## **COLONIAL SUSTAINABILITY:**

## **TRACING THE SUSTAINABILITY INDUSTRY’S ECOCIDAL LINEAGE**

## **FROM THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY**

**Christina M. Sayson**

**Samantha Suppiah**

**Anna Denardin**

**Luiza Oliveira**

**Nelson Maldonado-Torres**

**Ayabulela Mhlahlo**

## 

## **Abstract**

The concept of “sustainable development” fuelling today’s sustainability industry may be traced back to the turn of the 14th century. The Holy Roman Empire’s imperialistic expansions into Africa and the Canary Islands eventually morphed into a burgeoning capitalist European colonial project, which then sought to undo the very environmental harms it had wrought through colonial extraction, through further colonial domination and social control. Post-World War II “peace” efforts birthed supranational entities that continue to impose white supremacist epistemological systems, frames, and standards on the neocolonised Global South. These impositions led to the creation of the contemporary sustainability industry, enabling the obfuscation of Global North expansionism through the application of white supremacist, Western-centric sustainability rhetoric. The cultural evolution of “sustainability” moves steadily apace as decolonial counternarratives struggle to materialise amid active silencing and stamping out by the mechanisms of coloniality.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation, development aggression, ecocide, ethnocide, epistemicide, coloniality

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper witnesses the history of the contemporary sustainability industry with a critical eye, tracing the industry’s and the dominant discourse’s colonial roots in the Holy Roman Empire’s expansionist imperialism, to the paternalistic white supremacy of the European colonial project, and finally, to the obfuscation of this continuing expansionism through institutional sustainability rhetoric. In identifying colonial ideology and governance structures as the basis of today’s sustainability industry, this paper reveals the violent and pervasive nature of coloniality and how it dictates power structures, particularly in relationships engendered by its own mechanisms.

In exposing coloniality in dominant sustainability narratives, particularly in academia that informs industry, this paper hopes to encourage those in the sustainability, futuring, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) sectors who seek more equal governance systems rooted in partnership rather than domination (Eisler, 2008) to critically interrogate the coloniality pervading their fields. This requires a contextual awareness of how colonial histories shape contemporary structures of governance, discourse, and epistemology.

Thus, to emphasise its central argument and focus readers’ energy and attention on the subject at hand, this paper does not provide definitions nor restate what has already been written. Instead, this paper hopes to develop upon existing academic and industry discourse already established throughout the centuries of colonialism’s existence. Suggested readings written in the 20th century and after include Said (1978), Fanon (1967, 2004), Césaire (1972), Spivak (2023), Alatas (1977), Memmi (2016), Bhabha (1994), Anzaldúa (1987), and Escobar (1995). In providing relevant citations, this paper skims over complex concepts that the authors hope will encourage readers to delve into existing literature on their own terms.

For the purposes of this paper, colonisation’s development through history is framed as cultural evolution, tracing the narratives, mechanisms, and systems that build upon one another to advance colonisation. Of note is that the term “evolution,” particularly evolution in relation to colonialism and the development of white supremacy, may hold considerable epistemological baggage. Cultural evolution is a specific, relatively recently developed term referring to a body of theories and field of academic study that applies to the exploration of how cultures change over time as they transform their environments (Distin, 2011; Henrich et al., 2008; Henrich & McElreath, 2003; Lewens, 2015; Mesoudi, 2016).

Colonisation may be described as a dominant and abusive cultural system without concern nor responsibility for the regulation of ecological or environmental functions it profits from, thereby facilitating the Sixth Mass Extinction (Bar-On et al, 2018) and planetary systems collapse. It quashes local democratic movements to eliminate other cultural movements and advances a governance system that spawned such bodies as the sustainability industry to perpetuate itself. Colonisation’s cultural evolution is that of cancerous growth. Concepts and events are presented in chronological order in this paper to centre this fact and illuminate how coloniality has developed into what is described by Law as the One World World (2015), and by Dunlap and Jakobsen as the Worldeater (2020), that it is today.

Terms such as “traditional,” “indigenous,” and “precolonial” are used here in contrast to the Worldeater. Often, traditional, indigenous, or pre- or non-colonial cultures are constructed by coloniality as elements of the past – primitive, backwards, and doomed - that stand in binary opposition to a Euro-American-centric “modern,” “progressive,” and “superior” present and future (Clifford, 2013; Corntassel, 2003; Graburn, 2001; Phillips & Schochet, 2004; Wagoner, 2003).

This predator-prey dichotomy of colonial and non-colonial cultures obscures the fact that non-colonial systems and cultures are not extinct. Rather, they exist today and continue to be actively disempowered by coloniality and its mechanisms. The existence of non-colonial cultures is continuously threatened by the predatory efforts and effects of ongoing colonisation. For instance, even uncontacted indigenous cultures experience existential threats from development aggression and accelerating climate change (Chiba, 2024; Ereira, 2012; Recio & Hestad, 2022; Survival International, n.d.; Walter, 2023). Readers are encouraged to review the provided citations for more information.

Academia and industry in general are themselves products and mechanisms of coloniality (Basheer, 2015; Burns et al., 2016; Ndlovu, 2018), and as an academic piece, it would be quite logical to assume that this paper should present practical recommendations for confronting the ‘problem’ of coloniality in sustainability. Doing this, however, would centre white comfort (Hauge, 2019) and coloniality's need for easy and scalable (Tsing, 2012) solutions to digestible binaries of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that continue to bypass the harms of modern colonial discourse, and to deny the possibility of justice and reparations. Presenting Global South perspectives on colonial sustainability is the priority in this paper, noting that there is a high likelihood that such perspectives will be co-opted by many other approaches, including ones that claim to be ‘decolonial’ while attempting to position themselves in privileged spaces within a colonial world order.

Therefore, in taking a decolonial perspective, the predatory extractivism of colonial sustainability must be interrogated. Other sustainabilities existed prior to, and alongside, dominant white Western sustainability as it developed in parallel with globalised capitalism. Other sustainabilities rebel by persisting, developing, and growing not because of, but *in spite of,* a hegemonic sustainability industry that actively gains from silencing and eliminating them.

## **SUSTAINABILITY AS DISSENTING ECO-RELIGION**

The Bishnoi Panth is a religious sect founded in 1485 by Guru Jambheshwar in the Western Thar Desert and northern states of India. It is governed by 29 principles contained in a document called the *Sabhdvanis*. Of these principles, ten are on personal hygiene and maintaining good basic health; seven are on healthy social behaviour; four are on the worship of God; and eight are on preserving biodiversity and encouraging good animal husbandry. These include a ban on killing animals and cutting green trees, and affirm protection of all life forms (including evicting small insects from firewood). Blue cloth is prohibited due to the dyeing process, which requires what is considered an unjustifiably large quantity of shrubs. The Bishnoi are often called humanity’s first environmental activists because of their proactive ecocentric approaches in conserving ecological balance, and their active and selfless dissenting against civilising forces (Fernandez-Armesto, 2001) seeking to commit ecocide for profit. They remain active in environmental activism today.

On September 12, 1730, Amrita Devi, a Bishnoi woman, was the first to confront soldiers of Abhay Singh, the Maharaja of Jodhpur, for cutting down trees in Khejarli village for the construction of a new palace. In her attempt to stop them, she hugged a tree. Her family followed suit, and so did others from Khejarli and villages nearby. Amrita Devi told the soldiers that she was prepared to die to save the trees from being cut down. The soldiers killed her and 362 other villagers. The [Khejarli Massacre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khejarli_massacre) ended when Abhay Singh was informed of the killings and ordered his soldiers to stop (Bikku, 2019).

Amrita Devi inspired the Chipko movement of 1970s India. Global North activists across the West have adopted those same tree-hugging strategies with varying degrees of success.

For place-based indigenous and traditional groups, environmental sustainability is an essential and inseparable element of the human community’s worldview. Systems of care, understanding, and nourishment are deeply embedded in land and ecology, which themselves are entangled with self and society. In contrast, the hegemonic colonial ontology of the Global North (Law, 2015) insists on the separation of humanity (Kilomba, 2021) – specifically white man (Braidotti, 2019) – from “nature” (Tsing, 2005).

## **LEGITIMISING COLONIALITY THROUGH CHRISTIAN SUPREMACY**

The Doctrine of Discovery is an articulation of the worldview that engendered and implemented a series of papal bulls that would later be applied to contemporary international law. These papal bulls were issued by the pontiffs Eugene IV, Nicholas V, and Alexander VI, between 1436 and 1529. The socio-political confluence of church and state meant that religious commentary and legal policy were often construed and implemented as one and the same, such that any issuance from the Church would be taken as law (Rhodes, 1964). This paper explores the narrative justifications and the institutional governance structures that were established to legitimise European colonialism. As the first example of how this narrative justification continues to remain in force today, indigenous legal scholar Robert J. Miller notes in his 2019 paper on the Doctrine of Discovery:

According to the principle of ‘intertemporal’ law, modern-day territorial boundaries and land titles ‘are to be judged by the law in force at the time the title was first asserted and not by the law of today’ (Dugard et al., 2011, pp.113-114). … Consequently, how European countries and their colonies divided up the lands and assets of Indigenous Peoples and Nations in the distant past still determines national boundaries today… (p. 36)

In 1435, Pope Eugene IV issued a papal bull *Sicut Dudum*, following pressure from King Edward of Portugal, to allow the Portuguese to enslave un-baptised and non-Christian Canarians. In 1441, Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal asked Eugene to designate Portugal’s raids along the West African coast as a crusade, to permit and legitimise the enslavement of captives taken on raids. The papal bull *Illius qui se pro divini* (Russell, 2001) was issued in 1442, granting full remission of sins to members of the Order of Christ and those enrolled under their banner who took part in any expeditions against “the Saracens” and “enemies of Christianity,” authorising legal immunity for those committing colonial crimes. Pope Nicholas V issued the third *Romanus pontifex* (Davenport & Paullin, 1917) in 1455, endorsing Portugal's King Afonso V to

[I]nvade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit. (Davenport & Paullin, 1917, p. 23)

Other European kingdoms followed the example of Portugal, and later Spain, and sought to “discover” and thereby acquire other territories outside Europe, as legitimised by these papal bulls. The papal bulls gave Christian Europeans “dominion” (Davenport & Paullin, 1917, p. 23) over the non-Christian world, upon the false interpretation of European colonialism as an extension of just war. While Pope Paul III rescinded any such interpretation by 1537, no such act could effectively turn back a process that led to the perception of non-Christians as less-than-human.

This institutional domination set up systems of governance that ushered in the colonial era. It wove evangelisation – and its eventual “secular” successor, the “development” narrative – into territory-controlling, profit-centric colonisation. In the centuries that followed, the neoclassical revival of ancient Greek and medieval Christian concepts of the [Great Chain of Being](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781315132310/great-chain-being-arthur-lovejoy) (Lovejoy, 2009) reinforced existing moral justifications for the continuation and deepening of the colonial project. The Great Chain of Being rationalised racial hierarchies legitimising colonial exploitation, eventually evolving into modern forms of eugenics and white supremacy. In modern Western society, the world is perceived as a “system of nature” where living organisms, including humans, are perceived as “matter” to be organised, measured, counted, and used for the wellbeing of those who consider themselves “truly and fully” human. Here we find a common nexus between racial classification and the coloniality of nature, which are built upon and serve to justify further demographic and environmental catastrophes.

[White supremacy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/a-cultural-psychology-of-discrimination/202305/how-white-supremacy-is-built-into-societies) (Bettache, 2023) is a political and economic project. Its proponents deliberately construct evolving concepts of “race” to elevate themselves above all those they deem too different from the privileged white classes, relegating a curated majority to the rank of “less-than-human” - though never explicitly. White supremacy co-opts and eventually subsumes *everything* that does not represent nor serve [whiteness](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culturally-speaking/202006/what-is-whiteness) (Williams, 2023) into its own expansionary mechanisms. It creates narratives that place whiteness as the pinnacle of all creation, justifying the subordination of all others to itself. This is how the Great Chain of Being continues to influence contemporary environmentalism and sustainability today.

## **Forest Conservation in British India**

[James Ranald Martin](https://www.nature.com/articles/057462d0) was born on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, entering the Bengal Medical Service (Crawford, 1901) in 1817 at the age of 21 as a surgeon for the Honourable [East India Company](https://www.sussex.ac.uk/cweh/research/eastindiacompany) (EIC) (University of Sussex, n.d.). In the 1820s, he began to publish reports demonstrating the scale of damage deforestation and desiccation caused in British India. He lobbied for the institutionalisation of forest conservation activities in British India through the establishment of Forest Departments (*The Lancet*, 1852). What became known by the 1920s as “empire forestry” (Barton & Bennett, 2008) led to modern conservation convention - most clearly summed up Martin’s three core principles, as gathered and parsed out from Stebbing, 1922:

1. Human activity damages the environment;
2. there is a civic duty to maintain the environment for future generations; and
3. scientific, empirically based methods should be applied to ensure this duty is carried out.

In 1842, the Board of Revenue of Madras, India started [local conservation efforts](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44146752) (Rodrigues, 2011), headed by Alexander Gibson, who systematically adopted a forest conservation programme based on scientific principles (Gibson & Wright, 1863). Gibson, a Scottish surgeon and botanist at the EIC, was instrumental in implementing forest conservation laws across India. He promoted a forest conservation programme with help from two other Scots, First Conservator of Forests for the Madras Presidency Hugh Francis Cleghorn and EIC surgeon and “pioneering environmentalist” Edward Balfour. The actions of these four Scots led to the world’s first case of state management of forests in the world - in British-controlled India. The Governor-General of India introduced the first permanent large-scale forest conservation programme in 1855, a model that soon spread to other colonies, as well as to the United States (Kumar, 2010; Kumar, 2012; Sivaramakrishnan, 2008).

The invaders and occupiers used military violence for ecocide and ethnocide across annexed territories and set up their own legitimised authorities to define and regulate environmental sustainability, while shaming, demonising, targeting, displacing, and murdering rebellious and uncooperative indigenous peoples who were practising their own traditional agroecological cultures, while resisting the systematic theft of their ecological and cultural wealth (Broswimmer, 2002; Dunlap & Brock, 2022; Kirsch, 2016; Sivaramakrishnan, 2008)

## **COLONIAL ECOCIDE LEADING TO PLANETARY SYSTEMS COLLAPSE**

Colonialism is [a historic and ongoing driver](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/resources/spm-headline-statements/) of the climate crisis (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022). European colonisers degraded native ecology of the lands they colonised, committing ecocide and importing European plant and animal species, many invasive in their new contexts. Ecocide is an intentional project at co-opting indigenous epistemologies to further ethnocide and clear the way for colonial profit off colonised lands and bodies (Bacon, 2019; Bodley, 2014). In the context of settler colonialism, this is characterised by the destruction of local ecologies in favour of systems that facilitate settler survival, and - more importantly - comfort. Colonialism is a longstanding strategy of land dispossession, where deforestation, desertification, aridification, and planting colonising vegetation renders the land that indigenous communities occupy uninhabitable and volatile (IPCC, 2022)

In Australia, [digging animals were lost](https://theconversation.com/losing-australias-diggers-is-hurting-our-ecosystems-18590) (Fleming, 2013) when [hoofed animals were introduced](https://discover.hubpages.com/politics/Problems-Caused-By-Introduced-Hoofed-Animals-in-Australia) (West, 2018) during settler colonialism, changing landscapes and ecologies irreversibly. Introduced European animals such as [rabbits](https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/how-european-rabbits-took-over-australia/) found no natural predators and rapidly overpopulated to damage local ecologies (Reardon, 2023). Traditional ecological land management techniques were [interrupted](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-26/cultural-burning-to-protect-from-catastrophic-bushfires/100241046) by the genocidal and epistemicidal displacement of indigenous peoples, leading to catastrophic runaway effects of environmental damage and climate change, such as the unprecedented [wildfires](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%9320_Australian_bushfire_season) of recent years (Lee, 2021).

Israeli occupiers uprooted native olive trees in Southern Palestine and replaced them with eucalyptus trees to deplete groundwater supplies and deprive Palestinians of drinking water, while propagandising the act as a greening project (Varanasi, 2022).

Indeed, as Banivanua-Mar and Edmonds (2010) point out in relation to Australian settler colonialism,

...the settler imaginary requires the sequestering of spaces as constructed zones of aesthetically proscribed ‘wilderness’ emptied of Indigenous social spaces, so too settler cities were discursively narrated as spaces of progress, commerce and modernity – spaces of the highest stage of development in the Western historicising narrative aggressively exclusive of Indigenous peoples. The creation of both spaces, institutionalised wilderness and settler cities, presupposed and functioned upon the discursive production of an absence of Aboriginal peoples. (p. 11)

Colonial and settler colonial restructuringsof local ecosystems (Banivanua-Mar & Edmonds, 2010) have brought about ecocide. Such ecocide has cascaded, and continues to cascade, into ongoing planetary systems collapse (Broswimmer, 2002; Franklin, 2020; Jer, 2019). In the “post-colonial” era, ecological conservation and environmental sustainability projects have been implemented by wealthy actors in all nation states to monopolise the epistemic, material, and ecological resources of the Global South in an obvious and inadequate attempt to redress colonial ecocide. These efforts further undermine the practices of indigenous and traditional cultures, while continuing to target community leaders who demand just and culturally appropriate environmental protections.

[Fortress conservation](https://www.centredestudisafricans.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Brockingtonfinal.pdf) is often the favoured method of greenwashing colonial efforts to dispossess communities of their rights to custodianship and sovereignty, while profiting off conservation areas through certain categories of permitted economic activity by licenced actors, including the tourism (Brockington, 2015; Tauli-Corpuz et al., 2018) and carbon markets (Yale e360, 2022). This is another mechanism through which colonial sustainability perpetuates ethnocide for profit. Traditional and indigenous knowledge and skills continue to be co-opted by colonisers, to improve fortress conservation and further entrench coloniality, by misappropriating them into industrial, academic, and pharmaceutical outputs inaccessible to the very victims of the ethnocide perpetrated by hegemonic powers (Boyd & Keene, 2021).

## **IMPERIALISING ENVIRONMENTALISM THROUGH HEGEMONIC INSTITUTIONALISM**

After World War II, new nation states were formed as European empires “granted independence” to colonies whose anti-colonial rebellions were too expensive and impractical to quash. To prevent backlash for colonial crimes, and to guarantee continued extractive profiteering, European empires established Western-aligned political classes in new nation states under threat of direct military or covert political interference, further immunising themselves by coercing these new nation-states into agreements that guarantee or limit their ability to develop militarily or economically (Basu-Mellish, 2023; Mata, 2020), but certainly not to the point of posing a threat to colonial powers or their systems of extractive profit (i.e., “national security”) (Pigeaud, 2021). These were, and continue to be, framed by hegemonic powers as “independent democracies,” according to definitions that are policed by hegemonic institutions, such as the International Electoral Standards (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, n.d.). Such institutions act in alignment with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted by the [United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI)](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-4&chapter=4&clang=_en) in 1966 and entered into force in 1976 after its 35th ratification or accession - a deliberately delaying process of multilateral wrangling that continues to benefit neocolonial empires (UN, 1966).

The UN was created as an intergovernmental organisation tasked with maintaining international peace and security. It is also “tasked with developing friendly relations among nations, achieving international cooperation, and being a centre for harmonising the actions of nations” (UN, 1945). These new independent states of the Global South then became new UN members as a way to quell rebellions through a political performance of “equality,” “inclusion,” and “legitimacy;” state representation at the UN came from the Western-aligned political classes of “sovereign” former colonies (Puchala, 2005; Puchala et al., 2007).

The U.S. environmental movement took off after WWII as people began to recognise the costs of environmental negligence, disease, and air and water pollution through the occurrence of several major environmental disasters. Aldo Leopold, an American philosopher, scientist, and ecologist, wrote *A Sand County Almanac* in 1949. He believed that “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (1968, p.179). He was influential in the development of modern environmental ethics and in the movement for wilderness conservation. His perspectives were promoted by colonial power structures, while indigenous rebels and activists across the Global South continued to be jailed, tortured, and killed for opposing destructive and extractive projects, such as mining, dam-building, and railway construction, that profited private companies in the Global North.

In the late 1950s, Rachel Carson, an American marine biologist, author, and conservationist, started studying environmental problems that she believed were caused by synthetic pesticides. She published *The Silent Spring* in 1962 to critical acclaim across the Global North, receiving several character attacks by the chemicals industry and aligned politicians (Carson, 1962). Her work went on to influence many environmental policies at national, international, and global levels through the decades, sidelining ecologically aligned Global South communities’ centuries-long experiences regarding this same problem.

Jay Wright Forrester, pioneering American MIT computer engineer and systems scientist previously involved in the US Navy’s WWII campaigns in the Pacific, joined the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Sloan School of Management in 1956, and developed a computational concept he called “system dynamics” (Forrester, n.d.), even though non-Western knowledges and cultures in this area had already been developed and practised for thousands of years. By the late 1960s, his team had built a computer model to simulate what they called World Dynamics (Forrester & Forrester, 1973), which was used to develop the Club of Rome’s Limits to Growth (Meadows et al., 2004), published in 1972 to massive controversy. The Club of Rome is celebrated for continuing to “ring the alarm” around planetary systems collapse and the collapse of human civilisation, even though indigenous leaders across the Global South have been ridiculed, targeted, and killed for centuries by colonial police and military actors for warning the public about the ways they understood the planetary ecological balance was being tipped over.

The first UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) was held in June 1972 in Stockholm, Sweden, amid protests around environmental disasters at that time, such as oil spills. Martin’s aforementioned three principles (in Stebbing, 1922) echo loudly throughout UN discourse ever since its first declaration on the global environment, the UNCHE’s Stockholm Declaration of 1972. The UN Environment Programme was established at the Stockholm conference. It was headed by Canadian oil and mineral businessman Maurice Strong, who lived a privileged life enjoying high praise from environmentalists globally while continuing to promote colonial power structures and development narratives. He was one personality who [dominated and maintained](https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/world-mourns-one-its-greats-maurice-strong-dies-his-legacy-lives) (UN Environment Programme, n.d.) the [cult of white supremacy](https://capitalresearch.org/article/sustainable-development-part-5/) (Braun, 2023) from the early days of sustainability institutions worldwide. These multilateral dynamics continued to be enforced through political, economic, and military means, ensuring ever-increasing South-North [capital flight](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S095937802200005X) (Hickel et al., 2022), even as the multilateral mechanism harped upon semantics of sustainable development, thus becoming an institutional concept developed and defined by 1987 by European narratives within the UN-appointed Brundtland Commission, within which Strong played a dominant role (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

Swedish meteorologist Bert Bolin, first chairman of the IPCC, is credited with bringing together a diverse (albeit homogenous) range of views among the panel's 3,500 scientists under his chairmanship. The IPCC’s First Assessment Report (IPCC, 1990) led to the signing of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), ratified at the first Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. As Henderson (2007) notes in his critique of the IPCC,

…[T]here are good reasons to query the claims to authority and representative status that are made by and on behalf of the IPCC, and hence to question the unique status, one of virtual monopoly, that it now holds. The trust so widely placed, in Panel and process alike, is unwarranted; and this fact puts in doubt the accepted basis of official climate policies. (p. 912)

Parties to the UNFCCC have since met at annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) to discuss how to “[stabilise] greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (United Nations, 1992) The non-binding Framework contains no enforcement mechanisms, and simply functions as an international agreement to negotiate and form partnerships between and among political classes of nation states. The UNFCCC eventually produced the Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015.

Through spectacular displays of propagandised environmentalism at the COPs, Western narratives dominate, while non-Western discourse is often ignored, minimised, patronised, and co-opted. Through the centuries of [cultural evolution](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11692-015-9320-0) (Mesoudi, 2016), colonial propaganda mechanisms within the communications sector had already inculcated a deep-seated culture of Western-centric narratives, with the most influential media organisations based in political and economic centres of neocolonial empires such as London and New York. Media covering the COPs were by default socialised and incentivised to focus on the opinions and proposals of the political classes of self-branded and self-imposed “sustainable” Global North states (San Martin, 2021; Yamineva, 2017).

## **THE INDUSTRIALISATION OF COLONIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Industrial renewable energy projects were early developments in a very nascent sustainability industry. Take the example of industrial water mills. [Sir Richard Arkwright](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Arkwright)’s 1771 development [Cromford Mills](https://www.cromfordmills.org.uk/) in Derwent Valley, England, was humanity’s first industrial water-powered cotton-spinning mill, expanding Cromford village extensively for what British canals and waterways expert [Stuart Fisher](https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/author/stuart-fisher/) called in 2017 “the first factory housing development in the world” (Fisher, 2017). The mill is protected as a Grade I listed building within the Derwent Valley Mills United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Site as a celebrated innovation that heavily influenced the British Industrial Revolution. The raw cotton supplying the mill was [produced by enslaved people in the Americas](https://www.derwentvalleymills.org/discover/derwent-valley-mills-research/recent-research/global-cotton-connections/). The Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site acknowledges that “the industrialisation of Britain and the greater productivity of the factory system, which began in the Derwent Valley, led to unprecedented demands for cotton which contributed to an inhuman and brutal regime of historic global slavery” (Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site, n.d.). This demand for cotton continues to contribute to slavery to this day (Brooks, 2019; Cozma, 2023).

The origin of “sustainability consulting” as a highly profitable private sector function came about via the global sustainability agenda set by UNCHE 1972, Earth Summits, and COPs. These conferences brought together the global political and capitalist classes, creating a colonial environmental sector within itself, buttressed by developmental models established to maintain neocolonialism, complete with its own corporate language: greenwashing. The authors observe that the core values underpinning the narratives of this colonial sub-class of environment and sustainability professionals are advancing development, research and development to drive techno-optimism, propagandised “hopium,” and white feminism. The underlying meanings of these core values are:

* Advancing development: “Human societies need to follow Western development models to attain the standards of living that Europeans presently enjoy.”
* Research and development to drive techno-optimism: “Technology may have created this mess, but new technology will surely save the planet and guarantee modern Western civilisation’s ability to thrive upon it.”
* Propagandised “hopium”: “Planetary health and human societies are in dire straits, but optimism and positivity must be maintained at all costs to maintain power structures and to centre and comfort white supremacy.”
* White feminism: “Global inequities are best and most clearly seen through the lens of white women seeking to define and understand better the struggle for equality towards a more just world - but actual world history distracts from the issues we consider important.”

These values and narratives uphold and justify globalised capitalism as the mechanism by which sustainability is to be delivered. The colonial environmental sub-class utilises “development” to forward its agenda.

The sustainability industry is overwhelmingly white and well-compensated, drawing corporate rates in Global North capital cities, while celebrating its overt whiteness (as depicted in “Top 10” lists celebrating well-performing sustainability consultants or consultancies (e.g. <https://sustainabilitymag.com/top10/top-10-sustainability-consultants> (Hope, 2022) and <https://www.theconsultingreport.com/the-top-25-sustainability-consultants-and-leaders-of-2023> (The Consulting Report, 2023). In comparison, between 2012 and 2023, 1,733 indigenous leaders and environmental activists have been killed trying to protect their land and resources (Hines, 2022). This industry seeks to sustain colonial hegemony, the bedrock of modern Western civilisation as it exists globally today, as a continuation of European colonisation.

The harms perpetrated by institutional entities attempting to alter a given territory for economic development or advancement are referred to by the indigenous rights movement as “development aggression” (Asia Indigenous People’s Pact [AIPP], 2012). In confronting powerful neocolonial actors, local communities tend to buckle under enormous structural and economic pressures exerted by governments’ and corporations’ violent and lethal efforts to implement their business models. “[S]tate, public-private partnerships and corporate projects,” such as “large dams, mines, logging, plantations, national parks and the like,” severely alter territories and communities for economic advancement (AIPP, 2012). This almost always leads to ecocide and ethnocide through environmental destruction and displacement of indigenous and traditional communities. Local communities are denied justice and remain largely disenfranchised and ignored by broader society and mainstream media, devoting the vast majority of their efforts to critical care, security, rehabilitation, and other community survival priorities. Today, development aggression continues to offer effective mechanisms for neocolonisation by restructuring local economies to serve white supremacy and its colonial profit motives. Those profit motives generate revenues to compensate the sustainability industry – the very same white, colonial sustainability that sanctions and applauds statements such as,

We have been dedicated to conservation, human rights, and economic development for more than 50 years. These high standards apply to all our companies including timber and wind tower production. We are always exploring new ways in which we can advance our environmental and social contribution standards to uphold our commitment to accountability that guides us today. (Korindo, n.d.)

The above sustainability statement proudly adorns the website of Korindo, a Korean-Indonesian palm oil conglomerate responsible for environmental destruction and human rights abuses in Indonesian-occupied West Papua, including child killings, disappearances, torture, and mass displacement of people (Jong & Butler, 2019; UN Human Rights Council, 2022; Vembrianto, 2021). This is indicative of a broad recurring pattern across the sustainability industry, particularly concerning large-scale or commercial mining, energy, and agriculture projects. The global carbon market funding “reforestation projects” in the Global South has also been found to be “worthless” (Greenfield, 2023). On its website’s “Who We Are” page, Verra, the world’s largest carbon market certifier, with headquarters in Washington, D.C., describes itself as follows:

Verra sets the world’s leading standards for climate action and sustainable development. [...] Everything we do is in service of increasingly ambitious climate and sustainable development goals – and an accelerated transition to a sustainable future. (Verra, n.d.)

Investigations undertaken by *The Guardian*, *Die Zeit,* and *SourceMaterial* in 2023 showed that 90% of Verra’s rainforest carbon credits do not represent real emission reductions (in Greenfield, 2023). Some of the world’s largest companies are clients of Verra, and the United Nations Reducing Emissions from Deforestation in Developing countries (REDD+) (UNFCCC, n.d.) projects involved are based across the Global South.

## **THE CASE FOR ABOLISHING COLONIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

As planetary systems collapse and the Sixth Mass Extinction (Bar-On et al, 2018) continues to accelerate, the sustainability industry, a professional sub-class within humanity’s global ruling classes, remains concerned with promoting and implementing colonial hegemony’s long-failed yet loudly peddled concepts of Western environmentalism and white sustainability.

One of the most pernicious ways that coloniality sustains itself in a white supremacist system is through an emphasis on a blind optimism that often comes from a passive belief that external forces will solve a given problem, and through techno-solutionism, which emphasises the use of technology or engineering to solve problems – especially ones that require far deeper understanding and insight than what any rapid techno-fix or solution can address (Varoufakis, 2023).

Such “hopium” and solutionism do not stop the ecocides, ethnocides, epistemicides, and genocides perpetuated by ongoing colonialism and coloniality, and may in fact exacerbate ongoing development aggression and accelerate planetary systems collapse. Industrial sustainability’s values, as articulated in the previous section, are operationalised to create, exacerbate, and profit from the very problems the industry purports to address.

The sustainability industry’s inherent coloniality very frequently reveals itself in:

* Silencing or denying colonial and neocolonial histories, using powerful, lucrative systems of hegemonic tunnel-visioning to centre white supremacist perspectives;
* romanticising and co-opting indigenous and “ancient wisdoms;”
* saviourism, virtue-signalling, and exceptionalism;
* centring capitalist financial profit; and
* bypassing complex issues from non-Western perspectives to focus on easy solutions and romanticised ideals.

Industrial sustainability practitioners who wish to minimise the harms their industries perpetuate could do so by paying attention to whether the above elements are at play in their projects, initiatives, organisations, and/or institutions. However, other than a strict awareness of where and how harms are done, and a commitment to not perpetrating these harms, there are no hard and fast rules to addressing and confronting the denial, romanticisation, saviourism, profit-centring, and bypassing one may be complicit in within their work.

As described in the section on colonial ecocide, the cultural evolution of coloniality into the planet-spanning, ontologically predatory leviathan that it is (Dunlap & Jakobsen, 2020; Blaser, 2009; Law, 2015) has historically disrupted, diverted, and outright annihilated multiple planetary systems. It continues to this day, and industrial sustainability, as a product and mechanism of coloniality, has justified, facilitated, and perpetrated this ongoing destruction.

The denial of the very harms the sustainability industry perpetrates and the false accountability measures it puts forward to sustain and validate its own existence do nothing but provide life support for a necrotic and fatal system. By narcissistically insisting on a justification for globalised capitalism, colonial sustainability attempts to obfuscate its own complicity in violent and oppressive planetary systems collapse.

Other systems of sustainability, even the very presence of other ontologies (Blaser, 2009), pose a threat to coloniality. Other sustainabilities may undermine industrial sustainability and repair or grow past the material ecological and societal harms coloniality has perpetrated and justified. In working to co-opt or destroy them, industrial sustainability normalises the violence of white comfort. That is, within the white supremacist culture that coloniality has evolved, the violence itself becomes inseparable from comfort and white superiority.

In the face of planetary systems collapse, industrial sustainability is inherently harmful. It is irredeemable. To begin actively addressing the harms created by the coloniality that this industry perpetuates, profits from, and continues to invest in, industrial sustainability must do more than minimise those harms; it must begin to hospice itself.

Members of the professional sub-class that is the sustainability industry are, by design, agents of coloniality. In beginning to abolish colonial sustainability, sustainability professionals must seek to clearly understand and identify the patterns of coloniality that had generated it and that it continues to perpetuate and guarantee.

Deeply seated patterns of coloniality appear most overtly in the narratives and conceptualisations defining the sustainability industry – in individuals and institutions – to powerfully maintain and service our inequitable global class and governance structures. The establishment of the sustainability industry is just one project within the centuries-long cultural evolution of colonial hegemony, reinforcing and justifying validation and incentivisation for furthering ecocide and ethnocide via exploitation and oppression.

In contrast, sustainability as preserved indigenous and traditional eco-religious cultures is a decolonial ambition that has rapidly waned as colonial hegemony’s death-grip collapses planetary systems of life.

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Christina M. Sayson is an anthropologist and researcher with the decolonial collective POSSIBLE FUTURES, seeking truth in environmental justice, indigenous rights, and food sovereignty.

Samantha Suppiah is a decolonial design strategist for sustainability and regeneration with the decolonial collective POSSIBLE FUTURES, seeking to disarm, disable, and dismantle colonial designs, intentions, and systems.​

Anna Denardin is a designer in sustainability and regeneration with POSSIBLE FUTURES, experimenting with forms of creative expression that staunchly reveal and demolish toxic narratives perpetuated by the colonial cultural hegemony.

Luiza Oliveira is a decolonial health strategist with POSSIBLE FUTURES, seeking patterns and paradigms to dismantle coloniality and make way for holistic and traditional systems of care, bringing critical insights from her practice as a neurologist.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres is a decolonial thinker who works with the BlackHouse Kollective-Soweto, co-chairs the Frantz Fanon Foundation, and teaches philosophy.

Ayabulela Mhlahlo is a PhD student at the University of Connecticut Philosophy Department. She is a member of the Black House Kollective-Soweto in South Africa, where she works on community projects that pertain to epistemic, environmental and racial justice, and decoloniality.

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Samantha Suppiah at [infinite@possiblefutures.earth](mailto:infinite@possiblefutures.earth)