

Whose Wilderness?

People, plants, and power in a changing landscape

Aki & Ohóntsya (land) • Photography as relational inquiry

CENTRAL QUESTION

What stories do the plants of The Wilderness hold of enduring Indigenous presence, settler families, public use, and the care we owe this land today?

01 / LAND RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH TIME

An almost five-acre Carolinian woodland, gardens, buildings, and One Mile Creek form a landscape of overlapping ecological and cultural histories. [1, 2]

Deep histories

Panels report human presence along One Mile Creek over 8,000 years ago and identify Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee histories. [1: 3]

1799–1800s

Panels describe a 1799 Six Nations land exchange and gift to Ann Johnson Claus. The Claus household develops gardens and orchards; diaries record cultivation and plant exchanges. [1: 4, 15]

1919–1994

Austin revives gardens in 1919. Parker family preservation begins in the 1940s; heritage designation follows in 1994. Residents change while ecological legacies persist. [1: 12–13; 2]

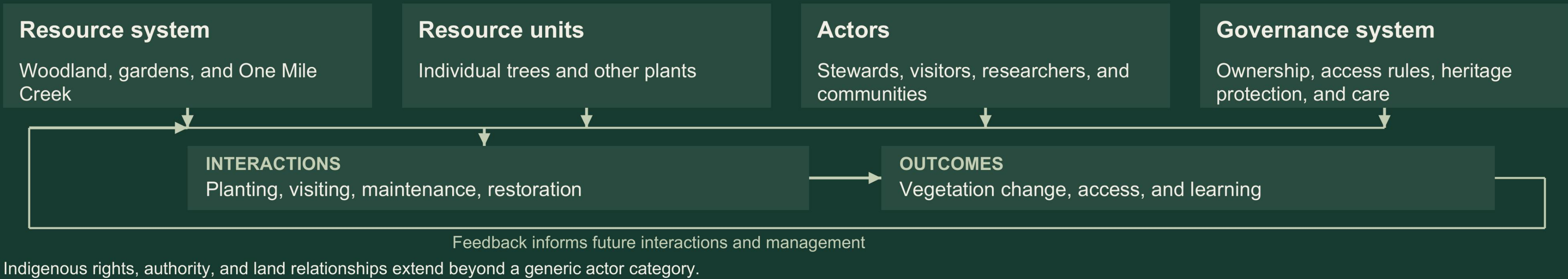
2013–2025

Ruth Parker’s bequest supports preservation. The Foundation acquires full ownership in 2024; its 2025 plan includes invasive removal, creek rehabilitation, and local-species planting. [1: 13, 24]

These are overlapping relationships, not a sequence in which Indigenous presence ends with settler ownership.

02 / THE WILDERNESS AS A SOCIAL–ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM

Applying Ostrom (2009) [3] within wider historical, social, and ecological contexts



Indigenous rights, authority, and land relationships extend beyond a generic actor category.

The language we use shapes what we notice, value, and take responsibility for. What changes when we encounter a tree as a resource unit, a living being, or a relation?

03 / FRAMEWORKS THAT WORK TOGETHER

Historical ecology: trace how cultivation and land use leave ecological legacies, using diaries, maps, and vegetation records.

SES + complex adaptive systems: examine linked actors, governance, and ecology; test feedbacks, time lags, and path dependence. Plant spread may outlast a gardener’s intentions. [3, 4]

Political ecology / anti-colonial inquiry: ask who controlled land, whose histories are visible, and who defines desirable nature.

Decolonial accountability: investigate Indigenous authority and land relationships. Recognition alone is not decolonization. [5]

04 / PHOTOGRAPHY + EVIDENCE



Tree detail, house and grounds, and entrance signage: photographs connect vegetation, built history, and stewardship.

WORKING PROPOSITION

A forest can persist while its species, meanings, and governance change. Restoration is both an ecological process and a decision about the future.

SOURCES & RESEARCH POSITION

[1] The Niagara Foundation. Windows to The Wilderness (2025), supplied 24-page PDF; page numbers above. [2] Richard Merritt, About The Wilderness, supplied Q&A, undated. These heritage accounts are starting points for inquiry, not comprehensive accounts of Indigenous perspectives.

[3] Ostrom (2009), Science 325:419–422, doi:10.1126/science.1172133. [4] Walker et al. (2004), Ecology and Society 9(2):5. [5] Tuck & Yang (2012), Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society 1(1):1–40.

Aki and Ohóntsya are retained from the project framing; their interpretation will be grounded in relevant language sources and relationships with knowledge holders. No completed ecological survey or interview findings are claimed.