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Chasing colonization back: rethinking parks, returning place-names, and restoring buffalo medicine—an interview with Ninna Piiksii, Dr. Mike Bruised Head

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In this interview, we hear from influential Blackfoot Elder and Cultural Educator Ninna Piiksii, Dr. Michael Bruised Head. Mike reflects on the colonial naming of national parks and the need to return to Indigenous place-names, examining how we occupy a pivotal moment where park staff are more open to substantive Indigenous engagement and presence within parks, although more needs to be done. Drawing connections across topics that may initially seem discrete, Mike reflects on his experience as a survivor of the Canadian residential school system, colonial dispossession by parks and more broadly, and how Blackfoot restoration efforts—including the return of buffalo or *iinnii*—can offer paths for healing from these traumas and build a more just, Blackfoot-led future. Through this, Mike asks us to rethink the profound value and potential of conservation, pushing beyond Western understandings. He closes by asking the interviewers to reflect on what motivates them to support Tribal buffalo restoration, turning the tables on the interviewer and interviewee, and reinforcing the importance of connection and responsibility among non-Tribal research collaborators. We open with an introduction to Mike and then turn to hear his words. The interview format reflects a growing trend of expert-interviews-as-articles and Indigenous practices of oral knowledge transmission. We also link to an audio recording of the interview to allow readers to become listeners and hear Mike's words in full context. The conversation and format are offered in the spirit of opening more space for Indigenous—and particularly Blackfoot—voices, perspectives, and methodologies in conservation scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous conservation, national parks, buffalo reintroduction, ecological restoration, residential schools, Blackfoot worldview

Introduction to Ninna Piiksii, Dr. Michael Bruised Head

As a member of the sacred Horn Society, Dr. Michael Bruised Head, or Ninna Piiksii (Chief Bird), is a Blackfoot Elder and Cultural Teacher from the Blood Reserve of the Kainai First Nation in what is today southern Alberta. Dr. Bruised Head, or "Mike" to his many friends and students, is the founding member of the Kainai Ecosystem Protection Association

(KEPA) and an influential Blackfoot thinker and conservationist whose contributions both reinforce the importance of conservation and require that we rethink its very meaning and purpose. More on that below.

Mike was born on 28 August 1957 along the Belly River. Born into the Weasel People and Spotted Horse Clan, Mike was delivered by his grandmother and great-grandmother and welcomed into a world and landscape steeped in the Blackfoot language and ways of knowing. As a Blackfoot Indian kid, he was surrounded by the love and wisdom of his grandparents and great-grandparents. This stood in stark contrast to the atrocities he experienced at boarding school, part of the notorious Canadian residential school system (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Despite efforts to "kill the Indian," Mike never lost the old version of the Blackfoot language or understanding of Blackfoot culture, with his generation possibly the last of fluent speakers of the old language. Mike has spent his career on the land as a horse and cattle rancher, cultural educator, and advocate for the animals, the land, the water, the Blackfoot people, and their ways of life, knowing and understanding all of these as interconnected and inseparable (Figure 1).

In 2022, Mike became Dr. Bruised Head after the successful defense of his Ph.D. dissertation, *The Colonial Impact of the Erasure of Blackfoot Miistakistsi Place Names in Paahtoomahksikimi, Waterton Lakes National Park*, at the University of Lethbridge (Bruised Head, 2022). The study examines how Blackfoot place-names and presence were erased from the park and then works to reintegrate these back into the landscape, so Waterton can once again be understood as *Paahtoomahksikimi*, or "a lake built by water from ice." This ties into a larger movement of decolonizing place-names within protected areas (McGill et al., 2022) and more broadly (Tucker and Rose-Redwood, 2015), as well as an effort to address conservation's legacies of dispossession (Spence, 1999). A notable contribution in its own right, the study gained wide recognition for Mike's handling of the defense entirely in the Blackfoot language. This, for Mike, reinforced that the study was not for the university but rather for himself, his family, the Blackfoot people, and other Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Once again, Mike displayed a commitment to critiquing colonial institutions—whether universities or parks—while finding their leverage points to make them more equitable, sustainable, and Indigenous by inhabiting them in distinctly Blackfoot ways. His approach is both oppositional and reconciliatory, with these united by a genuine warmth and unfailing sense of humor.

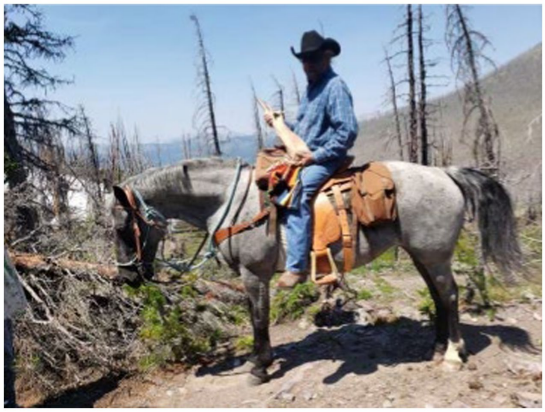

FIGURE 1
Ninna Piiksii riding on Sage Pass, on the Continental Divide, *Paahtoomahksikimi*.

The interview below was held on 7 February 2023 as part of the Indigenous-Led Ecological Restoration (ILER) Project. We reached out to Mike, Ninna Piiksii, to see if he would share his perspectives on Blackfoot-led *iinnii* [buffalo] restoration and the relationship between the Blackfoot and Waterton Lakes and Glacier National Parks. We reproduce key passages of the interview here, edited for readability and length, to share Mike's insights into new ways of understanding conservation that move beyond colonial models steeped in Indigenous dispossession to re-situate Blackfoot presence and kinship relations and advance meaningful prospects for co-management that are grounded in respect and cooperation. Methodologically, the study fits into a growing trend of expert-interviews-as-articles (e.g., Sauer, 2020; Parkes and McDonald, 2021). More than this, the interview format allows us to hear the words of an influential Indigenous Elder and educator in a less mediated and fragmented fashion and in a way that is more reflective of Indigenous practices of oral knowledge transmission (Haines et al., 2017; MacLeod, 2021). Recognizing that there is nonetheless a loss of meaning in translating an oral conversation into text, we also link to a digital copy of the full conversation so readers can become listeners, hearing Mike's words in context (Bruised Head et al., 2023). In the spirit of Mike's work, we hope this is one of many steps we can take together toward opening more space for Indigenous—and particularly Blackfoot—voices, perspectives, and methodologies in conservation scholarship.

Interviewers: Elizabeth (Libby) Lunstrum is a Professor of Environmental Studies and Global Studies and Research Director of Boise State University's School of Public Service. She is the academic lead for the Indigenous-Led Ecological Restoration (ILER) Project. Madison (Maddi) Stevens is an environmental social scientist working on community-led conservation, restoration, and human–wildlife relations and the postdoctoral researcher on the ILER Project. ILER examines how Indigenous-led restoration efforts confront the spatial and jurisdictional legacies of colonial settlement to reintroduce ecologically and culturally important species. Grounded in the Blackfoot-led Iinnii Initiative, ILER works closely with a Blackfoot advisory board and partners to co-produce knowledge in support of *iinnii*'s return to Blackfoot lands. This article has emerged from the ILER project.

Interview

Libby: We wanted to start by hearing about your relationship to Waterton National Park. Given your dissertation on Blackfoot place names in the park, what has your relationship to Waterton been like, from growing up as a kid through to where you are now?

Ninna Piiksii: Let me just start at the present, and I will go back. I think I have established some relationships with some of the park's people. The ones that I have met are pretty hospitable and open-minded, and I think they have heard what I am trying to achieve there. So at least that first part of the relationship is slowly being established. The second part of this establishment of the relationship, partnership, and collaboration process—though I was going to do it anyway—is to give the *miistakistsi* [mountains] in *Paahtoomahksikimi*, otherwise known as Waterton, back their rightful Blackfoot names.

Before 1858, Thomas Blakiston, the surveyor for then Prime Minister John A. McDonald, tried to find a passage to the Pacific Ocean. As part of that process, he went into the mountains, came back, and named a mountain after himself. So then, the other Hudson Bay French fur-trading companies, their surveyors, and other people imposed their own names on the mountains. Yet we already had names for everything—the valleys, the creeks, the lakes, and then the water systems there—and how they all trickled into the rivers. Then the park officials and people who have done studies from a Western angle were also giving their own labels and names to places with no consultation with the Blackfeet on the Glacier side. So there were no accommodations, and it was just all one-sided and very colonial.

I heard Charles Waterton never set foot in Waterton. There are some who say he might have said foot once in Montreal, but others say, "No, he never set foot in Canada." Sir Charles Waterton was a member of the Royal Geographical Society of England, and Thomas Blakiston was one of the surveyors. The tallest mountain in *Paahtoomahksikimi*, Thomas Blakiston named it after himself. But we call that mountain "Seen-From-Afar Mountain" or "Black-Pipe-Stone Mountain." And those names take us way back.

So, that is the part I am tackling overall: the colonial application of the Canadian government, the Canadian idea of how a national park should be, and using only Western science. I am not totally opposed to Western science; in fact, I kind of like it, but it has to be balanced with the Blackfoot interpretation of everything that is part of the traditional Blackfoot territory. So the reason, these names are important is that way back before the Treaty of 1877, before the Lame Bull Treaty was signed in Montana in 1855, before we were put on the reservations in 1884, prior to that, we had our own Blackfoot geographical names. When somebody was sent out to go pick and harvest medicinal plants, hunt, and go to other campsites, they directed the scouts or the leaders to those areas, and they all had names. It was not like we just wandered through the mountain valleys and would say, "Let us camp here." Everything had place-names. So the work I am doing is changing the maps of today, with the English language context, and putting back the Blackfoot names. That is the relationship that I am working toward, and to build co-management.

I see co-management in two ways: there is the actual physical resource capacity, hiring more people, but co-management also includes the Blackfoot philosophy, the Blackfoot doctrines of mountains, *miistakistsi*. And so when we say co-management, it is not just the human resources staffing the park. More or less, the heavy-duty side is knowing the park from a Blackfoot historical perspective, whether it's 20, 50, or 60,000 years ago. Our existence here is from time immemorial. But there is a refusal by many scholars, many park officials, many government officials, and many ordinary citizens to include the Indigenous, or in this instance, the Blackfoot thought. Governments play the largest role in decolonizing because they are the ones that sent their colonizing ideas from Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, and elsewhere. They all came across those concepts here and forced them on us.

So that is the process that I am undertaking. It is about educating those colonial managers and even some environmentalists and colonial conservationist thinkers. Mind you, it is starting to change, but it is got a long way to go. Even the colonial visitors have preconceived thoughts of what going into Waterton or *Paahtoomahksikimi* means, based on their premises of how they see a national park. Because without Blackfoot cultural content and history, there is exclusion. And it is not entirely their fault, the visitors, because we have been excluded. The time has come where that is going to change, where the visitors are not only going to take in the magnificent scenery of *Paahtoomahksikimi*, but also be immersed in their daily visitation to the park in the fact that it was and is traditionally Blackfoot territory (Figure 2).

The federal government needs to loosen their grip on their concept of parks. We need to have full reconciliation on consultation and accommodation because, when they established the parks, there was no consultation right off the bat. Lately, there has been consultation, the second phase, but no accommodation. The third phase will be a true consultation and negotiation process. But in terms of consultation, if we flip it around, we are always thinking, "Well the government should consult with us." I want to change that thinking 180 degrees, where they consult with us and we accommodate them. And that is the biggest colonial change of all time: the government comes to us, and we think about it, and if the consultation is good, we accommodate them, rather than what has been happening since 1867, when Canada became a confederation. The consultation will be from our perspective—our beliefs, our values, and our connection to the land, to the animals, to the water, to the mountains—that is immersed in our Blackfoot ceremonies.

So that is the relationship that I am trying to establish with the park. I would like to teach them about their history so that they can close their colonial-educated books on how to run a park and be taught from a Blackfoot perspective, not only by me but by the other Elders. That is why I did this work. I am doing this to insert the idea that, see: "I am not, and I refuse to be colonized, even though I'm drowning in it. I refuse." A lot of the treaties were not kept. They were broken the very second they were made. There will be no such meeting of the minds until the government's provincial, federal, and civil governments—the whole government bureaucracy—accept that it was a peace treaty and not a land treaty. And likewise in the United States. Every common Joe will probably feel uncomfortable with that because that whole colonial mindset is like a tsunami. They came with it, put their flags up, claimed the mountain peaks, and even named the waters their names. They renamed the whole geography in traditional Blackfoot territory.

I want them now to see it through my eyes, because my eyes are a collection of the People, the collective People, that I am from. *Áápaisitapi*, Weasel People, Kainai, Many Chiefs, and this word, Blood Reserve, which I am trying to figure out where that came from because it was not our own label. Like I say, my eyes are the gateway to my ancestors. To read my work and listen to what I am saying, it is not just coming from Ninna Piiksii, Chief Bird, my Blackfoot name. My thoughts are from my ancestors, and people will say, "the ancient people." But I am part of those ancient people. The chain never broke. I am, in 2023, still continuing to live traditionally in my mind, my behavior, my thoughts, and my philosophy, from my People, from time immemorial. I am not going to be a true colonial subject, even though it is imposed on me. Status card, reservation, all that kind of stuff that is dictated by federal and provincial governments, their rules, their policies, their laws, their legislation, and especially their funding. Money rules people, and only once we have our own money, then nobody will dictate to us.

Libby: You had mentioned that you think things are getting better with the park, even though much work still needs to be done.

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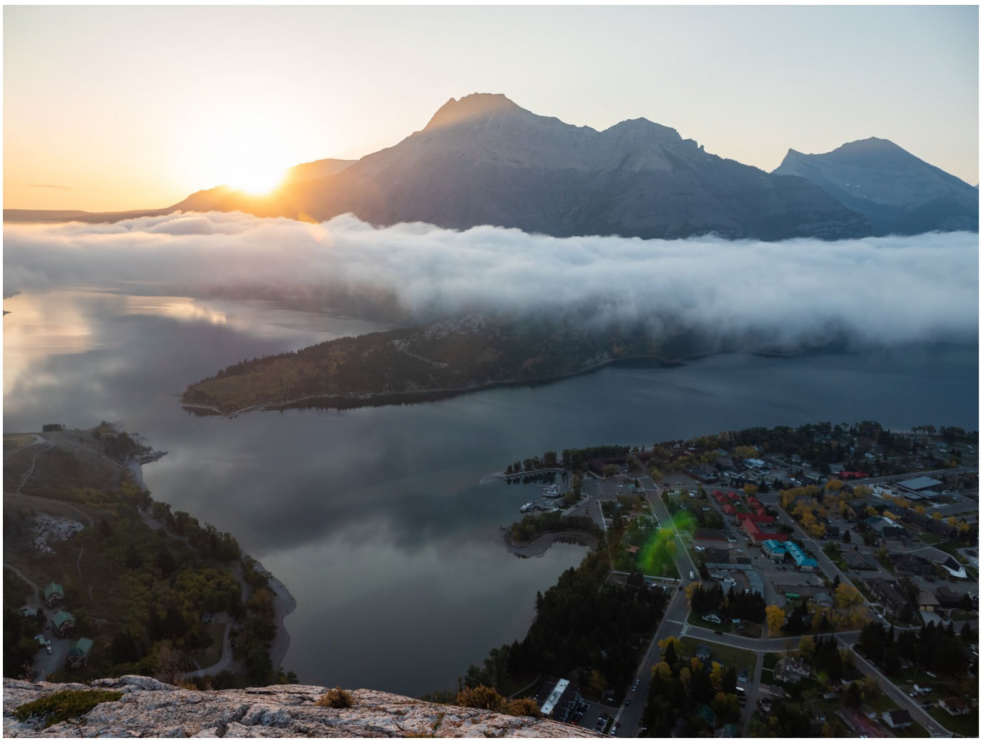

FIGURE 2
Looking out over *Paahtoomahksikimi* as the sun rises above Crow Chief Mountain (center).

What do you think has changed when you look at your relationship with the park over the decades? What is different now?

Ninna Piiksii: I used to go there with my grandfather, and he is the one that started bringing back the naming with the other Elders. We used to have to pay a park fee to go visit our own traditional lands. Back then, we did not have a lot of money, and so we did not go there many times because of the fee. You had to pay this fee to go see buffalo on our traditional lands when I was a little boy. And as I said, I was fascinated with the mountains. It is like this energy always came over me. We paid to go into the park, a darn fee, to go into our mountains, to go see the *iinnii* that were there in the buffalo paddock. We had to pay. So again, I will talk about money. The parks are established to make and generate funds for the government. It is income for the government, even today. But today, I do not pay. I just drove right through. And that is what I am saying: we are taking back a little bit every year, every day, of those things taken away from us. Now, I just drive through.

I am still on the path that I have been on since I was a child, when I spent summers over on the Blood Tribe Timber Limits as a horse guide, even though I was quite young, training their wild horses and just being in the mountains. I woke up to the smell of sweet pine and pine trees. Amazing. From that point on to the 80s and 90s, I carried out my own ceremonial activities in the mountains, getting that much closer. I try to get to the mountains at least once a month, or just get closer to them even during the winter. The overall name of the park, *Paahtoomahksikimi*, has a Blackfoot definition: "A lake built by water from ice." We are talking about the Ice Age. Built by ice, water, and creek streams that were created in the mountains blowing out to the prairie. So it is a long definition, *Paahtoomahksikimi*, and when you really look at it, Waterton Lakes—and sometimes I do not even like saying that word—you can see the lake in the mountains, and just a few kilometers out of the mountains are the prairies, so that water connects the mountain and the prairies and from there the different river systems.

A few years ago, I spent a couple days sitting down with someone from the national office of Parks Canada who did an assessment on Waterton Park, *Paahtoomahksikimi*. I see that as beginning a process. They published some booklets along with that report to insert Blackfoot words and the name of the park, *Paahtoomahksikimi*. So I think they are starting to listen to what I am saying, that I am not making up things when I say, "Let us give the mountains in Waterton, *Paahtoomahksikimi*, back their rightful Blackfoot names." And those names have been there since time immemorial. There are artifacts in *Paahtoomahksikimi* that can be dated easily to 12,000 years ago. So the physical, anthropological, and archeological evidence is starting to erase a half-done job from early researchers disclaiming that we were here. And to me, I see that disclaiming as a way to have a land and resource grab of our rightful sovereign territories. It is all about land; it is all about minerals; it is all about whatever benefits they can reap from this land; that is why they have not been giving it back to us.

But the first step in a process may be to have 25% co-management, then 50, 75%, and, at some point in the future, 100% management. To reach each of those quarter stages, there has to be some letting go of how the park systems are equipped with their resources, including their human resources; with their ideologies; with their academic learning, teaching, and science; with their ideas of environment and conservation. It means the whole colonial approach has to release that

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grip. Because the underlying thing is, let us show the true and accurate history, from *Siksikaitsitapi*, the Blackfoot People, rather than stomping on, disengaging, prejudicing, and discriminating against our history and culture that has been here from time immemorial.

I was recently appointed to the Indigenous Advisory Circle for Parks Canada. I thank whoever appointed me; I thank them because now you close my thesis, and the real work begins. So I think that is going in the right direction. Not just because I have been appointed, but because they are willing to hear what I have to say. There has never been a Blackfoot; there has never been a Kainai, a Blood Indian, from my reserve ever appointed to this Indigenous Advisory Circle. So it is not a political appointment; I take this as a true appointment—that they want to hear what I am going to say. I am going to say what I think should happen and the changes that should happen, because sometimes you make an offer and it could be refused. No, this is no offer. This is respectfully and diplomatically giving them ideas on how to make *Paahtoomahksikimi* a better park. Because it has been a better park for everybody else—except us.

We have to go back to that because we were the first conservationists, environmentalists, protectors of this land and to *Paahtoomahksikimi*, long before colonial people set foot on this part of the planet. We never overkilled, never overfished, and never overburnt because we were one with nature, and we still are. The Native people are the ones that really have a valued metaphysical relationship with the land that scholars do not really understand. We come from lived experience, and that is where Blackfoot philosophy comes in. No, not the qualitative or quantitative methods or all that. Lived experience, because we are from this land, and we know everything about this land, from the sky to the deepest soil, and everything that grows on it, and everything that flies, runs, or crawls on it.

Libby: Congratulations on the Indigenous Advisory Circle; they are very lucky to have you and your guidance. I see that as a major sign that things are changing. There is still work to do, but things are changing. If you think we are ready or prepared to understand—and maybe this is something that you cannot address in a short conversation—but are there aspects of the Blackfoot worldview that you think are more important for the park to take into consideration? Or does their need to be a whole shift in Western worldview?

Ninna Piiksii: Well, yes, and that is what I am referring to: a shift in Western worldview. Let me give you an example of the Western worldview and the Blackfoot worldview, and a partnership to create an understanding between both parties. Let me talk about the *iinnii*.

If we are going to bring the *iinnii* back, we need to sit down with the ranchers, farmers, people from towns and villages, hunting groups, parks, and reservations, to talk about how they all see the *iinnii*, and then iron out the differences. And there will be a lot of differences, but we need to come to an understanding. When it comes to free-roaming buffalo, people are afraid of disruption. They do not yell about the elk, the moose, the antelope, the white-tailed deer, or the mule deer. But if we are going to have free-roaming buffalo, just like with the wolves and the grizzly bears, we need to monitor their movement. This will allow us to really find out from the mountains and foothills into the prairie where these buffalo will migrate. Because we have to understand [their movement to learn how to live with them]. A lot of people do not understand, and they do not want to understand. The land was here first. The plants were here, then the animals, the fish beings, the birds, and the fourth: human beings. That kind of ecological history has to be really understood, because you are going to have ranchers and farmers saying, "I'm a fourth, fifth generation rancher/farmer and nobody's going to take my land and livelihood away, not even buffalo!" If things stay the way they are right now, it will be open season year-round on the *iinnii*. People will need very little reason, very little excuse to cut them down.

The underlying point of refusal [to share space with free-roaming buffalo] is all about money. When somebody says my livelihood will be disturbed, they are referring to the income that they gain from ranching, forestry, fishing, farming, and all those professions that come from the resources of the land. So we need to address where the ranchers and farmers are coming from. The education needs to start with them. They may get truly riled up, but it is an education process. One hundred people will probably all disagree, but to find a solution, we need to find a place where they can agree on something. They may just agree on one thing out of a 100 things, but that is a start. Nobody talks to each other, really. We have our backs turned to all those [ranching and farming] associations and communities, and the government people. I do not like this phrase because it sounds colonial… but we need to bring everyone to the table. Well, I would like to change that to say, "bringing them into the tipi to talk." This will happen in a civil manner that will start with a ceremony, a pipe ceremony, and song, to ease and cushion temperamental people. Then we can say, "Hey, let us talk. How can we do this? How can we work together?" We may have different ideas because I as a Kainai from the Blood Reserve, I have my own ideas. But what if they have an idea that we could compromise, collaborate, and find partnership on?

We have an Iinnii Treaty (Buffalo Treaty, 2014). Has any mayor or senator signed it? I do not think so. So a good place to start would be for them to sign the Iinnii Treaty of 2014. I was a signatory for the Iinnii Treaty, representing our Tribe. This Iinnii Treaty is a kind of Indian Treaty, which is a flip side to the treaties that were imposed on us. Within this process, we are at the center of the spokes [of the wheel], and Blackfeet and Blackfoot protocols are right in the middle. How do we start there, going outward? Let us have a whole bunch more people looking at it from the inside, because everybody is outside looking in and wondering, "What the heck are the Indians, the First Nations, the Blackfoot people, what are they doing?" And so that is where the fear begins, and it serves no purpose to be afraid. It does not help that certain federally elected officials promote fear, especially on the American side, and uphold the colonial privileged thinkers, the purist thinkers, and the supremacist thinkers.

So there is a lot of underlying work that needs to be done before we could have the buffalo coming down from Chief Mountain over to *Paahtoomahksikimi*, or up to Banff, to Jasper. Before, we could have the true, free-roaming buffalo. Because who is dictating the agenda? Ranchers and farmers. And the basis of some governments is the portion of their electorate that are the landowners that hold them in power, with no significant interest in what benefits the Tribal people or the animals. If somebody ran on a platform of saving the *iinnii*, they would not get elected because people do not understand. That's just how it is. Changing this requires changing how we live and how we educate students, from primary grades to post-secondary, all the way to the doctorate level. This is just a beginning, but my belief is that it can and it will happen. That colonial tsunami has to be pushed back. In partnerships, it does not matter what color of skin you have, but

rather whether you are protecting and holding up the ideals of a good world. And I do not want to be a Utopian thinker, but we have got to move onto something that is not so fragmented, the way we live today. Those are big philosophical words and ideas, but the thing is, they are practical, too. We can implement them to change how we live, to change how we raise our kids, our grandkids, to change school systems, post-secondary systems, to change the bureaucratic system, all by learning from the buffalo. Imagine, one animal can change all that… if we allow it.

Libby: Can you expand on that idea of the buffalo having power to change everything? More broadly, why is it important to bring the buffalo back?

Ninna Piiksii: Before the buffalo was decimated in the 1860s, millions of buffalo roamed just about every province and every state in Canada and the United States. They were the caretakers of this whole place until governments decided to kill them off. The *iinnii* was so powerful that it was seen as a threat. They did not kill off the deer, they did not kill off any other animals, it was the buffalo. And when the buffalo was killed off, then the Native people in turn starved. Well, what we are trying to do is to put that in reverse motion now, that wheel. If we can reverse that, the First Nations, or Native Americans, will thrive, and the buffalo will thrive. Prior to 1860, there was nothing wrong with the landscape, and then it was destroyed, just shrunk.

People also have a fear of expanding their thinking. The *iinnii* will stabilize our psychological mentality. The *iinnii* can calm your 24/7 desk-work mentality. When you see them out there, you will change your mind by simply looking at them. The buffalo is good medicine. Psychologically, spiritually, culturally, mentally, everything. Buffalo is good medicine. There is no bad medicine about buffalo, and looking at it from that perspective, why would you want to kill the buffalo off again? It was a good world. Without the buffalo, look at the turmoil. Again, this is from inside the tipi, looking out. We were put into starvation time by many Tribes. So bringing back the buffalo will bring back not only the original landscape but also the original relationship from time immemorial.

Libby: I am not sure if you remember this, but I wanted to ask you about a conversation we had several years ago that was very meaningful for me. We were sitting in a restaurant in Waterton [*Paahtoomahksikimi*], and you told me about your experiences in boarding school. It was the first time I had ever talked to someone who had actually attended boarding school. It really struck me—that moment where you learn, "Wow, this is not just something you read in books. Real people lived this experience." Given what you are saying about *iinnii*, and its power to make things different, do you see bringing back *iinnii* as part of the way to address that trauma? Is it part of reconciliation?

Ninna Piiksii: Well, it may not be the proper wording, but let us use "reconciliation." The *iinnii* will bring us back to that starting point, before they were almost totally killed off. To me, being a boarding school survivor—at the time of [the Truth and Reconciliation Commission], there had not yet been graves found on both sides of the border. It is only recently, from Kamloops to Ontario to the United States, that unmarked graves from boarding schools have been found. I am not only a psychological survivor, but a physical survivor; I am actually alive. Those deaths, the unmarked graves that were found—I could have been one of them. I could have been one of them. So I am going to change the colonial effects of boarding school.

I fought to keep my language [Ninna Piiksii spoke in Blackfoot to explain the point in further depth; 00:58:01]. I speak Blackfoot. It took a while for me in my younger days, after leaving boarding school, to switch it around. It is like it was coming this way toward me, colonization, boarding school, and I was just being chased. It took a while before I started chasing it back, saying, "you are not going to get the best of me." And sure, maybe that was how I was thinking back then, but years after that, up to today, I will not mope around and feel defeated. I will make a change. And we always hear, "Just talk about it." I say, "Well, I am beyond talk." I am changing and I am going to continue changing a lot of things.

So that is what I am all about today. I will battle and fight those organizations, those cells, that impose this against our freedom. I want to take back our freedom. I want to take our pride back. I want to take language back. All those things that they tried to take away from us. And I am very fortunate because my grandfather prayed a lot for me, and now I understand why he prayed every time I went back to boarding school. Maybe he prayed that I did not get sexually abused, and I did not. But I got physically abused. I got knocked on the floor with what seemed like 2 × 4 s; they were not rulers, they were not yard sticks, they were heavier than that. Imagine a 6- or 7-year-old getting knocked on the floor, and being hit while you are on the floor. So rather than cringing, after I left, I thought to myself, "I am going to do something about it rather than crying around the rest of my life." I do not cry easily, because I already cried a 1,000 times in boarding school. I have no more tears. I do not.

So, the *iinnii* is part of that process of finding, fighting, and pushing away the whole boarding school syndrome. Four generations. I am the fourth generation of boarding school survivors, and it ended there. Imagine if it went to the 5, 6, 7, or 10th generation. We would probably disappear. So that is why I am the way I am. I will speak. We talk about freedom of religion; I have my own ceremony. Freedom of speech, freedom of language. That is why I talk the way I do. No priest or nun is going to hit me today, or tell me to shut up and not speak my language. No one. No government officials, no police officers, nobody today [Ninna Piiksii speaking in Blackfoot to provide more depth; 01:02:03]. I will speak my language. And I would like to live to be 110 years old, I cross my fingers; hopefully, within that timeframe things change for the better for every Indian Tribe and community in North America. I see other very young people making those steps. It is going to change. I believe in that. It is like somebody quoted, "either we all get along, or we will all perish individually." We have a choice. We have a choice to have a collective mind or an individualistic mind.

So that is why I was talking about the buffalo. I see strength in the buffalo, and the buffalo is giving back that strength to the Native people for the better. It took almost four generations to demolish our language; it will take three or four generations to go back to how we were. Back to our original starting point—not necessarily how we used to live, but how we used to think. It will take about three or four generations to undo this, and we are already in the second generation after boarding school. The people that went to boarding school most recently, now their kids and grandkids [are growing up], so it is two generations past. Two more to go, and I think we are going to see a lot of change.

Libby: Thank you for sharing that with us. I think that is really painful and beautiful at the same time. It helps us understand the importance of *iinnii*'s return because it is about so much more than just the animal itself, but what it means to Blackfoot people. To me, this is a profound moment of putting some pieces together. Sorry, I am feeling very emotional. Thank you for entrusting us with this; I realize we need to do right by not just your perspective, but your experience as well.

Maddi: Thank you so much for sharing. This optimism around the capacity to change is something that really strikes deeply, because things have been so fragmented. I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about what it means for this generation of young people now to bring *iinnii* back. What will the experience be like for youth, and why is this important for them?

Ninna Piiksii: With the return of *iinnii*, there has got to be proper guidance and teachings from those Elders that are connected to the *iinnii* through ceremony, through lived culture. The teachings have to be brought in so the generation now will understand. The more they are taught in a very positive way, it will help them reconnect that disconnection from before the *iinnii* almost became extinct. We have to teach them. We cannot just impose the *iinnii* and think, "Well, now go learn. Here's the *iinnii*, learn." Because the majority of young people do not know that we have to go back to ceremony. We have to go back to all of the facets of the *iinnii*, of what the *iinnii* represents, of what *iinnii* means to Tribal people, what *iinnii* gave to the people. So that is starting to happen right now. So it has to restart. It has to kickstart all over again, because there were four generations that were taken, starting in 1884 with the first boarding school in southern Alberta around the Bow River and Calgary area, up until the 1980s, when the last one was shut down on the Blood Reserve.

We are in 2023 now, so there has been a gap since [the last boarding school closed]. Now, the teachings have to be brought into the curriculum: our ceremonies, knowing from land, all these teachings have to kick in so that the primary school children will slowly grow into the world of *iinnii*, rather than rediscovering the relationship with *iinnii*. The rediscovery is happening now, and [this generation] will go on to teach their children. That *iinnii* education, philosophy, and way of life are starting to roll out and unfold. We cannot assume that every child knows the whole world of *iinnii* because that is actually a wrong assumption. It is damaging. We cannot leave them alone and say, "Okay, go look at the buffalo and learn from them." No, there needs to be guidance from Elders, ceremonial [knowledge holders], and people who have lived with the *iinnii* in the past few years, because they are the ones that know about *iinnii*. This is like bringing the zebra to the wilds of North America. We know nothing about the zebra, nobody [here does], so we would have to bring people from Africa to teach us that. Well here, we do not necessarily have to bring the teachers, because they are here already. But they are a small group of Elders, very small, so we need to move at a quicker pace before my generation goes to the good place. We need to move fast [on this education].

I do not think our language will die off, but my generation is the last of those who are still living after boarding school and are proud to speak their language. I am proud. That is my first language. And nothing against them, but I will never be a white person. But I can make a heck of a lot of friends with white people. I even tell white ladies and white men that I hear in Blackfoot, and they laugh, because there is an understanding here. It does not matter if you are Blackfoot or not, there is a commonality that I am feeling and seeing. So, we do not need to say who is Blackfoot or not, when we have a thought that unites us regardless of where our ancestors came from. That is the most genuine, truest form of understanding, knowledge, and for lack of a better word, collaboration. Like all of you today, you are part of that. It is not like I am talking to someone who does not know a dang thing and starting from scratch. I do not need to start from scratch on you because you have been observant, listened, and you look. Something is making you tick inside. I have met many people like you, and that is what I am saying. Being from Kainai, I have a lot of non-Kainai friends of many different colors, and in all of this, I respect them, and they respect me. It is all about respect and cooperation.

So the *iinnii* is going to help us with that. City kids, urban kids, reservation kids, non-Native, Native—if they all start understanding, the *iinnii* is going to pull us together. And that is why I [talk about reconnecting] mentally, psychologically, and spiritually. Everything starts from there, then from environmental studies to conservation, it is going to kickstart. I see the teaching of our environment not ruling out the Western science thought, but I see even those disciplines slowly changing from the hardcore academia that I call "colonial academics." That type of thinking is going to be thrown out. We are all in this together. We are all in this for a change in making a better world, not just for ourselves but for future generations all the way down. It has to start now. We have that thinking, we have that commonality, we have that respect; let us use it to change things and make a better world for our kids, our nephews, and our nieces for many generations. This generation has to begin that process, and it means being brave and sticking our heads out. We do not need permission. I do not need permission for my own thoughts, to ask somebody, "Can I talk like this or can I think like this?" I do not need nobody's authorization. Boarding school is gone. I could say, "Oki," hello in Blackfoot, without getting hit. Especially on my birthmark, I do not know how many times I got hit here, trying to literally knock my birthmark off my face. And if you think about it, who is more psychologically lost? They were. And if God told them to do that, well, I guess their god is pretty crazy. So that is what I'm saying. I have survived. I'm alive. I did not die.

I have one question for you, and you might not be able to answer it, but I want you guys to think about it. Why are both of you doing this? (Figure 3).

Maddi: I think for me, it really comes down to something that you were saying before. There is a feeling of urgency that we need to change the relationship that we are in with the world in a really serious and profound way—and we do not have a lot of time to do it. In my previous studies, most of my work has been focused on conservation, which has often felt like holding back the damage and trying to put up a wall and saying, "stop that." But thinking about restoration feels like there is hope for change in a different way. Focusing on restoration prompts a shift toward thinking about how to not just protect what is there but move toward fostering abundance and building meaningful relationships with other species and each other. So for me, that is I think the core of why I am doing this and wanting to learn from people like you, is that this change feels like it has to happen. There is no other way to go forward.

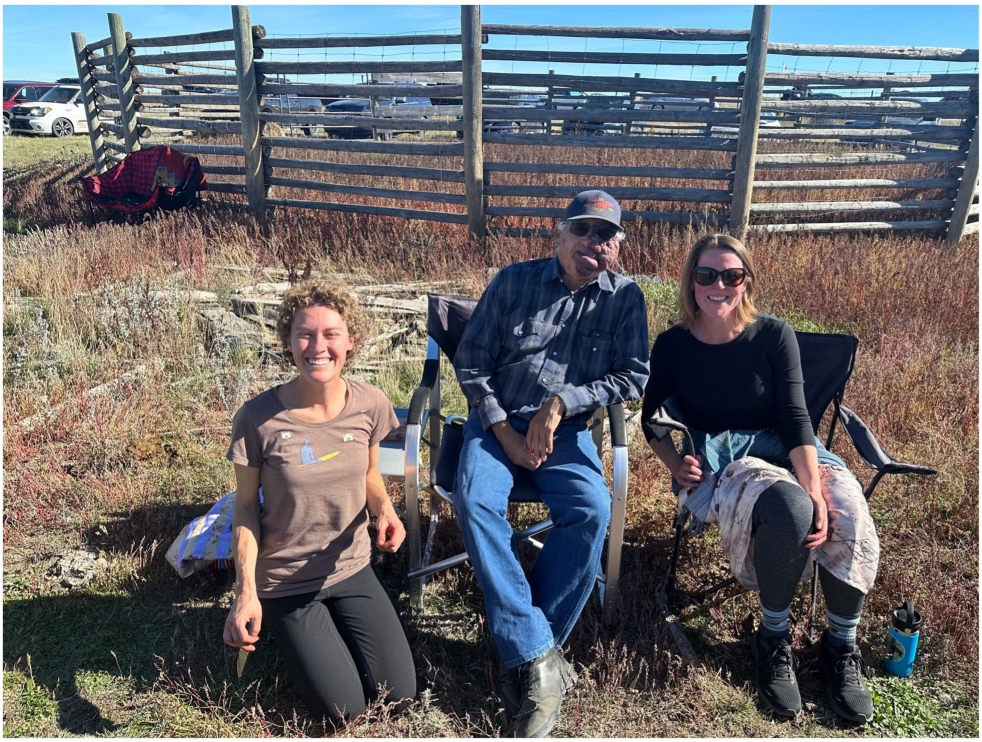

FIGURE 3
The authors attended a buffalo harvest on the Kainai Blood Reserve in October 2023. Left to right: Madison (Maddi) Stevens, Ninna Piiksii (Mike Bruised Head), and Libby Lunstrum.

Libby: Yeah, I agree completely with Maddi. I am motivated by that urgency because business as usual is not working. Things are not getting better. The land is being degraded, Indigenous people are being harmed and killed. For me, I think it also comes out of my 20 years of working in Southern Africa. I feel really lucky to have that experience, but by the last decade of that work, because of the region where I was working on the border with Mozambique and South Africa, the research was all about the killing of rhinos for their horn. That exploded a decade ago and just took over everything. I am still involved in that research, but it was all about death: the death of the rhinos, and the park shooting the young men who were involved in the trade. And I think maybe spiritually or psychologically, I was drawn to the buffalo because it was a story about life, and not just about the life of the buffalo, but new/old forms of living for the Blackfoot, and rights to land. It was just a completely different feeling to learn what was going on here, with this focus on life and the sacredness of life. So I think that is what I have been so moved by.

Ninna Piiksii: Unfortunately, it is the economic value placed on nature that is killing us. The dollar that people will try and obtain at all costs, even by selling half of the planet, you know? Again, all of this was due to colonization. People lived abundantly until colonization created poverty. And the other issue is that biodiversity has been missing the *iinnii*. Bringing them back is going to make an impact, because there was a huge, huge gap in biodiversity when the *iinnii* was taken out of the equation. Now, we are putting it back together. Our bundles are all about those cultural keystone species. The science world has its own keystone species. Well, just lately, they are trying to consider *iinnii* as a keystone species too. [Our whole culture as Blackfoot is based around the *iinnii*]. They are starting to include that [understanding], so there is a shift happening. Now, at least, we are heading toward a more holistic understanding of biodiversity. Biodiversity is a big giant word, but now it may be complete.

So that is my question for you, and if I am talking to somebody else, I will ask them the same thing. "Why are you doing this?" I have asked a lot of people that question, "Why are you doing this?" Because I have been asked, "Why are you doing this?" [And my answer is]: Well, I have to and I want to. It is my duty, because I do not want to go through life not putting it back in a good place. So if I do not do that, I'm no damn good as a Blackfoot. I would be a hybrid colonized Indian, taught at the post-secondary level to apply colonial thoughts to my own people. But that is not who I am. I am not a hybrid scholar, I am not a hybrid Indian, I never will be. I am just me: Ninna Piiksii. I am just me. I am just me. But through my eyes are all the teachings of my ancestors, the old people, coming out through my voice, and my choice of words, through my eyes. I am just representing people from way, way back now in a modern setting, modern times. I am just me. I am just me. I am Ninna Piiksii.

Conclusion

Dr. Bruised Head's interview speaks to the perseverance, personal strength, and expansive vision of Indigenous leaders working to "chase back" the pervasive legacies of colonialism. Beginning with Ninna Piiksii's longstanding work to re-situate Blackfoot place-names in *Paahtoomahksikimi*, we are taught that decolonization is fundamentally a process of unlearning colonial mindsets while re-situating relationships

of respect and collaboration among people and with the land. Here, Ninna Piiksii finds evidence of progress and needed change in the increasing space for Indigenous—and particularly Blackfoot—presence and voices in national parks and the resurgence of Blackfoot/Blackfeet youth recovering pride in their identity and knowledge following the devastating intergenerational trauma of residential schools. In efforts to decolonize our educational systems, economic models, and conservation practices, Ninna Piiksii argues that the *iinnii*—a keystone relative and powerful symbol of Blackfoot resurgence—holds a critical role as an agent of transformative change, "*if we let it*." Yet effectively restoring not only the species but the *iinnii* education and way of life requires learning from the teachings of Elders like Ninna Piiksii, who remain connected to their identities, ceremonies, knowledge, and language. The interview format provides a more direct way to learn from Elder knowledge-keepers without fragmenting their wisdom. This offers an opportunity to draw holistic connections across the range of themes Dr. Bruised Head explores. Woven through the conversation is a focus on the intersection of identity and responsibility: Ninna Piiksii asserts that to reverse the ongoing processes of colonial dispossession, division, and violence, we need to first know who we are and then cultivate a deep respect for one another, as well as the land, water, biodiversity, and broader environment. Moving beyond critique and beyond aspirational theory, Ninna Piiksii leads by example, gaining knowledge through lived experience and connection with Elders. He draws from this to challenge the listener to understand decolonization as not only possible, but also *implementable*, and vital for our collective future.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Boise State University Institutional Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin because participants were permitted to provide oral instead of written consent. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the research.

Author contributions

NP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. EL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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