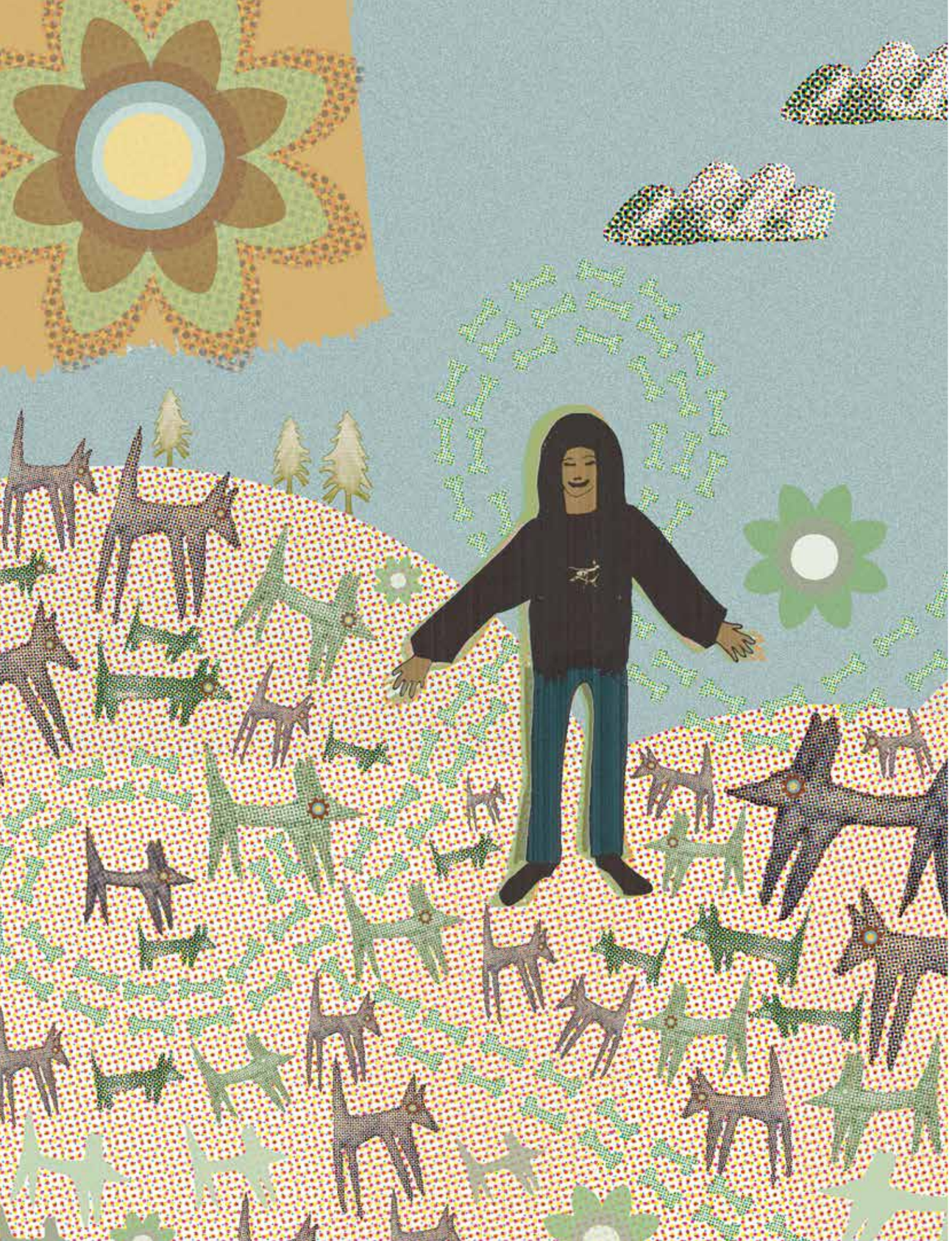

RESTORING THE BALANCE FOR REZ DOGS

Dogs have lived side by side with First Nations people long before Indigenous tribes were forced to move to reserves. In addition to the colonialists' atrocities inflicted on these communities, their dogs have more recently invited another kind of white saviourism. When self-appointed dog charities remove the pets of Indigenous people on misguided grounds, it's time to step in and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Canadian lawyer and political advocate Kay She-Johnson dives into the issue

Words Kay She-Johnson
Illustrations Rowanna Lacey

In 2016, Leah Arcand, from the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, was teaching a land-based programme to seventh and eighth grade girls at her reserve. During lunchtime, she would casually feed the dogs that wandered up to them. These animals were community owned. They roamed freely. And, although her students had grown up around these dogs, colloquially known as 'rez dogs', she was surprised to learn they knew very little about the basics of responsible pet ownership.

With the help of her partner, Craig Edes, Arcand started using the hashtag #saverezdogs on social media to share cute pictures, funny memes and heartbreaking stories about dog welfare on reserves in Canada. In doing so, she has captured the attention of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

Save Rez Dogs has morphed into a powerful solutions-oriented grassroots initiative, partnering Indigenous communities with a network of veterinary and rescue resources, as well as fundraising, educating and promoting animal welfare on First Nations reserves.

"It's a rollercoaster of emotions," Arcand says. reflecting on Save Rez Dogs. "There are times where it's really rewarding and there are times where it's super devastating. So that's why we have to just tell their stories … just as we experience them, being transparent and being accountable."

That rollercoaster of emotions Arcand refers to is not only due to sharing the realities of animal welfare on the reserves, but also the welfare of Indigenous peoples. The two are inextricably tied together.

Dogs were a critical part of First Nations people's existence. Indigenous ancestral knowledge recalls how hard dogs worked for man – hunting down buffalo and alerting people to danger

It's worth noting that Indigenous knowledge has honoured that interdependence for generations. Anthropologist and Indigenous culture scholar Courtney Townsend explains that the commonly used expression by Indigenous peoples – 'all my relations' – is an example of this. "It acknowledges one's relations to all living and non-living things, ancestors and future generations unconfined from the perception of time."

Recently, this concept has emerged in western medicine as One Health – that animals, humans and the environment must work together for the health of all.

My relation is a rez dog

'Rez dogs' is a shorthand and casual term used in Canada and the US to refer to dogs on an Indigenous reserve. The term is often laden with assumptions about the state of the dogs – that they are strays, unkempt and unhoused.

The reality is far more complex. There are many misconceptions about rez dogs from non-Indigenous communities, but the most dangerous ones validate colonial narratives about the Indigenous peoples who live on the reserves.

To understand rez dogs properly, we first must understand what a reserve (or rez) is – its colonial history and present-day circumstances. As always, if we pay close enough attention, we see dogs trot in and out of mankind's historical narratives.

In the beginning, First Nations people lived off the land. Different tribes had different skills depending on their territory – hunting, farming or fishing. Some tribes were nomadic, following their food. They had an intimate relationship with their environment and all living things, knowing better than anyone else that human survival demands the participation of non-humans.

Dogs were a critical part of First Nations people's existence. Indigenous ancestral knowledge recalls how hard dogs worked for man – hunting down buffalo, alerting people to danger and allowing themselves to be harnessed to a sled to pull humans across the tundra. The creation story shared by a First Nations elder *(see p80)* reveals a deep gratitude for the service of dogs.

The arrival of European settlers, in the early 17th century, changed the First Nations way of life forever. Colonial initiatives to 'civilise' Indigenous peoples by introducing them to Christianity and agriculture based on western concepts of property ownership were the precursors to the reserve system.

Treaties made between the Crown and certain First Nations groups, managed by the Indian Act in 1876, set aside tracts of land, or reserves, for exclusive use and occupancy of the First Nations. Ironically, such land was neither hospitable for agriculture nor legally owned by the First Nations group.

Fast forward to today, the Canadian Indigenous population fares worse than their non-Indigenous counterparts on every determinant of well-being, whether it be health, income, education, employment or housing. Reserves are stark illustrations of this – many still do not have reliable access to safe drinking water, poverty is rampant and suicide rates are twice as high for those living on-reserve as those living off-reserve.

Rez dogs are not immune from this phenomenon. Lack of access to veterinary care has resulted in a proliferation of litters. When communities do not have resources to care for their humans, they have even less ability to look after their dogs. Winters are particularly difficult on reserves, and there have been cases of dogs becoming aggressive and attacking livestock and people.

On the Save Rez Dogs Instagram page, there is a screenshot of a notice, dated 18 May, 2022, notifying all members of a First Nations band of a scheduled cull for any dogs not tied up by their owners.

"These are symptoms of the problem, and the source of the problem is the Indian Act," says Edes. Taking an upstream-thinking approach, he explains that the history of land theft, the residential schools, racism and oppression at the hands of non-Indigenous people, embodied by the Indian Act, are the root causes of the current suffering. Until those structural barriers come down, First Nations people will continue to struggle with the odds against them.

Reconciliation and rez dogs

Dismantling these barriers is a journey towards reconciliation, rebuilding the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples based on recognition of rights, respect and partnership. The task at hand is audacious and overwhelming, but, once again, dogs may be able to show us the way.

Veterinarian Celine Ward has participated in multiple spay, neuter and vaccination clinics on Indigenous reserves. She recalls one experience volunteering in Pukatawagan, a remote reserve in northern Manitoba accessible only by a twice-weekly local train, small aeroplane or ice road. They set up the clinic in the backyard of one of the community's teachers, and the people came with their dogs.

"There were beautiful lakes there and a lot of folks would bring us gifts. They brought us fresh-caught fish and elk and bannock [bread]." Ward smiles. "I have a painting that one of the folks gave me as a trade."

"The community is truly happy you're there. People don't have access to veterinary care, and when you provide them a place to get access, they are there."

She attributes the success of these clinics to the relationships built between certain animal welfare organisers and First Nations community members. Central to this is a respect for Indigenous self-governance. "We are not the boss," says Ward. "We are there to provide the help that they need, and we're not there to dictate what specifically they think they need."

Getting First Nations buy-in for these clinics may seem easy, but consider the history of Indigenous trauma due to the Sixties Scoop and Indian residential schools, where children were removed from their families and, in some cases, never came home. In some instances, "they're scared to bring their dogs", explains Arcand.

Similarly, when organisations rescue rez dogs under the guise of animal welfare without communication or agreement with the First Nations, it has echoes of white saviourism and can create the same Indigenous trauma.

There have been reports of rescue organisations taking roaming dogs off the reserve for adoption, even though the dogs actually belong to someone. "We project all this human stuff onto the dog, 'Oh, don't do that to another dog, you've got to be on a leash, you have to stay in the yard,'" says Townsend. "But that's not the Indigenous way, which recognises them as their own sovereign beings, just as we are."

"We need different ways of looking at dog welfare," agrees Ward. "A dog that's wandering in the community, and is loved by many people in that community, is happy."

To be sure, there are issues of animal health, neglect, and overpopulation on reserves. But to help rez dogs in ▸

the spirit of true reconciliation, animal rescues need to first re-examine their internalised racial assumptions about Indigenous people and dogs, listen and follow the lead of the First Nations community. Arcand and Edes are hopeful that, with the right education for First Nations leaders, young people and non-Indigenous peoples, they can build Indigenous capacity to manage dogs on the reserve, which they believe is the best and most sustainable solution to save rez dogs.

Wild and free

While some might aspire to a manicured yard with a white picket fence, rez dogs know better.

Townsend recalls visiting a Tsuut'ina Nation family with two dogs who roam free outside as they please. When they come back to the house, they're welcome to go inside if they want. "One dog does, the other won't. He doesn't want to be inside at all – he's wild, right?"

But, undeniably, the dogs have formed a bond with their humans. They get meal leftovers and a dog house for the winter. They love the playing children. When Townsend pulls up in her car, they greet her with excitement and invitations for rubs.

"They're so happy, such beautiful little spirits ... Eating and running around, having adventures and coming back to their humans. I can't imagine a better life for a dog."

saverezdogs.com
@saverezdogs

Support the Animal Welfare Fund at the Kenora Veterinary Clinic at **kenoravet.com**

Read more about Canada's journey in reconciliation, guided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada at **nctr.ca**

Helping his human:

a creation story about dogs saving people

A ceremonialist from Tsuut'ina Nation shared this creation story with Courtney Townsend in her Indigenous Studies research. With permission, we have reprinted it as told. The story has a home among the Dakota people and is located in a pre-colonial period.

When there was an abuse of power among humankind, the Creator called the winged, the four-legged, the swimmers and the plant people, asking who would be willing to help humans, who had been actively hurting others and abusing their rights. Nobody came forward at first, while others questioned how they could help the humans who had harmed them.

But, far away in the distance, someone was coming. The 'someone' was more than one; small creatures moving between the legs of all the others. And what emerged were the dog people.

"I will help them. I will speak on their behalf. They can use my fur and flesh if they need. I will do whatever you need me to do to help them," said the dog. The Creator responded, reminding the dog that they may be mistreated and badly hurt. However, due to their strong spirit, they would recover and forgive quickly.

"You will restore balance in their lives," said the Creator. After hearing all of this, the dog assured the Creator that they would take responsibility for the humans.