



Preserving Tribal Lands with Carbon Markets: National Indian Carbon Coalition

Featuring Bryan Van Stippen

Program Director, National Indian Carbon Coalition

DJ May:

Welcome to the Decode 6 Podcast where we take your questions about carbon and ecosystem services and match them to the experts with the answers. I'm your host, DJ May this week we have a special episode coming your way. We're spotlighting the National Indian Carbon Coalition. Here's the big question, what is the National Indian Carbon Coalition? Our expert with the answers is Bryan Van Stippen, program director for the National Indian Carbon Coalition, which is an initiative of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation.

Bryan is a member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, and previously served for seven years as a tribal attorney for the Ho-Chunk Nation Department of Justice in Wisconsin, where he was responsible for land acquisition and other land related issues. He's a graduate of the University of North Dakota School of Law, the University of Tulsa College of Law, where he studied American Indian and indigenous law and the University of Arizona James E. Rodgers College of Law, where he studied indigenous peoples law and policy. Bryan, thank you so much for being here today.

It's great to have you on. We're going to jump straight in. So tell me what is the National Indian Carbon Coalition?

Bryan Van Stippen:

So first of all, I will say Shekoli yaw[^]ko, which is a greeting and a thank you in my traditional language as a member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. As a tribal member, I took on the position as the program director for the National Indian Carbon Coalition, in which we are a tribally owned and operated not-for-profit organization working with indigenous communities throughout North America, which we include tribal nations in the continental United States, Alaska native villages and corporations, native Hawaiian organizations as well as First Nations in Canada on protecting and preserving their tribal natural resources rather than extract or exploit those tribal natural resources by developing carbon sequestration projects.

So our organization as a nonprofit, we try to help educate tribes, indigenous peoples as to what these projects all entail because they are complex. There's a lot of different moving pieces and parts. I know there's some controversy around them as well. So we want to make sure that we're addressing those concerns by the stakeholders, tribal leadership, membership and staff. So we do a process of educating the communities by doing multiple different types of meetings, presentations, just getting into the nuts and bolts of what these projects all entail, and then hopefully move through tribal leadership approval to do an actual project development.

Currently, we have two projects at market, we have two more coming online this year, and we have four more tribal projects lined up behind them in which we have received tribal council approval for. So it's just going through the process on how we explore these opportunities to help derive revenue for the tribal nations to mainly reacquire land back that was taken and stolen over generations. We call it took and crook in Indian country, and then utilize this revenue for other opportunities as well.

Looking at energy efficiency projects, renewable energy projects, weatherization of tribal housing, many different kind of factors. So the money goes back into the communities that we derive from these projects with, again, the foremost being acquisition of lands within the exterior boundaries of the tribal reservations or traditional lands that were once owned by the tribes themselves. So that's the kind of the role that the National Indian Carbon Coalition plays in all this carbon market arena. We're learning as we go along as well, because things are moving fast and furious, but so far everything has been looking good on our end.

DJ May:

No, that's fantastic. So just to bring this down to something a little bit more concrete, can you give me an example of one of the NICC projects that's at market now?

Bryan Van Stippen:

Certainly. So at the National Indian Carbon Coalition, our main role again is to act as that trusted resource in Indian country for the development of carbon sequestration projects. So what we want to do is that we focus on nature-based solutions, essentially keeping tribally owned natural resources in the ground rather than doing extraction or exploitation techniques. So we want to protect and preserve those tribal natural resources and yet be able to derive a revenue stream from those natural resource bases.

Again, a lot of times what we've seen in Indian country and throughout our history is that what's the easiest way to make money off your natural resources is that you're going to log or you're going to mine. Well, the mentality in Indian country is that we want to change that concept, and one of the ways in doing so is establishing carbon sequestration projects. Right now, we work closely with the registries that develop carbon projects utilizing the protocols that they bring forward.

We focus mainly right now on improved forest management projects, meaning that they keep your trees in the ground. We're able to generate revenue from doing so by creating a carbon credit and selling those on the voluntary carbon market space to what we want to work with, what we call socially responsible organizations. So some of the current organizations that have been supporting the work we've been doing in Indian country have been Airbnb, Meta, Dick Sporting Goods, the University of Minnesota has been supportive of our projects, so organizations, entities in that fashion.

So our role at the National Indian Carbon Coalition is to help educate tribal communities as to what these projects truly entail on their land base, how they work, how they function, how they operate. And then if there is a desire to move forward, we develop a feasibility study to show them the potential of any revenue that can be generated by reducing, say, commercial logging operations. We can give them those figures, give them that data. We work then closely with leadership, membership and staff to determine whether or not this is beneficial for their land base and their natural resource base.

And again, if they're acceptance of the program, we actually begin the development of the carbon sequestration project. So we work with other outside third parties that the National Indian Carbon Coalition has developed relationships with over the last five, six years since I've been on

board at NICC and ensure that those organizations understand how to work with these tribal communities, how to work on tribal lands to ensure that, again, these are operating in the best interest of the tribes in the best interest of that community.

Once we get to that point and we begin a development phase, we step through that process, and then the end outcome is actually getting carbon credits to the market in which again the National Indian Carbon Coalition assists in selling those credits to organizations in which those tribal communities, tribal leadership staff membership give us the approval to sell those carbon credits to. So we ask early on, who would you prefer we sell these credits to if we get that far along in the process? And for the most part, it's we don't want to sell to oil and gas.

We don't want to sell to mining operators. We want to work with organizations that have same or similar environmental values as the tribes.

DJ May:

Yeah. I'm glad you brought that up. I think it's really neat what you're doing in this whole process from project development all the way through to sales. Can you talk me through the importance of making sure that everyone's good with where these credits end up?

Bryan Van Stippen:

Yeah. It's a lot of conversation right now in the industry as a whole about additionality in the development of high quality, high integrity carbon credits. And again, that's one of the things that we strive for at the National Indian Carbon Coalition is to ensure that these projects are actually doing what they're supposed to be doing, that we are sequestering carbon, that we are removing greenhouse gas emissions from the environment because this has a direct detrimental effect on tribal lands. There's many studies out there that show how indigenous communities are affected by climate change.

So of course, we want to make sure that if we are supporting these projects and this type of work being done in Indian country, that it is actually making some true change. So again, what we want to look at is the highest standard protocols. For instance, Vera, one of the registries, has come out with a dynamic baseline standard and protocol that they're trying to implement as the highest stringent standards that we've seen so far. We are working with that organization to find a landowner, which we do think we have one, in Indian country to implement as the first of its kind in the United States to utilize these higher standards.

So that we are showing through scientific data, scientific methodologies that these projects are truly sequestering carbon at the scale that we need to, and then showing the buyers that those socially responsible organizations that the project on the ground that they can come and visit and see what their own eyes how it is affecting the land base. But it is adhering to the highest quality standards that we see out there. We want to ensure that we're addressing these additionality concerns. We're wanting to ensure that we're implementing very conservative and stringent baselines to show how these projects can be successful.

And tribes, at the end of the day, in my opinion, can lead this industry for change as the scrutiny has been coming out over the last few years. And we don't want to be roped into that bucket of just a project to make money. These projects truly on the ground have a direct benefit to the

tribes themselves. By protecting these natural resources, we've shown it can insist with the health of the tribal community itself, the health of the tribal members themselves, keeping those trees, keeping those natural resources in the ground.

DJ May:

Yeah. Tell me more about that. Can you give me a specific example of maybe one of these areas you've been able to conserve or stop logging to help tribes?

Bryan Van Stippen:

Certainly. So right now we have two projects that we have at market. Currently, they're on the American Carbon Registry, and again, we're using the improve force management protocol. Those projects, one is with the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians. The other is with the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community. Those two projects are at market. We're actively selling carbon credits. But the design of the projects, specifically focusing on Fond du Lac was to help protect and preserve some of their wild rice lakes.

So manoomin, which is a wild rice resource for tribal nations and important to their culture and their society, we're seeing a loss of those wild rice lakes. So by implementing a carbon project within their territory, protecting and preserving those trees, we're trying to ensure that we keep the water temperatures lower. We're making sure that there's not logging operations occurring in and around those areas so that those natural resources are going to be protected. And again, that's a traditional food source for the tribal nation and extremely important to that tribal community and that tribal culture.

And we want to help ensure that those resources are here for future generations. So by implementing this carbon project, again, we're able to drive some revenue to help with the sustainable management practices on that land base, and then assist in the protection of those wild rice lakes.

DJ May:

That's fantastic. No, thank you for that example. And I know even from my own experience in Eastern Oregon where I grew up, just coming back after leaving for a decade, you see how much can change so quickly. So it's fantastic to have that for the future.

Bryan Van Stippen:

It is, and that's one of the main statements I received from the chairman of the Fond du Lac Band. When we were exploring these projects, his statement to me was, we can't just pick up the reservation lands and move them somewhere else as climate change affects our land base. So we have to start taking into consideration how we needed to protect this land base now because we can't get up and move somewhere else like the rest of society has the potential to do. And they've seen change occur on their land base over the last 100 years already, and we know it's coming.

We've seen it occur. We need to make sure that we're addressing these issues. We're making sure that we are effectively addressing climate change by the most stringent standards that we can currently find in the marketplace. And again, in my opinion, tribes have the ability to be the

leaders in this industry because we do have that land base. We are being affected by climate change in Indian country, and we know that this is an issue that all of society needs to explore, not just tribes. But we can pave the way and show other landowners how to do land management appropriately to address these effects over the long term.

DJ May:

That's fantastic. Bryan, do you have any final thoughts about what's going on with NICC, or where can we find you if people want to learn more?

Bryan Van Stippen:

So right now we have indiancarbon.org is our website. We just launched a LinkedIn webpage, the National Indian Carbon Coalition. We're starting to push materials out on that page, some stuff on Facebook. So feel free to Google Indian Carbon, and you should find where we're at and feel free to reach out to me at any point in time and ask any sort of questions you may have.

DJ May:

Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for your time today.

Bryan Van Stippen:

Thank you, DJ.

DJ May:

If you want to learn more about the National Indian Carbon Coalition and the important work they're doing, check out the show notes. And if you want to dig deep into carbon and ecosystem services and the markets that are popping up around them, visit us over at decode6.org. We'll see you there.