how to meet our needs sustainably and equitably, rather than being at the mercy of private interests and the ceaseless pursuit of profits. Our future depends on the commons!